

INTERVIEW

Exploring the “Lively Art” of Young Adult Literature: A Conversation with Michael Cart

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Much has been made about the growth of young adult literature in the past 15 years. Indeed, YAL is enjoying a period of remarkable quantity and quality. Similarly, scholarship and research addressing different aspects of young adult literature are flourishing, with a growing contingent of academic journals and conferences focusing on pedagogical value and literary analysis. However, this was not always the case. Just a few decades ago, young adult literature’s prospects seemed dim. Publishers and adults in general viewed it with condescension and saw it as substandard literature, and unsurprisingly, it received little academic consideration. While various factors have contributed to both YA’s popularity and scholarly viability, perhaps none has been as potent or as enduring as YA historian, critic, author, and expert, Michael Cart. Few have championed and raised the profile of young adult literature as long, as well, and as enthusiastically as Cart, whose seminal work, *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*, provided a comprehensive history and examination of YAL. Since 1996, when the publication of the first edition, *From Romance to Realism* has served as the foundation for countless articles, books, and studies on YAL. Additionally, it helped highlight Cart’s expertise in young adult literature and the legitimacy of the field’s academic potential.

Cart’s ability to be both an advocate and critic of YAL has manifested itself time and again during his impressive tenure in the discipline. His first encounter with YA was in 1988, when he served on the Best Books for Young Adults committee for the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). Since then, he has written 21 books, including *Taking Aim: Power and Pain, Teens and Guns* and *How Beautiful the Ordinary: Twelve Stories of Identity*, and served (and continues to serve) as a columnist and reviewer of both YA and adult books for *Booklist* magazine.

He has been president of both YALSA and the Assembly of Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE (ALAN), the only person so far who has that distinction, which serves as a testament to Cart's devotion to and work on behalf of YA in a variety of milieus. As YALSA president, he worked to establish the Michael L. Printz Award, which is "for a book that exemplifies literary excellence in young adult literature" (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/printz-award>). Additionally, he has revisited and updated *From Romance to Realism*, now titled *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, with the second edition being published in 2010 and a third edition following in 2016.

As his remarkable professional biography indicates, Cart is generous and enthusiastic about sharing his knowledge of and experiences with young adult literature, and he graciously agreed to be interviewed for *Study and Scrutiny*, where he shared his thoughts on the evolution of YAL, the areas where it needs to grow, and the development of *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*.

Terri Suico (TS): Thank you so much for all of the work you have done on behalf of young adult literature. Given that, I was interested to see that you didn't encounter young adult literature until 1988. On the "About Me" page (Cart, 2016a) on your website, you state that you were "instantly smitten" with young adult literature when you first encountered it after being invited to serve on the YALSA and that it filled a gaping hole in your life. What was it about young adult literature that captivated you?

Michael Cart (MC): I grew up without young adult literature. Young adult literature, of course, debuted in 1969. By that time, I was already 28. I grew up on children's literature and then adult literature. Young adult literature was an opportunity to see myself in the pages of a good book. That's one reason why I was so attracted immediately to young adult literature. It did fill an emotional gap in my own life, and I think it does an extraordinary job of filling emotional gaps in the lives of today's teens by giving them an opportunity to see that they're not the only one. Teens do tend to be solipsistic and oftentimes feel that they are the only person like themselves in the world. Young adult literature puts the light of that and lets them see themselves.

TS: Do you recall the first YA book that you read when you started working with YALSA?

MC: I wish I could say I remembered the exact title of the first YA book I read, but I can tell you a title I read early on that spoke to me. This takes us back to 1989 when I first became a member of YALSA's Best Books for Young Adults Committee, and that book was Francesca Lia Block's *Weetzie Bat*. It's a book I really love and one that cemented my interest in young adult literature.

TS: As you know, young adult literature has changed so much in the past 25 years. What changes to it do you think have been the most substantial or important?

MC: One of the biggest right now is the phenomenon that I'm still shaking my head at, and that is the discovery of young adult literature by adults. The fact that we now have the crossover readership and multi-generational readership of young adult literature bodes well for its future. I attribute this largely to the Harry Potter books and to the movies that have been made out of *The Hunger Games* and *Twilight* and others of that ilk and genre.

TS: What do you think caused the shift? Beyond the franchising, do you think there was anything in the books themselves that helped make adults more aware of young adult literature?

MC: I've heard, and I think buy into this because of my experience reviewing both adult and YA books for *Booklist* magazine, that adults like young adult literature because it actually tells a story. Unlike YA, adult literature often is devoted to very minute explications of people's psyche. This doesn't always produce a page-turning novel.

TS: You noted the influence of the Harry Potter series earlier, and many regard it as one of the most influential series in young adult literature. What other book or books do you think have energized readers, teachers, and scholars?

MC: I would say probably any one of the many Printz Award-winning books, which have invested young adult literature with a depth that it probably didn't have before. The award and the depth it has encouraged have invited more and more literary fiction to be published under the YA rubric. One Printz winner that has always stuck with me is Aidan Chambers's *Postcards from No Man's Land*. He is one of my heroes, and I think he's a great talent. He brings not only a great talent as a fiction writer but also as a critic.

TS: Where do you think young adult literature has the most room or need for growth?

Michael: Multicultural literature is the first thing that leaps to mind. That speaks, of course, to all literature but particularly to YA. I've written about that, too, in *From Romance to Realism* and elsewhere. To harken back to what I said earlier about helping people see themselves in literature, we desperately need multicultural literature because these people are treated as the quintessential outsiders, and we need to bring them inside. Multicultural literature that gives them faces and speaks to their own existences, their cultures, their religions, and their lives in general is uniquely equipped to do that.

TS: What do you think of the We Need Diverse Books movement, and how does it fit with this need?

MC: I applaud it. I think it's wonderful, and I think it already is having an effect. I recently put together an annual list of best books for young adults, and I realized that the first five books on my list were multicultural titles, which made me stop and think, "Wow, this this is something that's become a happening thing." I put the credit for this largely at the doorstep of We Need Diverse Books.

TS: It's been an interesting movement to follow and to see how people have responded to it. By and large, there has been a very positive response in that it has helped call attention to the fact that we need books that reflect all different experiences and different cultures. You make some intriguing statements in *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* in relation to the ongoing debate regarding the ability and the right of authors to write about cultures other than their own. How do you see young adult literature navigating this debate?

MC: There are some people who feel strongly, and perhaps justifiably, that one can only write about a culture from within that culture. It seems to me those attacks underestimate the importance of the writer's creative intelligence and that people who are familiar with a culture, whether they're inside or out, should have a certain liberty to write about it. Jane Yolen said if we could only write from within the culture, we wouldn't have any historical literature, because nobody alive was within that

culture. I think she made a good point. I'm a great believer in the creative imagination and the emotional intelligence of good writers. I think they should be permitted a certain latitude to write about cultures other than their own, presuming that they have learned about the culture and are familiar with it.

TS: I think what's helpful here is that they can write about the culture from a different perspective. That perspective could be enlightening and offer a gateway for people from different cultures to get a better sense of what that culture is and what that culture means. In *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, you include another quote from Jane Yolen again about the balkanization of literature and how being overly concerned about who can write what segments literature into little states, which isn't helpful.

MC: Precisely. Sometimes, we find the universal in the particular, and we also find the universal in the universal. I think we have to make room for both.

TS: What do you think needs to happen to get more books in general, and YA books in particular, to address multicultural topics?

MC: There have been many reasons given over the years why we have a paucity about multicultural literature. One that I think is still relevant is that we need more people of color in editorial positions and publishing and in the role of publishers themselves. There were recent studies in articles reported in *Publishers Weekly* (Deahl, 2016; Milliot, 2015) that speak to an amazing lack of multiculturalism in the ranks of people who work in publishing.

There's also another aspect that speaks to publishing. Many publishers perhaps still feel that there isn't much of an audience for multicultural fiction; therefore, it's not monetarily viable to publish it. I think this is terribly wrong-headed. It derives from a feeling that kids are only interested in themselves and people like themselves and that they're reluctant to read about other cultures and ethnicities. This is probably a base canard as far as kids' abilities and interests are concerned.

TS: If anything, it seems like children and adolescents want to learn about the world around them and to find out about other people and other people's experiences.

MC: Increasingly so, I would say.

TS: This reminds me a bit of the argument that I've heard regarding gender and books. The assumption is that books with a male protagonist and books that are written by men are seen as being meant for everyone, and books with a female protagonist or books written by women are seen as being only for women. It's an infuriating mindset, but I think it's something that has taken hold in some parts of the industry and of society.

MC: This goes back to the 19th century, when there were books published specifically for young women who intended to become homemakers and not have careers. The rest of literature then was addressed to boys, and that has carried over to today where we still have this cultural lag between what was and what should be now. It's interesting about the gender issue that you have. Men can write about men, and women can write about men. Look at somebody like M. E. Kerr, who has spent her career writing about men and from the point of view of men. The same thing is true of Francesca Lia Block who gave such wonderful vibrant life to Dirk and Duck in *Weetzie Bat*. However, for men to write about women is generally viewed as being semi-taboo.

TS: Thinking about multicultural books, what are some recent ones that have excited you or that you think are moving us in the right direction?

MC: One that immediately leaps to mind is Angie Thomas's *The Hate U Give*, which is a remarkable book. I reviewed it for *Booklist* and of course gave it a big star because it is a remarkable novel. Also, anything by Jason Reynolds, who has deservedly become one of the shining stars in young adult literature. He has a new novel coming out - I just got the galleys for it the other day and haven't had a chance to read it yet, but he's another voice that speaks to a different kind of multiculturalism. He's a marvel.

TS: I especially appreciate that his willingness to have these uncomfortable conversations with people and to hold people accountable for some of the issues that are happening in society. I think it would be easy and tempting to go to a venue like the National Council of Teachers convention or

the ALAN Workshop and just say, “You’re shaping the future. Thank you so much.” He does a good job of saying that while also noting, “Look, we have to do better.”

MC: If we only talked about things that were comfortable, there would be absolutely no opportunity for dialogue or dialectic. I applaud him for what he does.

TS: YA authors such as yourself tap into ongoing discussions of issues like race relations, social justice, and LGBTQ rights, which you’ve written about as an author and as a YA critic and historian. What other issues do you see young adult literature authors in the vanguard of?

MC: You pretty much cover the waterfront. Obviously, my principal focus at the moment is on LGBTQIA+ literature, which continues to speak to a particular need. The initialism has gotten so long and unwieldy - I might use the word queer. When David Levithan, the wonderful author and publisher, speaks about the field, he always invokes the word queer as a shorthand, so I’ll say queer as well. These kids still need a literature that informs their own life experience. I hate to keep sounding like a broken record, but it lets them know that they’re definitely not the only ones in the world. I speak, of course, from my own experience, harkening back to my own teenage years when there was no young adult literature, and very precious little adult queer literature, for that matter.

TS: We’ve already touched on your work *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, and I’d like to get some more of your insight regarding the book. The first edition of the book, then called *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*, was published 1996. Besides your self-described desire to immerse yourself in YA and learn more about the subject, what else prompted you to write this book?

MC: Curiosity. As I said earlier, I first discovered young adult literature back in 1988 and immediately fell in love with it. I wanted to know more about it, and I’ve always said the best way to find out about a subject is to write a book about it. That certainly was the case with YA. The research I did for it was an undivided joy, and I wish I could replicate that joy in some of the other things that I’ve written since then. It informed my thinking and helped me to look at literature in a way that I hadn’t before.

TS: How did you go about doing the research for this book, since nothing else like it had been written before? How did you go about finding the information?

MC: Oh, I made it up (laughs). No, part of it was immersing myself in the literature itself and reading widely and catholically, if that word can be turned into an adverb. There had been journal articles published about YA, and I certainly read those. Then I got involved of course with the history of adolescence itself, and there was a wide view of the research in that area that I could fall back on. However, as far as young adult literature itself is concerned, you're right, there really wasn't very much. Researching it was a challenge, but I hope I rose to the occasion.

TS: When thinking about young adult literature in the mid-1990s, when *From Romance to Realism* was first published, its prospects seemed dire. You acknowledge this in several of the editions. What do you see contributing to young adult literature's near death?

MS: There were several things. One of them was the rise of the middle school movement, which created a new audience. Publishers, of course, are always looking for a new audience, and they tended then to turn their energies from young adults to middle schoolers and created this new middle school literature at the expense of young adult literature.

Another factor was that young adult literature historically was a literature of contemporary realism. Realism had become so bastardized by reality television, even as early as the late-'80s and early-'90s, and people were thinking, "We can't top that, so we'll give less and less attention to YA because kids are not looking to young adult literature now for the experience of reality, they're looking to television." This is one time when I think the fears about the influence of television probably had some validity.

One other circumstance that was important, speaking of audience, was that the number of teenagers in America declined rapidly from the mid-'80s well into the '90s. Again, publishers felt that there was a dwindling audience, and therefore, they produced a dwindling literature.

TS: Given all these factors, what did you see in young adult literature when you wrote the first edition of *From Romance to Realism* that made you think that it would continue? In the later editions, you were able to use hindsight to note that it had a near-death experience and then came

back from the brink. With the first edition, you were in the midst of the downturn, and you observed that young adult literature was facing problems, but you also argued that it's going to continue, despite what some of the publishers were saying at the time. What made you think that young adult literature was here to stay?

MC: Young adult literature speaks to a viable audience. We had children's literature and adult literature before there was a young adult literature. Some people have said there's no need for young adult literature because teenagers go directly from children's literature to adult literature. But young adult literature is uniquely equipped to speak to their life needs, including their intellectual, emotional, and social needs. It never really got away from that. Even though the number of books that were published went down in the 1990s, young adult literature continued to meet a definite need. So long as it does that, we need to believe that there's going to be a future for young adult literature always.

TS: As you well know, young adult literature certainly made a recovery and has grown considerably since 1996. Besides its substantial evolution since then, what else inspired you to revise the book, now called *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, in 2010?

MC: I felt, as you just said, there have been so many changes in the field, that the first edition would have needed updating, but even the second edition needed an update after 2010. Young adult literature is a lively art, and so long as it remains lively, we need to revisit and revise our past opinions and information about it. The third edition was one that I particularly enjoyed -- I think I probably enjoyed it more than the first two editions, simply because it changed so dramatically and remarkably. YA is so exciting now; every time I think about young adult literature, I get all atwitter because it is such a vibrant field.

TS: What are you particularly excited about now in terms of young adult literature?

MC: A number of things. I'm excited by the fact that YA now is certainly established as a literary field after being dismissed as being mere problem novels for so many years. You had this experience

of cultural lag where people didn't realize that the field was changing under their feet, until finally somebody called their attention to it.

In terms of other developments, queer literature has undergone a real sea change in the last five or so years. We're now seeing transgender people, we're seeing intersex people, and we are beginning to see people of color in queer literature as well. That is tremendously exciting to me.

Though I'm not so sure that this belongs in this category, I go back to the fact that young adult literature expanded its readership by speaking to a multi-generational audience. I'm particularly interested in the new adult phenomenon.

TS: What are your thoughts regarding new adult literature, and what does the term mean to you?

MS: To understanding it, we need to go back to the definition of young adult. In terms of cognitive research, it was famously discovered not so long ago that the brain is not fully developed until perhaps age 25 or 26, something that we didn't realize before. When that happened, it expanded the age of the young adult into these crossover people who we call new adults now.

TS: I appreciate your explaining what new adult literature is. Until I read that section in the most recent edition of *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism*, I was a little befuddled as to what is new adult literature versus young adult literature versus adult literature.

MS: I was lucky in that I was able to go to school on this from the very beginning of the phenomenon, which I date back to 2004 when I started reviewing adult books for *Booklist*. The first book that I reviewed was *Prep* by Curtis Sittenfeld, which I regard as a quintessential new adult book. From that point on, my editor and the publisher of *Booklist* started looking for similar books to send to me to review, so I became the in-house reviewer for what we are now calling new adult fiction. It's been fascinating to see how the field evolved.

TS: What do you like about new adult literature, and what have you found promising about it?

MC: I think it's very challenging. Kids have traditionally always liked to read up in terms of the age of the protagonist, and this certainly gives them an opportunity to read up. However, this is true of young adult literature as well. What we call young adulthood has changed so rapidly and so

dynamically that it gives kids an opportunity to see themselves in a future context, which will be on them before they realize it.

TS: How do you see new adult literature differing from young adult literature, and how do you see it differing from the traditional romance novel? Based on my limited experience with new adult books, it seems like many of them are similar to chick lit or traditional romance.

MC: Chick lit is a perfectly viable term to use here. I did a lot of interviewing for an article for *Booklist* magazine some years ago, and I made it my business to talk to people in publishing. Even many of them were dismissing it as a chick lit phenomenon that was here today, gone tomorrow. But I felt from my own reading that there was a different aspect to it that warranted more attention, and that was the more literary aspect of it, the continuation of young adult literature.

In terms of new adult literature's similarities to chick lit or traditional romance novels, you could say the same thing about young adult literature, where you have a whole body of chick lit books. However, you also have a larger literature that transcends that. For new adult literature, like YA fiction, you acknowledge that there is this fundamental sort of chick lit aspect of it, but it's moved beyond that and has turned into a more traditional and viable literature, just as young adult literature has. When you look back at the history of young adult literature, in its earlier days, it was what we today would call chick lit and romance. The 1940s was a decade of romance that extended well into the mid-1950s. But as young adult literature evolved, just as new adult literature is evolving, it turned into something much broader and more extravagant, if I could use that word, in a positive way.

TS: When I think back to the young adult literature of the 1940s and 1950s, I also think of it as being much younger than the YA literature we have today. Seeing it grow to encompass a lot of different ages has been interesting, and this new category of new adult literature seems like a natural progression in some ways.

MC: Kids were younger then, not just in chronological age, but in terms of their worldliness. They tended to be more naïve. Also, publishers had their own ideas of what kids were like, and they saw them as kind of a tabula rasa audience, so they gave them books like that, starting with teen romances. Then they went into adventure stories and sport stories for boys. I guess this probably is something

we always have to reinvent for each new generation of literature – what goes around comes around. And literature is, in its own way, kind of circular.

TS: Another thing that strikes me, as we think about the history of young adult literature, is that it seemed like the publishers and authors of the 1940s and 1950s wanted to mirror what teenagers were interested in, but they also presented an idealized picture of teens. Prior to *The Outsiders*, the books were a portrayal of how adults wanted teenagers to be rather than how they actually were.

MC: It made adults comfortable when they became aware of the literature being published for their kids, because it was idealized and had very little to do with the real world.

TS: While young adult literature often makes people uncomfortable, I feel like it's doing its job if that is the case.

MC: If people read about the real lives of teens, they would be uncomfortable in too many cases. This is another reason realistic young adult literature is important, because it shines a light on areas that need attention if teens are to be healthy and viable citizens of the world.

TS: In *From Romance to Realism*, there were quite a few changes from the 1996 edition the most recent one, which was published in 2016. What changes are you the most proud of in terms of your writing and research?

MC: One change I made is that I gave more focus to the marketplace, without which we wouldn't have the literature. Between 1996 and 2016, there was such a sea change in terms of the way that the literature was marketed, and I was fascinated by that aspect. Of course, one thing that also fascinated me that I gave some attention to is the explosion of the very numbers of YA books that are being published these days - talk about an exponential advance. This goes back to the market obviously, since YA literature is selling extraordinarily well. Nothing succeeds like imitation in the world of publishing, so they are going to publish more and more YA, which is good and bad. Sometimes, when you get a surfeit of the literature, it gets published without as much editorial input as it could. I think that has been a problem with publishing, as the bottom line has become more and more

important. Editors are required to spend most of their time looking for the next big thing and less time on traditional editing of the manuscripts they have in front of them.

I would say one other thing about the latest edition. I would hope that it underscores the very viability of young adult literature. I've tried to do that in all three editions, but this is particularly emphasized in the new edition. Because the field has become so expansive, we need to recognize that it is an absolutely viable literature in and of itself.

TS: Definitely. For so long, it has been seen as inferior or as less than because it is meant for teenagers, which is a shame. Adolescents are important, and the literature here is important. Also, I hate always going back to the business side of publishing, but young adult and children's literature are keeping the publishing industry afloat.

MC: Even though publishing is bottom line-driven, there are still wonderful things being published. Publishers are still taking risks. This has occurred to me, but I wasn't quite sure about the validity of the idea until I sat down and started looking again at contemporary young adult literature when I was doing the third edition. I was impressed at how many first novels were being published that are good. They're not commercial enterprises, but they're literary enterprises. One thing that may be promoting that is the William C. Morris Debut Award (<http://www.ala.org/yalsa/morris-award>) that YALSA has conjured up. I applaud that; it's a wonderful award, and it's tremendously important.

TS: Given the time that passed between editions and the considerable changes that happened in young adult literature that you had to address, I know that some of the material in the first edition of *From Romance to Realism* had to be excised in later ones. Is there anything you wish you could have kept from the 1996 version that had to go in the later versions?

MC: The thing that didn't survive was more of an attention to literary criticism. That was certainly evident in the chapter from the original edition entitled "Time for Relevance - And Revelation: Into the Heart of Darkness," which I devoted to Robert Cormier's *We All Fall Down* and Richard Peck's *Remembering the Good Times*. I did focus more on literary criticism in the first than I have in the second and third editions.

TS: One aspect I enjoyed about all versions of *From Romance to Realism* is your willingness to look at the literature critically, particularly when it comes to the touchstone works of young adult literature such as *The Outsiders*. You explored what they did well and acknowledged what was problematic about them.

MC: Well, young adult literature is like any literature. It has highs and lows. One of the responsibilities of the reviewer and the critic is to point out faults, flaws, and failures. I hope I did that in all three editions because otherwise my credibility as a reviewer, historian, and critic would be compromised.

TS: I think you do it well, and I appreciated it because I feel like certain books are seen as so important and as such a turning point in young adult literature that we hesitate to say anything negative about them. Did you get any pushback with the critical piece?

MC: You know, I didn't. Maybe people are saying bad things about me behind my back (laughs), but nobody has ever confronted me over my evaluation of *The Outsiders* and some of the other untouchable works in young adult literature in the field.

TS: Is there a work that you would consider untouchable or above any sort of critical reproach?

MC: Yeah, *Weetzie Bat* (laughs). That does again leap to mind as does Robert Lipsyte's *The Contender*. I have a special fondness for that book because I think it has been overlooked by critics and literary historians. It was a tremendously important book in the early history of young adult literature, published the same year as *The Outsiders*. It was, to my mind, a much more viable example of contemporary realism. *The Outsiders*, as I've said many times, has realistic elements, but it is a romance. *The Contender* is, at its heart, a gritty, street-smart exercise in urban contemporary realism.

TS: Is there anything else that you want to say about young adult literature or *From Romance to Realism* in closing?

MC: You've been very catholic in terms of your questions. I think we really have covered the waterfront. As far as anything else, I really can't think of anything off the top of my head, except to tell you to look forward to the fourth edition (laughs) if I live long enough to do one.

TS: That was going to be my final question, so I'm excited to know that a new edition of *Young Adult Literature: From Romance to Realism* is on your mind.

MC: It has passed my consciousness a number of times since the third one was published. I have no idea how many years it would take before a fourth edition would be needed but stay tuned. We may have a fourth edition one of these days after all as long as the field remains as dynamic as it is today.

TS: I think it's getting much more dynamic, which in turn, encourages scholarship in the area. As you know, there is a great deal of research taking place, and you have had a huge part in that by making YA literature a legitimate avenue to pursue in academia and by giving researchers the tools and history we need so they can write and research it in a thoughtful way. Thank you for everything you've done.

MC: Thank you, Terri, for what you said, you are very generous.

TS: Not at all. Every year I tell you, your work changed my life, and I know that I speak for many, many other scholars in young adult literature.

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