

# Ploughing the Field:

## (Inter)disciplinary Approaches to YA

Emily Corbett and Leah Phillips

The categories of ‘book people’ and ‘child people’ identified by John Rowe Townsend to demarcate the key players in children’s literature studies might also be applied to YA studies, where scholars and practitioners from diverse disciplines – including literary studies, book studies, creative writing, library sciences, and education studies – engage with the same source material but from different vantage points and with divergent priorities. “Book people” are those whose interests lie in literature, and who are perhaps “bound to look first at the book, because that is their job” (Townsend 407), while “child people” are concerned with the pedagogical, moral, and social functions of children’s literature and focus, instead, on its “non-literary standards” (407). The distinction is perhaps simplistic and has certainly been critiqued, but the “turf wars between these factions” (Hunt 19) have shaped the development of the study of texts for young people ever since they were first introduced. In our third edition of “Ploughing the Field”, we disrupt the disciplinary borders and boundaries of our field to unpick the current state of play and consider some of the future possibilities for interdisciplinary collaboration. We do so by bringing together the perspectives of 10 scholars from a range of disciplines with stakes in YA and YA studies (see Table One).

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**Dr Emily Corbett** is a Lecturer at Goldsmiths, University of London. She is a YA literature specialist with particular interest in paratextual materials, LGBTQ+ young adult fiction, and YA life writing. Emily is Vice President for the YA Studies Association and, from November 2022, Co-General Editor for *The International Journal of Young Adult Literature* (having been Associate Editor since 2019).

**Dr Leah Phillips** is a Senior Lecturer in English at Plymouth Marjon University where she is the Programme Lead for the BA English and the MA Literature for Children and Young Adults. Her research focuses on representations of adolescent girlhood in YA, and her first monograph, *Female Heroes in Young Adult Fantasy Fiction: Reframing Myths of Adolescent Girlhood* will be out with Bloomsbury in 2023. She is the founder and President of the YA Studies Association.

## QUESTION ONE

Please introduce yourself by sharing your disciplinary approach to YA (e.g. education studies, literary studies, book studies, creative writing), especially as it relates to your current research.

**Gabrielle (Brie) Owen:** I am an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. My disciplinary approach most closely aligns with literary and cultural studies, and my main research focus is how adolescence functions as a cultural idea. Lately, I've been working on a project that aims to synthesise theories of ontology that emerge from childhood studies, critical race theory, and queer and trans theory. Each of these fields has important things to say about identity and being-ness in the world – topics which are inherent in children's and YA literature – but they aren't necessarily in conversation with each other. My work is always grounded in theory, which I bring to the study of literature via an overarching set of big concept questions that I think have many implications for how we interact with actual young people, and how we write – and write about – YA.

**Marianne Martens:** I am Associate Professor at Kent State University's School of Information, which means that I'm theoretically working in social sciences. In practice, my approach to YA is rather varied. I have a background in the humanities and a prior career in children's publishing in New York. Book history is a language that I speak and love. I also dip into education studies, as I have an interest in reading practices, and media studies, due to its convergence with books and publishing. Together, these are the areas where I feel most comfortable.

**Danielle Fuller:** I'm a Professor at the University of Alberta, where I work primarily in English and film studies and as an adjunct in the sociology department. Prior to that, I worked for nearly 21 years at the University of Birmingham, UK (in the departments of American and Canadian Studies and English Literature). I've strayed far from my original training in literature; my work mostly combines textual methods with empirical methods of study, meaning I use recognisably social science methods to study real human beings. For example, I've done research into publishing and writing communities because, like Marianne, I worked in publishing; and I've led a project that was about pregnancy loss and stillbirth. In the last decade, my work has been about readers and cultures of reading in the contemporary period. I've done two collaborative projects with younger readers: one with a group of 10-year-old children in the UK and one online project with young adult readers at the higher end of the range (19-26). What unites these diverse threads is an interest in lived experience as a form of everyday knowledge. As a discipline, book history makes a lot of sense to me, because it's a sort of sweet spot where media studies, cultural studies, literary

studies, historical studies, and the various kinds of experiences some of us have had in the industrial world of publishing all come together.

**Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak:** I am Associate Professor at the University of Wrocław, in the Institute of English Studies. I am also a member of the Centre for Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature, which is a faculty research centre. In the years 2013-2022, I was Director of the Center for Young People's Literature and Culture. Like others, I'm a 'magpie' in my approach. My field is literary studies, but I've become more and more interested in environmental education, plant studies, animal studies, and childhood studies, particularly posthumanist and new materialist childhood studies (through my very close collaboration with Macarena García-González). Some of my recent research has been child-led, adopting participatory methods in childhood studies by including children as co-researchers. This has led to outputs that open new ways of achieving epistemic justice (though, of course, power relations fluctuate), such as articles that were co-authored with children (Chawar et al.; Deszcz-Tryhubczak et al.). Relatedly, I'm concerned with the flipside of youth activism; that is, the burden that young people bear and the more difficult feelings they may experience.

**Roberta Seelinger Trites:** I started at Illinois State University in 1991, in the English Department. My undergraduate degree is in history, so a lot of what I have done over my career has been literary history, but mostly I would say I'm very solidly on the theoretical side of literary studies. I work more with texts than I do with actual young people, so I have great respect for those of you who have been trained to work with the people that I theorise about.

**Kim Wilkins:** I'm a Professor from the School of Communication and Arts at the University of Queensland, Australia. I am also a creative practitioner, having published more than 30 full-length works of fiction. I came to YA through my interest in genre fiction (especially fantasy fiction) because YA is so well-represented there. Publishing studies is probably where I'd place myself currently, as I am more interested in how books function in the world than what meaning can be gathered from the words in the books. I'm curious about what people do with books once they have them, especially popular books. So often, our focus is on the YA marketplace, but of course we know that people do many more things with books than just buy them. I want to better understand how people use books to build communities.

**Stacy Collins:** I also backed into YA. I read it recreationally and then found out that literary studies wasn't limited to specific kinds of books; it could be about any book that I wanted to turn a critical lens towards. I am a Librarian by trade, so library science comes in one way or another and whether I like it or not, but my approach is heavily informed by literary studies, and also critical theory. My current interest in YA lies in what it can reveal about the culture

in which it is published. For example, while YA is about teen characters and for a YA audience, adult authors write YA and its narratives are sanctioned by the industry as appropriate for YA (a literary and life category invented by adults in the first place); as such, it is filled with insights into adult culture. It's similar to some other genres, like horror, for example, which can reveal a culture's intense fears and fascinations. I find myself getting quite meta about it from time to time, as I'm fascinated by what we can glean about adult culture in academia by looking at how those adults are studying YA literature: which stories they're choosing to explore, what they're canonising on syllabi, what they're writing about.

**Fox Benwell:** I'm a PhD student and author of children's literature and YA. My disciplinary approach is inherently multi-disciplinary: it encompasses traditional English literature methods, sociocultural studies, disability studies, and queer studies, as well as the study and practice of craft. My research started out looking at the representation of disability in current YA – the tropes, the expectations that we have of those narratives, the nitty-gritty of the language that we're using to describe disabled lives – but then, three years in, I realised it wasn't doing what I wanted it to do. It wasn't opening up the conversations, and it wasn't changing the state of play. So, I've somewhat switched my approach. Rather than the former triad of literature studies, sociocultural studies, and disability studies, I'm much more focused on the craft and how we can do better in terms of nuanced, decent representation for marginalised folks. I'm interested in teaching and having conversations with students and industry people and with throwing them exercises and looking at books together. Even more than that, I'm focusing on my creative practice, on writing the things I want to see, and with making the changes.

**Helma van Lierop-DeBrauwert:** I am a Professor of Children's and YA Literature, based in a department of Culture Studies at Tilburg University, which consists of scholars with very different backgrounds. I have a background in literary studies, but I think I can define my current approach as a combination of narratology, life writing, and age studies. I think narratology is always my basis, but I approach YA texts from very different angles, mostly dependent on the relationship that I see between societal matters and those YA texts.

**Melek Ortabasi:** I'm an Associate Professor of World Literature, and my field is comparative literature. These fields are interdisciplinary and multilingual by nature. What some people might consider to be too much breadth is actually my strength. My languages of speciality are Japanese and German. The German is a heritage language because my mother is German, and the Japanese is acquired by historical accident (I lived in Brisbane as a teenager and, back in the 80s' bubble, Japanese was offered in high school). Many years later, I backed into YA and children's literature. My previous book is about folklore scholarship in Japan, and now I am working on a manuscript about transnationalism in modern children's

literature from approximately 1870-1930. My main interest there is translation studies. I look at why certain books travel between languages, and why they are historically enduring. I can feel very much on the margins of YA studies as a comparative literature scholar, but it's important that we expand our international awareness of the literature that young people are consuming. There's plenty of scholarship in Japan, in Japanese, about children's and YA literature. Every country with a lively YA literature market has that. However, English-language scholarship on Japanese texts remains underrepresented, so I am aiming to initiate and nurture conversations between YA studies and Japan studies.

## QUESTION TWO

The lack of collaboration between distinct areas of YA studies prompted us to host this discussion. How could you see your work benefiting from increased collaboration, and how can we (as scholars, practitioners, and readers of YA) make it happen?

**Kim Wilkins:** To start, we have to realise, and most of us do, that texts are not created in a vacuum. Texts are created by people, read by people, circulated by people, etc. In *Genre Worlds: Popular Fiction and Twenty-First-Century Book Culture* (2022), which I co-authored with Beth Driscoll and Lisa Fletcher, that idea is at the centre. One of the most interesting things we noticed was how much the human infrastructure of genres impacts how texts are created, read, received, and distributed, and, although YA was not one of the categories we talked about in that book, our findings would also apply to YA. That project was interdisciplinary from its inception, bringing together cultural sociology, literary studies, audience studies, and analysis of industry's 'grey literature'. The idea that we as scholars would allow disciplinary boundaries to hold back the study of YA is wild. YA books are recession-proof; they are what kept publishing alive during Covid. Not crossing those interdisciplinary boundaries seems to me to be a very limited way of looking at a hugely complex and important cultural phenomenon.

**Roberta Seelinger Trites:** You're right, and I see a lot of cross-pollination between library sciences and literary studies, but I don't often see education studies at the table. I want to engage with them more, but we don't seem to attend each other's conferences or read each other's journals that much, and when we do, it feels that the differences in our approaches are a gaping hole. We occasionally see collaboration happening at a local level, such as within university departments, but I want to ask: why aren't we talking to each other on a global scale?

**Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak:** I notice a similar reluctance to come together at the same table within my Polish context. There is little exchange between pedagogy scholars and literary scholars, despite both groups being interested in children's and YA literature, and I don't know why.

**Marianne Martens:** From what I've seen in the US educational system, it is so prescribed what young people can and cannot read in school. This can make it difficult to engage in interdisciplinary projects with colleagues from education departments. And now with Bills being introduced that ban the teaching of anything 'critical', which is a blanket term being used for anything relating to people of colour, queer people, or other marginalised identities, it is even more difficult. You can't dive into half of the things we are talking about in other disciplines in education because it is simply not going to be allowed.

**Roberta Seelinger Trites:** This culture war and the phenomenon of politicising K-12 education is relatively new, but the reluctance of our fields to work together has a much longer duration. Recent events are very distressing, though. The phenomenon that you're describing, Marianne, is only going to make it worse.

**Gabrielle (Brie) Owen:** I've been thinking a lot about the separation we are noting between education studies and other disciplines within YA studies. In my own work, I cite literature scholars, psychologists, sociologists, and more, but very rarely do I include scholars of education. I have the great fortune of being well-connected with the Secondary Education Professor in the College of Education at my university, and they support interdisciplinarity between our departments. I have developed courses on children's literature and YA which have been listed as recommended or required for the Secondary Education cohort. What this means in practice is that I welcome a lot of potential future teachers into my classroom to think about culture, history, theoretical questions, and analysis. I came of age in the field at a time when we were just getting over Jacqueline Rose's notion that we should not talk about children, and in the very first article, I wrote – "Queer Theory Wrestles the 'Real' Child: Impossibility, Identity, and Language in Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan*" (2010) – I argue that thinking about the categories of childhood and adolescence, and the cultural work that those categories do, is essential for thinking about how we interact with young people. All of this is to say: when I think about the crossover between disciplines like education, library science, literary studies, and creative writing, I like to frame the work we're doing and the questions we're considering as relationality. A YA book is the product of a relational act. We talk a lot about adults being a domineering force in YA, but when you think about YA as a relational act of connecting with a young person, the dynamic is no longer only about overpowering them. When we start to think about YA through that frame of relationality,

there is a table that we can all come to, to talk across our different fields about a similar concern.

**Roberta Seelinger Trites:** The article Brie mentioned is excellent, and I agree with what is being said about how relationality can bring different disciplines into conversation. We can also teach students from all disciplines to be more careful readers. The close reading and critical thinking skills that we teach in our courses are of value to anyone who works with children's and YA literature, whether they are scholars, practitioners, teachers, etc. I'm just not sure why that is not translating into more cross-disciplinary scholarship.

**Melek Ortabasi:** To my mind, there are two other bridges that we aren't crossing, or we aren't crossing often enough, which can be attributed to marginalisation and the exclusivity of academia. The first is to high school teachers, who are very rarely involved in the conversations we are having. The second is to translators. I'm lucky to be involved with translators as colleagues and friends due to my research specialism, and I've tried my hand at translation, but there is very little conversation happening more widely between translators and academics. Both of these professions are intimately connected to YA, but don't get a seat at the table (or, rather, they have their own table).

**Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak:** Recently, I've been thinking about how we forge those connections outside of academia to create a more engaged field. While not necessarily education scholars, I've had success in making connections with education by working with teachers. Indeed, many of my recent projects are those that have had education purposes that were also of interest to literary studies. However, I have not really worked with anyone from childhood studies, though I'd love to, especially in relation to participatory research and the inclusion of young people as co-researchers.

**Emily Corbett:** The lack of communication between academics and translators is what inspired Leah and me to write "Ploughing the Field: YA in Translation" (2021). I also agree that, when we talk about interdisciplinarity, teachers are so often overlooked. There's something that I'm involved in at the minute that has really been enlightening for me in that sense. I'm part of the Reading4Normal project, a UK initiative that sets up, funds, and coordinates national book clubs (along with colleagues Alison Waller and Rita Dashwood). The purpose of the project is to bring together teenagers from different schools across the UK to read British YA and reflect on their own lives and their ordinary experiences with one another. Working with the teachers and librarians that are leading these reading groups has opened my eyes to the reality that there is not enough collaboration between academics and educators from compulsory and further education. There's so much to learn from the people

who are working on the ground with the readers that we are engaging with very theoretically at times, and we need to continue to open up these conversations wherever possible.

**Danielle Fuller:** The disconnect is quite entrenched it would seem, but the pandemic has further disrupted people's ability to connect with colleagues in other departments and other institutions. We need to develop better ways to break down some of those disciplinary walls. What Leah, Emily, and the rest of the Board have done already for YA studies by creating the YA Studies Association (YASA) is significant: YASA has managed to bring into the same virtual space not just people from different disciplines, but people from all over the world. It is hugely important that global, interdisciplinary collaboration has been a starting point for YASA, rather than an add-on or a reform, as this is the foundation for disrupting Western ways of approaching YA. I'd be keen to see that collaboration taken a step further, for example through the partnership of senior and emerging scholars from different parts of the world. YASA has planted a lot of good seeds, which are very generative, and I hope that senior scholars will help to nurture those seeds by taking seriously our responsibility to mentor, encourage, and support emerging scholars.

**Helma van Lierop-DeBrauwert:** Collaboration is always beneficial for our work, because getting constructive feedback from others, be it scholars, practitioners, or readers, enhances your work and inspires new ideas, new research questions etc. Like you say, I think YASA, and also the *International Journal of Young Adult Literature*, have been fruitful initiatives in that regard, because they offer opportunities to know the field better and to contact people working on the same topics or with the same kind of approaches. We can't overlook, though, that practical barriers such as a too-heavy teaching load so often stand in the way of collaboration.

**Stacy Collins:** There is something to be said for how academia operates as a hierarchical structure, one that serves mostly straight, cis, white, able-bodied, middle-class men. In the Humanities, especially, there is a scarcity problem. In a very real sense, there is a lack of resources and funding. But there is also a rhetoric of scarcity that puts folks in competition in potentially unhealthy ways and stifles collaboration and interdisciplinarity as a result: to give ground, to give recognition to another field's interpretation of a subject, or to reckon with historically excluded perspectives on our field as a whole, somehow feels like we're diminishing our validity or risking our resources. There is something to be said for the importance of 'parallel play' – the peaceful coexistence of multiple fields within YA studies – but people should be listening and speaking to each other. We need to find ways to turn people to face each other as they engage in parallel play, such as symposiums, networking events, and interdisciplinary publications (at the same time as acknowledging that parallel play is an important way for some neurodivergent brains to engage in collaboration).

Removing the real scarcity, disrupting the rhetorical scarcity, and making room for parallel play to at least be happening in the same space would offer some of the strongest, broadest opportunities to break down the entrenched systems in academia and, importantly, allow marginalised folks to find their way in.

**Fox Benwell:** I think that it's true that departments do separate themselves, perhaps because of this scarcity or rivalry. What this leads to, though, is a perpetual cycle, as students come to expect very specific things when they access courses within these departments. For example, students of an English literature course might expect to scrutinise texts and study theory, whereas students of a creative writing course might anticipate being immersed in creative practice amongst a community of writers. In reality, I think that interdisciplinarity is key. When you ask all students to engage with YA as a form of craft and a thing of enjoyment, analysing it and picking it apart gains a greater purpose. The questions become: How do YA books function? Why do they work that way? Why do we need or want them in the world?

**Kim Wilkins:** I'm struck by your craft-orientated approach, Fox. Creative practice and analysis are clearly complementary skills, but I do believe there is a distinction. In *Genre Worlds*, we frame this distinction as reading against the grain (literary analysis) or reading with the grain (creative practice). When you're reading against the grain, you're asking: What can I unpick? What ideology is hidden here? But, when you're reading with the grain, you're asking: How did they do that? What can I borrow? How can I build on this?

**Fox Benwell:** It's interesting that you frame it that way because I would argue that craft is reading against the grain, especially when the grain is mainstream, white, cis, heteronormative. For me, creative practice is about looking at what existing literature is doing and thinking about how I can do things better, differently, originally, to make them my own. I wouldn't say that is following the grain.

**Emily Corbett:** I see what you mean, Fox. I recently had the opportunity to teach a critical module with a creative element. Observing how the students connected with creative writing – even if they are not creative writers and felt uncomfortable – was encouraging. You could sense their enthusiasm and see connections they made between their analysis of others' work and their own practice, and there were certainly instances of going 'with the grain', looking at how someone constructed an image or a scene, but there were also instances of using their critical skills to, as you say, do things better. Teaching practice and research in harmony has been a really enlightening experience for me to that end.

**Stacy Collins:** One of the most meaningful parts of my education was a capstone course I was required to take on a dual library sciences/literary studies degree. I've thought about it

and the messy knot it started me untying at least once a week since. The course focused on positionality, and on interrogating the authorising forces at work in the study of books for young people. Academia clings to the idea of ‘white dude’ objectivity – the reality that white men’s ‘objectivity’ is just subjectivity that has been mythologised as somehow devoid of personalisation and bias is not often broached. But this course was about getting uncomfortable with the assumptions we were authorising in our practice and learning to recognise our positionality through that discomfort. We quite often see performative positionality work taking place – somebody will begin a conference paper with a list of their identity characteristics, which they then don’t engage with at all – but what we need is to create discomfort and deal with it when it happens. In our field, we need to convey this sense of everyone sitting in the same classroom, looking in the same direction at the same book, theory, history, marketplace, etc., as we also turn to look at ourselves and each other within that space.

**Leah Phillips:** I’m constantly in awe of the brilliant work librarians are doing, especially children’s and YA librarians as they are also (in the US, at least) one of the most attacked groups of people in terms of bans, challenges, and legislation that is criminalising putting books into people’s hands. Stacy very rightly mentions the mythologisation of ‘white dude’ subjectivity and the vitriol and worse librarians are facing seems to be about the pressure they and the books they’re sharing with young people are placing on that myth. I’ve been teaching a class on “International Youth Literature” for San Jose State University’s iSchool for the last couple of summers. One of the projects those current and future librarians do for the class is to develop a mini collection (25 texts) from a geographic or cultural region that’s not their own. Their final assignment is to use some of the collection to create a library programme or lesson plan. I urge them to think about the library spaces they’re in or the ones they hope to be in when they’ve finished their studies, to think about patron demographics and gaps in provision. Their positionality grounds everything we do on the course, especially the programme or lesson plan.

**Fox Benwell:** Stacy talked about the stale, pale, maleness of particular disciplines, but we haven’t talked about that yet in terms of creative writing. It is a well-trodden conversation that reading lists feature the same dead white men, and that we need to revolutionise publishing by changing up the industry to be more inclusive of marginalised folks. We have the same ‘this is how to change things’ discussions over and over again, but a book I discovered recently – Matthew Salesses’ *Craft in the Real World* (2021) – talks specifically about creative writing courses as breeding grounds for homogenous, cis, straight, white cultural perspectives. It is brilliant in how it works to challenge existing thinking by presenting some common-sense solutions in an accessible way, and for that reason, I now regularly share it with students. We need to be opening up discussions about inclusivity,

ethical representation, and marginalisation with creative writers before they begin writing in order to bring about real change in the YA market.

**Leah Phillips:** That's a good point. There is clearly work to be done with the books that we have, but there is also certainly work – possibly even more important work – to be done with authors and future authors.

**Stacy Collins:** Academics have just as much bias (and perhaps nostalgia) at work when they are building syllabi as editors have when they are deciding what authors they are going to publish or promote – and it's no accident that both groups have similar dominating demographics. We have comparable authorising and naturalising forces happening in all of the disciplines and professions intersecting with YA studies that we have talked about here: publishing, creative writing, library science, literary studies. This is a big problem when we are immersed in these forces while also trying to break down barriers and advocate for diversity and a recognition of the power of the marginalised.

### QUESTION THREE

In the first “Ploughing the Field” (2020), we asked panellists why they thought YA and YA studies were critical to our contemporary cultural landscape. Given current cultural conditions, how do you see the state of YA and YA studies in 2022? And, where do we go from here?

**Stacy Collins:** In “Cross-Culturalism and Inter-Generational Communication in Children's Literature” (1987), Peter Hunt uses the metaphor of a cake to think about cross-culture communication. It also works, here, to think about both where YA and YA studies are and where we can go. Hunt asks whether we should slice the cake horizontally, so as to separate different layers of culture, or vertically, so as to get cross-cultural slices. For me, the cake metaphor serves differently as a means of discussing how we move forward: we need a new cake, a new recipe, a new concept of confection entirely, not the same dry, old, white cake that we are trying to dress up with colourful icing. We need to think about the ingredients being added to the cake and about how we are baking it. That is, we need to break down existing structures, how we conceive of them (and ourselves), and build them anew.

**Melek Ortabasi:** It is also key that we remember that young people want to be involved in baking the cake, too. It's a difficult balance – we do not want to bake the cake and hand it on, but we also don't want to exploit young people by giving them the burden of baking the cake all by themselves. The potential for collaboration with young people is one of the most

exciting things about YA studies, I think. Their participation as consumers and co-creators, who are setting the direction of YA's future, offers an opportunity for real inclusivity.

**Kim Wilkins:** I see YA breaking away from children's literature into its own category, perhaps more than it already has, due to a recognition of how significant it is as a publishing phenomenon. YA is at the centre of so many of the rapid changes in publishing over recent years. It's got the seriality, the fast turnaround, immersive storyworlds, the fan culture that spreads onto the internet and creates wonderful spaces for engagement. YA is a truly thrilling part of the publishing landscape, and of the entertainment landscape in general, that warrants more academic recognition than it's getting. I also think this uncoupling from children's literature might be driven by the rise of streaming television. So much of that programming is YA, so there comes with that the idea that we should publish more YA. I don't know what it's like where you all live, I assume it's similar, but in Australia we also have Supanova and Comic Con – two huge pop culture conventions that celebrate the stories of youth culture in YA books, but also TV, movies, fan culture, etc. That's what's most exciting for me: YA is right at the centre of that whirlpool of activity around popular culture.

**Fox Benwell:** And to that end, as a creative writer and an educator, I'd like to see a more holistic approach taken to YA when we teach it. There is so much to explore for that age group: TV scripts, festivals, live events. I'd like to see YA studies courses digging down further into the culture and practice of creating media for young people. Oh I want to run this course so badly now – somebody give me an MA to teach!

**Danielle Fuller:** YA studies does feel especially relevant at this time because it is part of a media ecology – a transmedia phenomenon. YA is literature, TV, communities of fandom, social media, film, gaming. People from around the world are able to connect and share their passion around particular products that were made primarily for them. That to me is one good reason why we should pay attention. There is a feeling of urgency to understand who engages, and how, with these hugely successful products and spaces.

**Roberta Seelinger Trites:** Some of the most important work that we, collectively, have done over the last century is uncovering the ideological machinations by which books, film, TV, music, etc. are used to train young people to become 'proper' consumers. For the last five or six years, Sean P. Connors and I have been doing a lot of work on neoliberalism and how materialism and entrepreneurship are ideologically embedded in childhood and adolescent culture.

**Marianne Martens:** The subject of the commodification of childhood is near and dear to my heart. This is firstly due to my work in publishing, but also from my research and writing

about *Harry Potter* in the context of fan sites, fan participation, and the mechanisms that are in place to get people to buy more and engage more in commercial venues. When my son was around 12 years old, he saved up all his money to buy a wand from the Harry Potter Studios. When he got there, turned the box over, and read ‘Made in China’, it was like the end of his childhood, as he became suddenly aware of the commercialised world we live in.

**Melek Ortabasi:** If we’re talking about fans and fandoms, I need to step in (even though I didn’t wear my Sailor Moon outfit for this roundtable). We as academics, if we are academics, are not only cutting YA from children’s literature (which I think is fine), we’re cutting YA off from the wider context in which it exists if we’re not talking to teachers, producers, fans, fanfic writers, and young people themselves. The thing that I would also point to in order to show why YA is so important right now is its place within the media mix, and how real that media mix is for young people. There is a whole YA landscape, a universe, that young people engage with. A few years ago, Japanese artist Takashi Murakami spoke about the idea of the ‘superflat’ – the idea that popular culture has a flatness because it is devoid of history. He suggests that everything from every historical point and from every medium is flattened onto one plane in popular culture, and I believe that is how young people experience culture in many cases. They are new to things, and they don’t know where references come from (take *Stranger Things*, for example). Young people often experience everything as if it’s new, and that flatness is an important concept that we must take into account when thinking about young people’s engagement with YA, and how they consume and react to the wider media mix.

**Marianne Martens:** I recently read a *New York Times* article about teens fighting back, about teens forming banned book clubs. I’m so proud of them, it makes me so excited and gives me hope. I really think that all eyes are on YA right now – the people and the materials. I think YA studies are more important now than ever.

**Helma van Lierop-DeBrauwert:** I agree entirely that YA and YA studies are very important today. Against the background of world problems such as discrimination, but also climate change, the contributions of young people to society are extremely valuable. They are the future of our planet. Therefore, it is important that there are media for them, such as YA novels, through which they can learn about the world, about other people, and through which they can experiment with possible roles and identities and develop a sustainable self-image.

**Roberta Seelinger Trites:** Identity formation is key, and to that end I’ve been really pleased to see that Rudine Sims Bishop’s concept of windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors is being cited more now than when it was published in the 1990s. I’ve also been excited to see

some really important work on critical race theory and structural racism. Take one of the most recent issues of the *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, for example, which includes a marvellous piece by Erin Wyble Newcomb called “Transformative Agency and the Pursuit of Justice in Mildred Taylor’s Logan Family Series” (2021).

**Gabrielle (Brie) Owen:** I think that YA literature is uniquely positioned to diagnose and illustrate, and maybe intervene, in what is ailing us. The question you have asked brings to mind Rebekah Sheldon’s *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (2016) and her focus on YA’s shift from character to setting. The future, for me, offers a really cool opportunity to write about and engage with YA in ways that take up some of these questions and concerns about social media algorithms, mass manipulation of public opinion on different levels, the political destabilisation, the discrediting of science, and so many other contemporary issues. I don’t want to idealise literature – I don’t believe it can save us – but I think, as scholars, we can pick up some of these urgent questions about what’s wrong with the world right now through YA literature.

**Danielle Fuller:** Indeed, Elizabeth Long’s work reminds us that we should not invest much optimism in the possibility of positive change emerging from people reading about difference and experiences that are different from their own. That is because there is never any guarantee that anyone will take up any social or political action on the back of what they read. I think that it’s very easy to romanticise or idealise what reading can do, but in YA studies particularly, it’s important to remember Long’s words because we can very easily overstate the power of reading (especially in the domain of education studies).

**Justyna Deszcz-Tryhubczak:** I second Brie’s link to Sheldon’s work, and I want to bring in Sheldon’s critique of the idea of the child as the saviour or protector of the future. With YA and YA studies, we can problematise this idea of hope by validating and exploring alternative feelings, such as fatigue, exhaustion, and despair. Speaking from Poland and having experienced closely the Ukraine War through hosting young people, I can’t begin to imagine what they are feeling. YA may be a way to bring up, not solve, but bring up issues and difficult feelings and challenge the idea that young people always have to be filled with hope for the future.

**Roberta Seelinger Trites:** There was a wonderful article in the *New York Times* this week about malaise, about how our learners in college have become so detached because of the pandemic. Brie’s earlier point reminded me of that article: it’s relational, learning is relational. The bottom line is that everything we do is relational, including the creation and consumption of texts (whether they be creative texts or the sort of writing I do). It’s Marah Gubar’s kinship model. To me, the really urgent work that we have to do in our field is

recognise that we're going to have another lost generation if we can't help young people, especially teens, invest in relationality again.

**Danielle Fuller:** Yes, we need to centre young people. We need to listen to our students again, but also remember the importance of kindness. Young people are having a really discombobulated childhood and adolescence right now, and we must practice an ethics of care with kindness at its centre, without romanticising or idealising it.

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**TABLE ONE**

Name	Role
Benwell, Fox	YA Author & PhD Student at Anglia Ruskin University, UK.
Collins, Stacy	Curriculum & Research Librarian and Team Coordinator at Simmons University, US.
Deszcz-Tryhubczak, Justyna	Associate Professor & Director of the Center for Young People's Literature and Culture (2013-2022), University of Wroclaw, Poland.
Fuller, Danielle	Professor in the Department of English and Film Studies and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta, Canada.
Martens, Marianne	Associate Professor, Kent State University, US.
Ortabasi, Melek	Associate Professor in the Department of World Languages and Literatures, specialising in Japanese and German literatures, at Simon Fraser University, Canada.
Owen, Gabrielle (Brie)	Assistant Professor of English at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, US.
Trites, Roberta	Distinguished Professor of English at Illinois State University, US.
van Lierop-DeBrauwere, Helma	Professor of Children's and Young Adult Literature at Tilburg University, Netherlands.
Wilkins, Kim	Author and Professor at the University of Queensland, Australia.