

THE
WRITERS' STUDIO

EXPLORING GENRE: YOUNG ADULT FICTION

A Creative Writing Workshop

The Writers' Studio
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Winter 2022

NAME YOUR YA NOVEL!

First Initial

A - B: Court
C - D: Queen
E - F: Empire
G - H: Lies
I - J: Prince
K - L: Throne
M - N: Kingdom
O - P: Memories
Q - R: House
S - T: Crown
U - V: Curse
W - X: Days
Y - Z: Song

+ OF +

Birth Month

January: Snow
February: Dreams
March: Glass
April: Thorns
May: Roses
June: Blood
July: Fire
August: Ash
September: Hearts
October: Light
November: Darkness
December: Dragons

+ AND +

Color of Shirt

Red: Flames
Orange: Salt
Yellow: Starlight
Green: Ruin
Blue: Ice
Purple: Ravens
Pink: Swords
White: Crows
Black: Embers
Brown: Bones
Grey: Shadows
Multi: Sorrow

TODAY'S WORKSHOP

Exploring Genre: Young Adult Fiction

- * Background, Definition and Genres of YA
- * Common Features of YA
- * Considerations: Tropes and Clichés
- * Examples & Discussion
- * Final Thoughts
- * Questions?
- * Contact Information





WHAT IS YA?

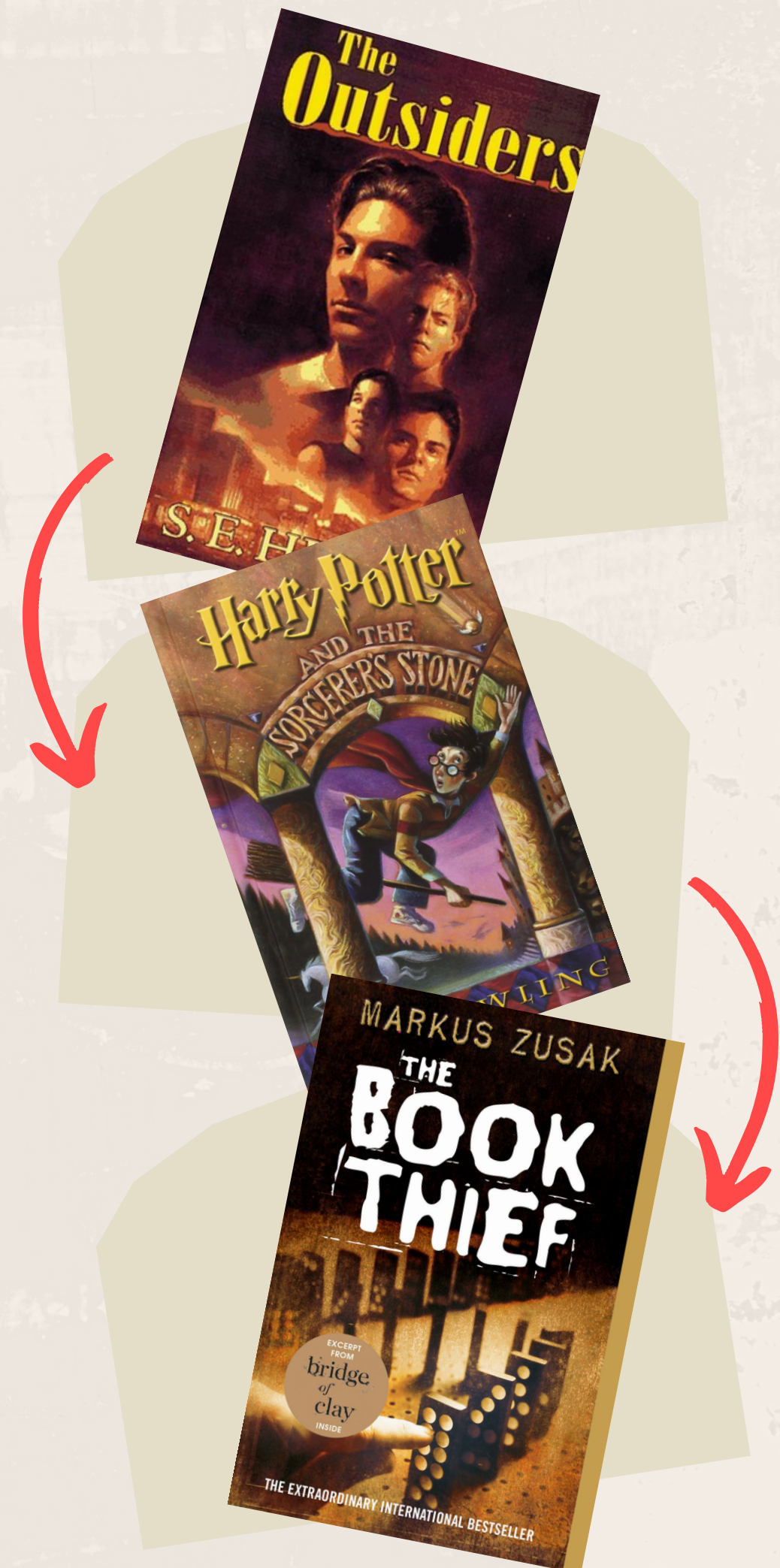
YA isn't a genre as much as a marketing category designed to sell books.



A BRIEF HISTORY OF YA

YA isn't really a genre but a marketing category used by publishers to sell books to a specific audience.

- * Created by NYC librarians in the 20th Century
- * *The Outsiders* is considered the first YA success
- * Was considered "low art" until *Harry Potter*
- * Over 55% of readers are over the age of 18
- * One of the most important book categories today
- * Some books are sold as YA even if they aren't



WHAT MAKES A STORY YA?

Middle Grade

Protagonist's Age: 10 – 13

Readers' Age: 8 – 12

POV: 3rd Person

Reactive, Passive Main Character

Timeframe: Limited/ Contained

Love: Friendship and First Crush

Violence: Mild

Profanity: None

Adults: Useless

Themes: Fitting In

Endings: Happy

Word Count: 30 – 50 K

Young Adult

Protagonist's Age: 13 – 19

Readers' Age: 12 +

POV: 1st Person

Proactive, Reflective Main Character

Timeframe: Limited/ Contained

Love: First Love, Non-Explicit Sex

Violence: Mature and Graphic

Profanity: Allowed/ Limited

Adults: Problems

Themes: Standing Out and Growing Up

Endings: Bittersweet

Word Count: 55 – 90 K

Adult

Protagonist's Age: Any

Readers' Age: Teens and Up

POV: Any

Active or Passive Main Character(s)

Timeframe: Any

Love: Any (explicit and erotic)

Violence: Any (graphic and explicit)

Profanity: Any

Adults: Characters

Themes: Small Epiphanies/ Any

Endings: Any

Word Count: 70 – 120 K

POPULAR SUBGENRES OF YA

Genres often overlap and feature romance, but the most popular are set in fantasy or contemporary worlds.

- * Fantasy

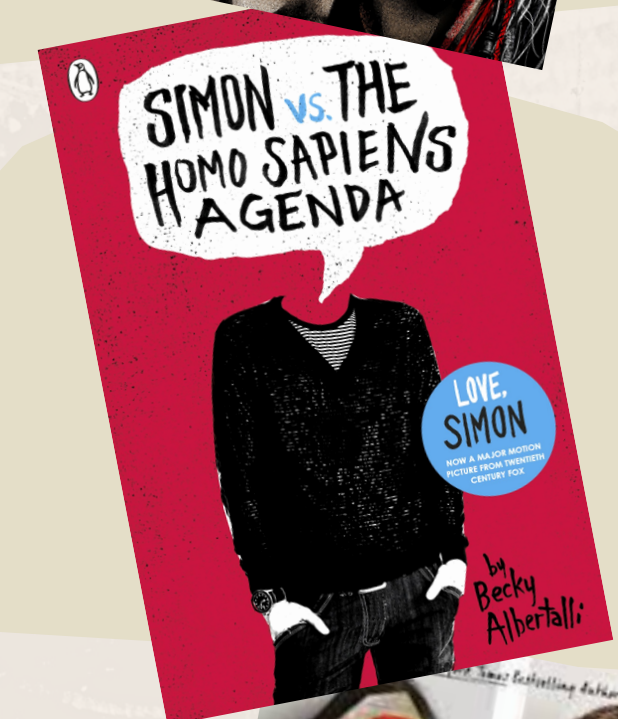
special/chosen teen must fight evil to save the world

- * Contemporary

ordinary teen overcomes problems in recognizable world

- * Other

historical fiction, mystery, thrillers and crime stories





COMMON FEATURES

YA Stories cover a wide range of genres but share several elements.

TEENAGE PROTAGONIST

The most important feature of YA is the age of the protagonist. They must be a teenager.

- * Age of protagonist (14 – 18)
- * Act, think and talk like a teenager
- * Face problems teen readers can relate to
- * Have teen priorities in a teen world
- * Special/ chosen or ordinary/ everyman
- * Flawed, complex, authentic and interesting



TEENAGE POINT OF VIEW

Capturing an authentic teenage voice and perspective is essential to hook readers.

- * Believable, accessible teenage voice
- * Focused on themselves/ limited perspective
- * Everything is filtered through teen priorities
- * Sense of urgency and immediacy
- * Direct but not simple
- * First person, present tense is standard – but not required



TEENAGE PROBLEMS

No matter how fantastic the world or epic the scope of the story, YA is grounded in teen issues.

- * Big emotions and big problems
- * Everything is intense, dramatic and life-or-death
- * Friends and romantic partners very important
- * Freedom/ abilities are usually restricted
- * Adults are problems
- * Problems teen readers can relate to



TEENAGE CONTENT

YA audiences want serious and mature content, but there are limits on what's acceptable.

- * PG 14 – 16
- * Violence: Non-graphic descriptions
- * Sex: Non-explicit and off-screen
- * Swearing: Minimal
- * Can include other issues like suicide, rape, addiction, etc., but this is usually not the focus
- * Dealt with in a teen way/ way teens can relate



TEENAGE GROWTH

YA is about leaving adolescence and becoming an adult, so strong character arcs are important.

- * Internal growth is essential
- * Clear value shift from the beginning to the end
- * Change results because of the plot (conflict)
- * Change reinforces theme
- * Growth should cost them
- * Better off because of it



TEENAGE THEMES

Find the emotional truth of your character and explore it in other elements of story.

- * Growing up, standing out and finding yourself
- * Leaving family and building new relationships
- * Loss of innocence facing problems of the world
- * Mental health and identity
- * First love and sexual encounter
- * Not necessarily simplistic but straightforward





TROPES AND CLICHÉS

What to consider and avoid with common character archetypes and plot devices.



STRONG & SPECIAL PROTAGONISTS

Protagonists are often chosen or special, but readers need to care and invest in them.

- * The reason the plot happens to the main character
- * Avoid overly perfect characters
- * Abilities must be hard earned and cause problems
- * If you're not like other girls - prove it
- * Boys can be main characters too!



STEREOTYPICAL SIDEKICKS

Supporting character must feel real and add to the story.

- * Round out, reflect and contrast protagonist
- * All characters should feel like they exist off page
- * Move beyond clichés
- * Be aware of token diversity
- * Research harmful stereotypes and avoid them
- * Can have an arc but don't need to



DEAD PARENTS

Many protagonists are orphans in YA. This can define the main character and their story.

- * Parents' death sets up central conflict
- * Sympathize with abandoned/ abused children
- * Creates a wound that impacts character
- * Lack of parental figures provides freedom
- * Need a parental figure/ mentor



MAGIC MAKEOVERS

Transformation is a key story element, but beware of what easy, external changes mean.

- * Have symbolic meaning for growth and arc
- * Integrate into story's plot and world
- * Consider what it means if love interest only notices the character when they're hot
- * Your main character deserves a moment to shine



DUMB DECISIONS

Mistakes can move the plot forward and create conflict but they must make sense.

- * Actions and decisions should be believable
- * Make sense in terms of character or world
- * Beware of irredeemable ignorance
- * How do misunderstandings impact character?
- * Could one conversation fix everything?
- * Avoid after-the-fact justifications



BAD ROMANCE

Romance is a large part of most YA plots, but some tropes are overused and others toxic.

- * Insta-love
- * Love triangles
- * Forced relationships
- * Unhealthy/ obsessive/ controlling relationships
- * "I'm nothing without you" characters
- * "I can't stop myself" scenarios



UNAMBIGUOUS BADDIES

YA readers want complicated, no-easy-answer stories, so make sure antagonists are too.

- * Complex and dimensional
- * Not all antagonists are villains
- * One tragic event doesn't make someone evil
- * Should want the same thing as your main character or want to stop your main character
- * Should start with more power than your main character
- * Generate the most conflict for main character





EXAMPLES

Let's explore some aspects of structure and style in YA stories.



CONSIDER:

- * Character
- * Theme
- * Plot
- * World
- * Language / Prose

SIMON VS THE HOMOSAPIENS AGENDA - BECKY ALBERTALLI

It's a weirdly subtle conversation. I almost don't notice I'm being blackmailed.

We're sitting in metal folding chairs backstage, and Martin Addison says, "I read your email."

I guess he must have seen me sitting at the computer.

And I guess I'm a monumental idiot.

He actually smiles. "Anyway, I thought it might interest you that my brother is gay."

"What are you trying to say?" I ask.

"Nothing. Look, Spier, I don't have a problem with it. It's just not that big of a deal."

Except it's a little bit of a disaster, actually. Or possibly an epic fuckstorm of a disaster, depending on whether Martin can keep his mouth shut.

"Anyway," he says, "it's pretty obvious that you don't want people to know."

I mean. I guess I don't. Except the whole coming out thing doesn't really scare me. I don't think it scares me.

It's a giant holy box of awkwardness, and I won't pretend I'm looking forward to it. But it probably wouldn't be the end of the world. Not for me.

The problem is, I don't know what it would mean for Blue.

CONSIDER:

- * Character
- * Theme
- * Plot
- * World
- * Language

THE HUNGER GAMES – SUZANNE COLLINS

Sitting at Prim's knees, guarding her, is the world's ugliest cat. Mashed-in nose, half of one ear missing, eyes the color of rotting squash. Prim named him Buttercup, insisting that his muddy yellow coat matched the bright flower. He hates me. Or at least distrusts me. Even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown him in a bucket when Prim brought him home. Scrawny kitten, belly swollen with worms, crawling with fleas. The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. But Prim begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay. My mother got rid of the vermin and he's a born mouser. Even catches the occasional rat. Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Buttercup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me.

Entrails. No hissing. This is the closest we will ever come to love.

CONSIDER:

- * Character
- * Theme
- * Plot
- * World
- * Language / Prose

THE PERKS OF BEING A WALLFLOWER

- STEPHEN CHBOSKY -

I walk around the school hallways and look at the people. I look at the teachers and wonder why they're here. If they like their jobs. Or us. And I wonder how smart they were when they were fifteen. Not in a mean way. In a curious way. It's like looking at all the students and wondering who's had their heart broken that day, and how they are able to cope with having three quizzes and a book report due on top of that. Or wondering who did the heart breaking. And wondering why.

CONSIDER:

- * Character
- * Theme
- * Plot
- * World
- * Language / Prose

THE HATE U GIVE - ANGIE THOMAS

We break out the crowd. Big D's house is packed wall-to-wall. I've always heard that everybody and their momma comes to his spring break parties—well, everybody except me—but damn, I didn't know it would be this many people. Girls wear their hair colored, curled, laid, and slayed. Got me feeling basic as hell with my ponytail. Guys in their freshest kicks and sagging pants grind so close to girls they just about need condoms. My nana likes to say that spring brings love, but it promises babies in the winter. I wouldn't be surprised if a lot of them are conceived the night of Big D's party. He always has it on the Friday of spring break because you need Saturday to recover and Sunday to repent.

CONSIDER:

- * Character
- * Theme
- * Plot
- * World
- * Language / Prose

THE FAULT IN OUR STARS – JOHN GREEN

There are infinite numbers between 0 and 1. There's .1 and .12 and .112 and an infinite collection of others. Of course, there is a bigger infinite set of numbers between 0 and 2, or between 0 and a million. Some infinities are bigger than other infinities. A writer we used to like taught us that. There are days, many of them, when I resent the size of my unbounded set. I want more numbers than I'm likely to get, and God, I want more numbers for Augustus Waters than he got. But, Gus, my love, I cannot tell you how thankful I am for our little infinity. I wouldn't trade it for the world. You gave me a forever within the numbered days, and I'm grateful.



FINAL THOUGHTS

Some aspects of style and story structure in YA Fiction.



CHARACTER

Having a distinct character audiences can identify with and root for is key.

- * Must be able to relate to them
- * Must sympathize with them
- * Must understand what they care about
- * Have a clear, identifiable goal
- * Has flaw that hinders them reaching goal (vulnerable)
- * Be active – the action happens because of them not to them



VOICE

What your character says and how they say it is key to keeping your audience hooked.

- * Avoid wise-beyond-years reflection
- * Focus on emotional drama and insecurity
- * Short, simple language
- * Avoid slang and references that will date you
- * Relax grammar and syntax rules
- * Must feel authentic and true to character



BEGINNINGS

Start the story as soon as possible and include as little set up as necessary.

- * Start the day everything changes
- * Set up character and world
- * Fantasy and sci-fi can require more set up
- * Something happens making main character act
- * Sets them on the road to success (will be hard)
- * Consider the worst thing that could happen and how it can become the best thing or vice versa



MIDDLES

**YA stories are plot-driven and fast-paced.
Things will get better and then worse.**

- * Don't protect your characters
- * Defined by trying, failing and learning
- * Gain and lose allies
- * One conversation shouldn't fix everything
- * Don't hit the same story beat twice
- * Remember your story's midpoint – shake things up half way through



ENDINGS

YA stories often have happy endings, but they must be earned and cost the main character.

- * Story ends when character reaches their goal
- * Look for the inevitable but surprising or obvious but unexpected outcomes in your story
- * Avoid coincidences and easy endings
- * Needs to feel complete/ have closure
- * Should end optimistically



STYLE & PROSE

YA stories shouldn't be dumbed down or simple, but the writing is accessible and straightforward.

- * Prefer the direct over abstract
- * Language is straightforward and simple
- * Symbolism is concrete and uncomplicated
- * Avoid purple prose
- * Try to sound natural and casual
- * Include a few key details to paint mental picture in audience's mind



RELATIONSHIPS

Finding peers is as important to teens as finding themselves, so this is integral to the story.

- * Add a fresh spin to tropes
- * Integrate them naturally to your story
- * Avoid or challenge clichés
- * Don't forget about friends and found families
- * Don't romanticize toxic relationships
- * Write relationships we can root for and respect





QUESTIONS?

Thank You!
The Writers' Studio

FOR
MORE
HELP!

The Writers' Studio

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