

## **DENISE BECKTON**

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**‘Mum, what is a blow queen?’:**

**tracking the emergence of the Steamies genre**

### **ABSTRACT**

*The fast-changing sub-genres within contemporary Young Adult (YA) fiction are leading to a wide range of emerging themes and concepts that are, moreover, being read by an increasingly younger market. Investigation of the emerging ‘Steamies’ sub-genre (part of the established New Adult age category) will elucidate evidence of parallel indicators that have the potential to impact upon the YA field. The implications of this discussion are relevant to a wide range of stakeholders in YA popular fiction: authors, publishers and their marketing departments; readers and their families; teachers, lecturers, librarians and curriculum designers; scholars of YA fiction, and others including researchers in the tertiary sector.*

### **KEY WORDS**

crossover novel  
market segmentation  
new adult fiction  
Steamies  
young adult fiction

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Young Adult (YA) fiction market is undergoing a turbulent period of growth and change in readership and sales, with a seemingly ever-changing kaleidoscope of genres, themes and content. This paper pinpoints the recently established category of New Adult fiction as a shaping factor upon YA books, and acknowledges Steamies as a newly described sub-genre within the New Adult category, which is increasingly marketed toward and demanded by young adult fiction readers.

### **NEW ADULT ON THE BLOCK**

The appeal of YA fiction is not new to the literary market, however recent trends show that adults are increasingly reading works within this category. For example, statistics presented by Bowker Market Research in 2012 cite that ‘55 per cent of buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17 [...] are 18 (years of age) or older, with the largest segment

aged 30 to 44, accounting for 28 percent of sales.’ This high level of adult readership is confirmed by the Managing Director of Scholastic Books, publishers of *The Hunger Games* and other popular YA fiction, who estimated that in 2012 ‘more than one third’ of their teen books were purchased by adults (Thomas 2012).

This change in age-defined readership has led, not only to the way books are actively marketed into the lucrative crossover book category, but also sees change in the content of books offered to both adults and young adults. In 2009 the market saw the emergence of a new age-defined category called New Adult fiction. The first reference to this category appeared via an online call for submissions, and offered a fledgling definition of the intended target audience:

St. Martin’s Press is holding a contest for submissions [...]. We are actively looking for great, new, cutting edge fiction with protagonists who are slightly older than YA and can appeal to an adult audience. Since twenty-something are devouring YA, St. Martin’s Press is seeking fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult—a sort of an ‘older YA’ or ‘new adult’ (Jae-Jones 2009).

By September 2012, the American social networking site Goodreads.com, saw a 500 per cent rise in New Adult book listings between 2010 and 2012 (Vincent 2013) and within three years the newly named New Adult label had arrived as a stand-alone category on many large booksellers’ and publishers’ websites such as Amazon (2013) and Macmillan (2013).

## **WHEN YOUNG ADULT AND NEW ADULT COLLIDE**

Publishing and distribution is the ‘jump-off’ point where books meet their desired target audience, and it is here that market segmentation strategies can have the greatest influence on readership. Examples of book publications with covers that defy their content and seek to appeal to a wide age-defined target audience include; the *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban* (Rowling 1999) with separately designed adult and child friendly book covers, Lanahan’s age-ambiguous cover for *Tender Morsels* (Lanagan 2008) and the generically designed covers of the *Hunger Games* series (Collins 2010).

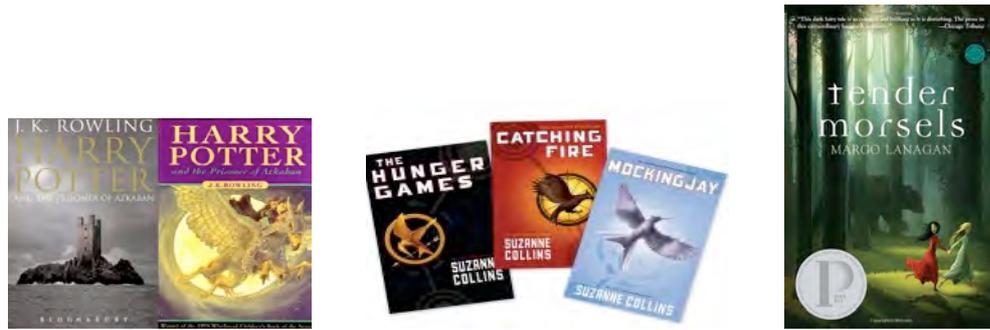


Figure 1: *Marketing influences on book cover designs.*

Source: (Rowling1999, Collins2008 Lanagan, 2008).

Sales catalogues, distributed through primary schools, offer insight into marketing segmentation strategies where YA books occupy sales space directly next to picture books. Often these books, which are designed for a more mature readership, do not have an age limit applied to the book image, in comparison to picture books which are age specified. In a recent the *Hunger Games* series is advertised alongside items recommended for six and nine year olds, giving the impression that the books are suitable for children of similar ages.



Figure 2: *Primary school marketing catalogue.*

Source: (Ashton & Scholastic 2013:6).

Some book covers now offer little reference to the explicit nature of the content within them. The depictions of characters on these covers can be indistinct, creating difficulties when choosing age-appropriate material. Many of the books that employ these strategies are also considered literary classics and merit stalwart exposure within high school curriculum. This adds complexity when balancing literary merit with age-appropriateness.

## STEAMIES

The lure of publication and sales is also a driving force of change for potential authors who are beginning to direct how and when their books hit the market, and are actively marketing towards a designated target audience. The emerging New Adult category sub-genre, ‘Steamies’ feature significantly more, and more increasingly detailed, sexual content than traditional YA fiction. The sub-genre has enjoyed increased popularity since the release of the Romantic Erotica novel *50 Shades of Grey* (James 2011). In fact, it has become such a commonality in the New Adult arena that many commentators view the (New Adult) name as synonymous with the Steamies category (Angel 2013).

Liz Banks, when interviewed by Managing Director of Piccadilly Press, in 2013, outlined the confusion surrounding books of this nature:

Some publishers, retailers, teachers and librarians think it means sexy fiction for older teens. And some think it means crossover fiction – fiction read by adults and teenagers, and perhaps even children. So is New Adult a term for *Twilight* (where there was no sex until the third book) and *Hunger Games* or is it any title, which is sub *Shades of Grey*? (Banks 2013).

NA Alley, a website dedicated to promoting New Adult books, offers a more conservative clarification of the category, ‘New Adult literature is not: warmed up YA, cooled down adult, all about college, all about sex, just for females, for kids [...]’ (Wesley 2013).

Titles and content within the New Adult category often share young protagonists and settings similar to those found in both adult books, such as *50 Shades of Grey* as well as YA novels. This exemplifies the demand for sexually charged content across a broad age readership, ‘The influence has been so great that some publishers and authors are winkingly describing the new category as *Harry Potter* meets *50 Shades of Grey*’ (Kaufman 2012).

The St. Martin’s competition (stated earlier) asked for protagonists older than 18 (preferably aged in their early 20s) and book content to appeal to an 18-25 year old market. Three years on, however, the gap between the Steamies sub-genre and YA fiction is closing, with increasingly younger protagonists. For example, a 14 year old in *Tender Morsels* by Margot Lanagan (2008) and a 16 year old in *Irresistible* by Liz Banks (2013). Additionally, they include situations and settings that are familiar to a younger target audience, e.g.; a high school spring carnival in *The Kissing Booth* (Reekles 2012), and a high school camp in the recently released YA novel *Wildlife* (Wood 2013).

When it comes to the current levels of sexuality in YA fiction, there is an identified rising trend, which parallels the exposure of New Adult material within the literary market. A

current example of this is debut novel, *The Kissing Booth* (Reekles 2012), which was published in December 2012 as an e-book. The book, which has been referred to as a ‘safer’ depiction (Angel 2013) of romance rather than one of raw sexual content, topped the Children’s *iBooks* chart on release (Apple.com 2012). Interestingly, this YA novel is also listed within the New Adult category of Goodreads.com (2013).

This increased demand is also evidenced by the fact that authors have successfully self-published after their initial manuscripts rejections from publishing houses and/or agents. Recognising this success, agencies have post-signed authors, often with lucrative deals and contracts for future books and series. Colleen Hoover, author of NA book *Slammed* (2012), enjoyed bestseller success on the New York Times Best Seller List as a self-published author before she was signed with major publishing firm Simon & Schuster in 2012.

## **CLASSIFICATION**

The latest media guide, issued by the Australian Board of Classification (2010), identifies three levels of unrestricted viewing for children under fifteen and reserves one classification (MA+) as requiring parental accompaniment on viewing before full adult restriction, within the R18+ category, applies. A wide-ranging scale of classifications is devised for television, film and computer games whereas classification for fiction is subjective, offering guidance rather than restriction.

Australian author Margot Lanagan, assigns a reading age from upwards of an adventurous 13 or 14 year old for her novel *Tender Morsels*, despite the fact that she describes the first 50 pages are ‘fairly hard going’ (ABC Radio National 2013). Scenes within these pages include; two forced abortions, incestuous sexual abuse and rape. Australian New Adult author Stephanie Bowe, who was interviewed alongside Lanagan, is also a firm believer in free reader choice, stating:

I think every reader is going to have a different level of content that they are comfortable with. I think with YA fiction that it is really important that we do not try to shut down people writing about sex because it is so easy for kids to be accessing information about sex: but novels offer context which film and porn do not offer (Bowe 2013).

Fiona Wood, author of recently published novel *Wildlife* (2013) agrees and explains why she believes addressing sexual themes is important:

Fiction provides a great forum to discuss sex in a positive way. A book is private place

to learn [...]. For many teenagers in this era, first exposure to sex is via pornographic imagery [...]. We've never needed positive representations of sex more than we do now! (Wood 2013).

These opinions reflect a general acceptance within the industry that literature is an acceptable platform to express sex (without restriction) when compared to visual media and the internet in particular, where sexually explicit images are considered to be easily accessible and generally viewed without context. When compared to alternate sources of information such as school-based sexual education, some argue that books offer an alternative and more relevant perspective:

Young adult literature has the potential to fill the gaps left by sexuality education curricula by depicting the many ways - from abstinence to intercourse - young people may choose to be intimate. Furthermore, as these sensual scenes have the potential to arouse the reader, the frank young adult novel can become a safe and private haven for teens to consider the physiology of desire [...]. In the absence of this content in federally mandated curricula, young adult literature that deals explicitly with adolescent sexuality and that situates discussions of sexuality within a developmentally and socially relevant context can become a valuable source of information for teens (Pattee 2006: 31).

This is not to say that all authors fully agree with this point, or are seeking to gain notoriety from sales related to the rising trend of sexuality in NA fiction. YA author C.J. Daugherty, contemplates the issue of sexual content in Steamies and identifies the complex parameters surrounding the possibility of applying an age rating on these books:

If we could guarantee only readers over 14 could buy certain books, those books could be racier – and thus more realistic. Parents would feel they had more control. But then, where do you draw the line? Is the f-word for those 14 and above, or 15? What about kissing scenes? Do first-base kissing scenes get a different age rating from those that make it to second-base? Then there is the issue of violence [...]. It all gets very complicated very quickly. (Daugherty 2013).

## **INDUSTRY SELF-REGULATION**

Popular New Adult author Abbi Glines (2013) dealt with this sensitive issue by providing publishers with two different versions of her books: *The Vincent Brothers* and *The Vincent Boys*. Separate and sexually charged versions of each book were developed and marketed to the New Adult audience while parallel, and sexually tamer versions were directed to a younger readership.

Some in the industry see the New Adult label as a positive and useful classification for adults who are trying to assess the suitability of content within books aimed at this transitional audience. When interviewed, Harper Collins publicist Pamela Spengler-Jaffee, admits, ‘It is a convenient label because it allows parents and bookstores and interested readers to know what is inside’ (Kaufman 2012).

Conversely, many large book sales sites and publishers have not yet embraced the New Adult market as a stand-alone category, which creates uncertainty for buyers when purchasing books from these websites (The Book Depository 2013, Amazon 2013). It leaves books from the Steamies sub-genre without an appropriate sales category; and sees them classified under a YA label and therefore a younger reading audience than the intended New Adult category. For example, New Adult book, *Someone to Love* (Moore 2012), can be purchased online from Barnes & Noble’s website, which claims the book is intended for a mature audience (17+) and cites ‘sexual situations’ as a red-flag to buyers; but then also lists the book under the site’s Children’s Book category, as well as noting a 12-18 year old age range.

In Australia there has been little resistance to YA books as curriculum sources and/or reading material, compared to other countries such as the United States. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* (Chbosky 1999), which has largely been immune to criticism in Australia, saw its inclusion on the American Library Association’s (ALA) top ten most challenged books five times in the past decade (ALA 2012). It is yet to be seen if future school literature choices in Australia will follow open market trends and contain greater sexual content. If this does occur, it is also unknown if it will cause controversy or will be justified by the literary merit of the books concerned.

## CONCLUSION

The use of the Internet and the social platforms within it has provided an exponential conduit from which to explore and share information. The increase of e-book sales is testament to the impact social media has on the speed at which this information can be obtained and delivered. As a result, the Internet is an increasingly important platform for the marketing and sales of fiction, and society is only now beginning to understand the impact such a saturation of information is having on the wider community.

The potential trend for increased sexuality in New Adult and YA fiction is unknown. If it continues and/or becomes more explicit, the potential impact that an increased adult

readership has on an increasingly younger audience makes this fast moving and easily assessable genre conceivably more contentious.

The dilemma faced by authors who obviously have a vested interest in book sales as well as a concern for the potential impact that sexuality explicit material has on children, is particularly relevant to me. My 12-year-old son posed the title of this article as a question to me, after reading *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, and with reference to the following passage:

I asked my sister about this and she said that Sam has low self-esteem. My sister also said that Sam had a reputation when she was a sophomore. According to my sister, Sam used to be a 'blow queen' (Chbosky 1999: 109).

I was unprepared for the explicit nature of the question, given that I had read the publisher's blurb on the back cover of the book, sought the novel from the children's section of my local bookshop and was offered advice from sales assistants, describing the book as 'popular' for my son's age group. Following my son's question, I felt compelled to read Chbosky's highly celebrated novel and agreed with the critical acclaim attributed to it. But, it is also true to say that I felt a sense of guilt at unwittingly exposing my son to information that should have been preserved for him at an older age. While the situation opened a valuable opportunity to discuss issues surrounding drugs and sexuality, I felt that the depth of the concept was not appropriate for his age and continue to believe that deliberate ambiguity in the marketing of the book contributed to my choosing of it for him to read.

The traditional view that literature should be sacrosanct as a medium, due to its literary merit and educational qualities, may begin to be questioned where the introduction of such content has unforeseen and/or untested influences. This is relevant when demand is evident and growing from an increasingly younger readership. Additionally, when this content exposes a younger audience to material that would be considered classifiable in an alternate platform, the spotlight of contention could potentially fall on the literature arena.

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## CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

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