

# **Young Adult Fiction**

## **Playing with the Big Kids**

**by Ian Bone**

"For whom does the writer write? And, secondly: what is the book's function – or duty, if you like – in its position between writer and reader? What ought it be doing in the opinion of its writer? And finally, where is the writer when the reader is reading?"

**Margaret Atwood, in 'Negotiating with the Dead – A Writer on Writing', published by Cambridge University Press, 2002**

Margaret Atwood poses some fundamental questions here. For whom do we write? Ourselves? Our 'audience'? Ourselves ten, fifteen, twenty, years ago? These questions seem to me to be crucial to the writing of Young Adult fiction. The young adult is young by definition, but more crucially, he or she is emerging as an adult, an equal to you as a writer. The hopes, desires, concerns and interests of young adults closely resemble your own hopes, desires, concerns and interests. Think of any young adult you know. You're able to have a conversation with them about war, current affairs, politics, relationships, ethics, careers – topics that are in the realm of adult life because that's the direction they are headed in, and that's the one thing that *consumes* them, the desire to grow up and be an adult and be FREE!

'For whom does the writer write?' When we write Young Adult fiction, we write for the big kids, teenagers with pimples and low self esteem and awkward limbs that seem to knock everything over. Confident young people with life experience – emotional, career, sexual, political – who have lived out some of the life-defining events in a person's journey that shape who they are. We write for young men with cars, young women who drink alcohol, young people who are trying recreational drugs at a far greater frequency than you or I ever did. We write for fathers and mothers, for young people who know fathers and mothers.

Margaret Atwood asks us to consider what is the 'duty' of our books, and where are we when young adults are reading them. We will discuss some of these 'duties' on these pages, but I ask you to consider this crucial question, 'Where are you when the young adult reader reads your books?' Because it seems to me that Atwood is challenging us as writers to consider two aspects of her last question. Firstly, it's all on the page, and it can only ever be on the page. Whether you're young at heart, or feel aligned with the readership, or feel you understand them, or feel that you *don't* understand them, it is only those words on those pages that matter. Nothing else! Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, what part of *you* are you

putting into your young adult fiction? Because you're playing with the big kids now, and there are very few places you can hide in here. Whether it is conscious or not, you expose your own morals, frailties, concerns, beliefs and desires when you write fiction for this age group.

### **Playing with the Big Kids!**

What characterises Young Adult fiction? Who are these young adults? Generally speaking, they are any reader from 12 to 25 or beyond. However, anyone in the publishing world will tell you that of all the categories, Young Adult is the most difficult to define. The readers of Young Adult fiction can be categorised as 'just about anybody who can understand the words', because students as young as year six, and as old as fourth year university will access this group of fiction. In a sense you can let yourself go with this age group, explore more complex literary structure, use a wider vocabulary, however there are loosely defined variations within the category.

### ***The Younger End of the Category***

There are a growing number of Young Adult fiction books aimed at the 'middle' age range of Young Adult. This is the age range that crosses over from primary school-aged novels and junior fiction to older, young Adult. Generally speaking, these are students in years 6 – 8, who are leaving primary school and entering high school. Obviously, if you were writing a book that appealed to students in years 6 – 8, then it would contain situations and language appropriate for that age. These books tend to be more action based, more humorous, and range over topics that deal with the life experiences of these kids. They still concern themselves with independence, relationships, families, freedom etc, but they most likely contain less violence, sex, swearing and adult behaviour.

### ***So-called 'Teenage' Fiction***

Some publishers will refer to a category called, 'teenage fiction'. They might even label their books as thus, or have an imprint with this sort of label on it. Generally speaking, 'teenage fiction' is fiction that relates to young people in the 13 – 17 age group, dealing with the everyday life experiences of these people. Relationships is a huge topic within this group. Friends, lovers, boyfriends, girlfriends, all these issues can produce intense emotions for teenagers as they try to work their way through the relationship maze. They are entering a period in their lives where sex comes into play, love, lust, all of those strong motivators for

appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. They want to work it out. They want to know why they feel like shit. Why they feel unable to talk to that girl or that boy. Why the boy they thought was a gift from heaven turned into a pig, or a slob, or a two-timer. All these things are happening around them. Mostly they are learning the emotional 'language' to be able to cope with the tumult. This is language that is learned from life experience, yet books can help provide the wisdom and experience that might help them sort through some of the issues they are facing.

### ***What's the 'Duty' of Teenage Fiction?***

Remember Atwood's question: 'What is the 'duty' of your book? One of the 'duties' of teenage fiction is to hold up a mirror to all these emotional experiences so that the reader can take what they need to help them sort through. This is an age where they will mostly talk less and less to their parents about what is troubling them. In fact, they could very well *hate* their parents with a passion, as well as need and love them dearly. Teenagers might go through huge life issues without their parents ever knowing. From the break-up of a relationship that drives them to the brink of despair to becoming mixed up in violence or illegal activity that is way over their head. Or they might just be feeling incredibly isolated and alone. Whatever the emotions, teenagers seem to experience these emotions intensely.

This is one of the reasons that teenage fiction is often labelled as being too tinged with despair, too bleak, too ready to deal with suicide or great drama, too laden with angst. And there are titles that do slide too far into the emotional quagmire so that they are in danger of becoming melodrama. (There's nothing more melodramatic than a teenager, anyway!) However, to touch the reader, to make sure that they feel that the book is written for them, you have to delve into the realm of deeper, more heart-felt emotions. You have to touch those moments within your own experience when it all felt too much, when it all felt too intense, when everything made you angry, or sad, or so frustrated you simple wanted to get into a car and drive away forever! This is the stuff of teenage fiction. Not all Young Adult fiction has to be this way, but specifically writing for teenagers about teenage issues will mean tackling some strong emotions.

### ***Are You Prepared to Put Yourself into Teenage Fiction?***

Are you up for it? Are you willing to write so that some of your own self is left on the page? Teenage fiction does not have to be melodramatic. It can touch on quite simple moments in a person's life, yet be truly moving and eloquent. But for the writing to be moving, for the

words on the page to contain triggers that will have the reader weeping (yes, it happens!) then you have to leave a part of yourself on the page. You might not be aware you're doing it, but it *has* to happen. There are very few times as a writer teaching writing that I will state a rule, rather than a principal, but this is one. If you write at a distance for this age level, if you don't draw on your own emotions, if you're not prepared to take some risks with what you expose about yourself, then you will write bland, light, fluffy, two dimensional fiction.

### ***Young Adult and Beyond***

There is a growing number of Young Adult fiction titles in Australia and overseas that tackle literary subjects, and have a literary scope that would set them comfortably within the adult fiction canon. This is really fiction without restraints on style, construction, language and topic. It is fiction aimed at mature readers. Fiction that will still move, still engage, still tell a story, even. So, what sets this fiction apart from adult fiction? Why isn't it just marketed as adult fiction and let young adults find it?

Anyone foolhardy enough to try to answer this question must need his head read... So, here's my attempt because all my friends know I'm crazy. The protagonist in YA fiction is almost always a young person, from a teenager to late teens to early twenties. Yes, adult fiction has characters of this age, but generally adult fiction looks in on the young person's life, whereas YA fiction lives out the young person's life. This is perhaps the biggest difference between the Young Adult titles and adult titles. YA title will tend to be told from the point of view of the young person.

The older band of Young Adult fiction is really where authors for young people can make their mark. Taking book reviews as an indicator, YA fiction for this older group receives far more serious consideration, both in specialist magazines and in the mainstream media. Reviews will engage with the ideas and themes, will go further into the scope of a piece of work for this age group than perhaps teenage fiction or younger fiction. Reviews for the latter tend to mostly tell the story. The fact that this literature is seen as 'serious' tends to then impose on the author a note of importance, because he or she can write serious literature. This, of course, ignores the fact that books for younger readers can be just as difficult to write. Perhaps the fact that the reviewers are adults, and can *relate* more to the topics, themes, etc of YA literature helps. The judging of awards for this category also shows up this tendency to hold the older end of YA literature up as the pinnacle. In fact, some books seemingly written for adults have appeared and won this category.

***Genre***

YA fiction lends itself to genre fiction, especially fantasy and crime. However one drawback for any author wishing to write in these genres for YA readers is that you are competing with the best of the best in the adult market. If you write crime, you're up against Patricia Cornwell, Ruth Rendell and even good-old Agatha Christie. If you write fantasy, you're up against a huge pantheon of fantasy writers. Even so, authors such as Isobelle Carmody have been very successful in writing Australian fantasy novels for the YA market. Phillip Pullman of the UK had his third book in the 'Dark Materials' trilogy on the long list of the Booker Prize! Matthew Riley is a young Australia author writing in the thriller, adventure genre. His 'Area 7' has sold tremendously well, and was self-published!!