

This week's column is by Lily Collins, a staff member at the Kirkland Town Library and a junior at Clinton High School.

Why Young Adult Books Matter

Oftentimes, people read books in an attempt to relate to the characters and feel seen. Books with "adult" storylines like unhappy marriages or career struggles are hard for teenagers to identify with. That's where YA comes in.

Young Adult, or YA, books are aimed at readers between the ages of 12 and 18 featuring protagonists of those same ages. YA got its start in the 1950's with books like *Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger and *Lord of the Flies* by William Golding. Although intended for adults, these books captured the attention of the adolescent population, who could relate to the characters. The first book to gain widespread popularity that was written with a young audience in mind was S.E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*. This book showed a darker side of youth that wasn't common at the time. Since then, YA literature has prominently featured storylines with more taboo topics like family struggles, mental illness, teen sexuality and other complex issues that affect today's teens on a daily basis. In recent years, trilogies like *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins or *Divergent* by Veronica Roth have thrown YA work into the spotlight by being turned into popular movie adaptations.

YA books highlight characters with diverse identities from a variety of backgrounds. Recently, there has been an upswing in the amount of characters in these books that are people of color, or LGBTQ+, or disabled. As teens are growing up and figuring out who they are, having characters they can relate to is extremely important.

There are a few different ways authors approach diversity in YA books. Sometimes they address it head on, like in Casey McQuiston's *Red, White and Royal Blue*. Although readers realize they're (probably) not going to fall in love with the Prince of England as the son of the President of the United States, they can relate to the feelings of discovery and finding you are. Books like *The Sun is Also a Star* by Nicola Yoon captures the story of a teenage girl who's about to be deported falling in love. *Challenger Deep* by Neal Shusterman tells the story of a boy who struggles with schizophrenia. Those books can be comforting for teens, to help them know that other people have similar struggles and identities. However, there are also fantastic books that have diversity without it being the focus of the story. *Once & Future* by Amy Rose Capetta and Cori McCarthy includes a ton of diversity, in terms of gender, race and sexuality, but this isn't the forefront of the story, instead a incredible retelling of the Arthurian story. As the field of

YA expands, it's incredibly important that more diverse stories are told. Being able to see yourself in a book can feel incredibly validating. Additionally, many young writers want to tell stories that they know, and having YA as a defined category gives them a chance to write their story knowing that there have been many successful books with similar themes.

YA is a wide-spanning genre with stories that can be enjoyed by both teens and adults. Some truly great titles, from *The Outsiders* to *The Hunger Games* have come out of the genre and are available for all to read. The books mentioned in this article are available through the Mid-York Library System, and come highly recommended!