

INTERVIEW

“If You Read, You’re Never Alone:” A Conversation with Dr. Judith A. Hayn and Dr. Jeffrey S. Kaplan

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Young adult literature (YAL) has encountered more than its fair share of detractors. In 1956, Frank G. Jennings asserted that “the stuff of adolescent literature, for the most part, is mealy-mouthed, gutless, and pointless” (1956, p.526). Even now, with YAL’s popularity among readers and teachers reaching new highs, concerns regarding the books remain. Fortunately, YAL has defenders who not only affirm its legitimacy as literature but also offer meaningful applications for the classroom. Two of its staunchest and most ardent champions are Dr. Judith A. Hayn and Dr. Jeffrey S. Kaplan.

As classroom teachers and teacher educators, Hayn and Kaplan have a long history with YAL and English education. With their experience at the secondary level as a guide, they have prepared English teachers through their courses in college education programs. Besides influencing their education students and, by extension, their students’ students, Hayn and Kaplan’s works have provided guidance for countless other educators and scholars through their research and professional work. Both have been on various committees for professional groups, including the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), the International Literacy Association (ILA), the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE (ALAN), and the ILA Special Interest Group – Network on Adolescent Literature (SIGNAL). Kaplan served as president of ALAN from 2012 – 2013. Hayn is currently the co-editor of *SIGNAL Journal*. They have also published articles in peer-reviewed journals and have served as editors and leaders for different YA publications and organizations.

Additionally, Hayn and Kaplan have worked together numerous times. They teamed up to edit the first edition of *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today: Insights, Considerations, and Perspectives for the Classroom Teacher*, which was published in 2012 by Rowman and Littlefield. They followed this text up with *Young Adult Nonfiction: Gateway to the Common Core* in 2015, *Teaching Young Adult Literature: Integrating, Implementing, and Re-Imagining the Common Core* in 2016, and a second edition of *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today* in 2017.

Besides being vital resources for people looking for innovative and thoughtful ways of utilizing YAL in the classroom, these works reflect Hayn and Kaplan's interest in and dedication to YAL, pedagogy, and research.

Even a cursory glance at their work shows Hayn's and Kaplan's willingness and desire to share their knowledge and their love of reading, teaching, and YAL. When asked to be interviewed for *Study and Scrutiny* on their experience with YAL and their work together, they responded with characteristic generosity and insight.

Terri Suico (TS) : How did you originally become interested in studying young adult literature?

Judith Hayn (JH) : I first became interested during a graduate class at the University of Kansas. Our professor was Associate Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Edwyna Gilbert, and she was committed to adolescent literature, so she still taught that graduate class. That was the first time that I actually knew what adolescent literature was. I taught the books, but I didn't really know anything about the genre being special. That would've been sometime in the 1980s. That's where I became a fan and then a zealot for the cause.

When I was in the classroom, I always asked to teach at-risk kids. I'd been teaching in the public school quite a while then, I taught in junior high and high school. And the books that we were teaching were not reaching those kids. When I would be teaching something like *The Scarlet Letter*, even though that situation may be something that teenagers could identify with, they couldn't identify with Hester Prynne or the times. That's when I thought maybe I ought to be looking at something else. The graduate class helped me discover that there were alternatives to the classics.

Jeffrey Kaplan (JK) : When I started out as a seventh-grade teacher at a middle school in Summerfield, Florida, my students inspired me to read young adult literature. In particular, there were three kids in my class – two who read all the time and one who was a reluctant reader. Of the two who read all the time, one was a girl who would do her work and then read her books. She would read nonstop, and probably to this day, she still reads. I firmly believe that when kids start reading at a young age, they never stop reading. And if they don't have that habit, it's difficult to start. That's why middle school and high school teachers are so special; they spend their time motivating kids to read.

The second student was a boy, and he was certainly a non-reader. But, one day, he walked by my desk and noticed a book called *Hotrod* by Henry Gregor Felson, which was a popular young adult book at that time. He looked at it twice, and then he picked it up and started reading the first page, and then he read the second page. Before I knew it, this boy who wouldn't sit still was reading this book. I will never forget this experience, since that was probably one of the first books he ever read from cover to cover. I realized that the standard stuff from Edgar Allan Poe and Isaac Asimov – and all the short stories in between that were in my middle school reader – were not doing the trick. The stories were not inspiring my students to read, but, this book – this fun story about a boy building and racing a 'hotrod' – was doing the trick.

Finally, the other reader in my class was a girl who was also a voracious reader. Yet, instead of being very quiet and studious, she was the one who wanted to be known. She wanted to be the class president, and she would raise her hand all the time. One Friday at the end of class, she handed me a book and said, “You should read this over the weekend.” Startled, I looked down at the cover. The book was Madeleine L’Engle’s *A Wrinkle in Time*. Believe it or not, I had not heard of this book. *A Wrinkle in Time* was not discussed in my college English classes. I had received the kind of classical education where you read the great books, and then you teach the same great books to your students – regardless of their age or interests. I realized then, though, that *A Wrinkle in Time* was a book she identified with because it was about a family that was exceptionally smart – and like the story’s young heroine, Meg, this student too was exceptionally smart. She just loved it, and I loved it, too. That turned me on to young adult literature because I realized at that time that we were doing a disservice to our kids by promoting the great books at the expense of books that kids really understood and enjoyed. That moment – the reading of this book for kids and about kids – turned me on to young adult literature.

Then, I attended a workshop with the late Ted Hipple, the founder of ALAN, and I realized that I had found my calling. I wanted to do what Ted was doing – talking to teachers about the great things they can do in their classrooms with kids, and especially, with young adult books. Joan Kaywell and I were Ted’s graduate students during his last couple years at the University of Florida before he went to the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. I just developed this great love for young adult books ever since.

The one thing I love about young adult books is that young adult literature changes every day. If you leave it for a month, you go back, and you realize that there’s a book you’ve never heard of – that kids are reading and enjoying – like Angie Thomas’s *The Hate U Give*. It constantly changes because kids who read always ask “Do you have another one like this?” Young adult literature satisfies adolescents’ curiosity at an age when they’re developing questions about themselves. Young adult books answer adolescents’ questions about growing up and facing life’s realities better than anything else I can possibly imagine.

TS: There have been a lot of changes with young adult literature in the past 20 years or so. What changes have you found most exciting or intriguing since you started working with it?

JH: It’s gotten edgier, as is the case with most elements of our society, with the advent of social media and video. The video world many of the teenagers live in have found new outlets for basically the same kinds of stories. However, the themes have pretty much stayed what they were; the adolescent search for identity is buried in all the books somewhere. There have been interesting changes to the venue that the author chooses to use, from multimedia formats to the verse novel, which of course is just a throwback to *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. There’s also the graphic novel, which owes so much to comic books. These are the choices that authors can make now, and I think that’s really cool.

This, of course, has been driven by demand and publishing. This part of the market has become huge, which blows my mind. You go into a place like Barnes and Noble, and the section for young adult literature is massive. J. K. Rowling and her *Harry Potter* books have really helped with this. I'm not a fan of that genre at all, but that doesn't mean Rowling wasn't good for young people's reading. It was a way I saw parents bonding with their kids; they would all be reading the *Harry Potter* books together and then waiting for the movies to come out. You can't knock that. I think that series will be a classic, like C. S. Lewis's *Chronicles of Narnia* or J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series.

JK: The books have become more real. Young adult novelists write about everything from the mundane to the very real. I love Joan Bauer because she writes books about ordinary kids who run for the school president or learn to handle money during the summer at her family's shoe store or something like that. And the majority of the kids that I knew growing up had those kinds of problems, but if they had any problems – problems that were serious and consequential – those problems were experienced behind closed doors. If their parents were having affairs, or if their parents were alcoholics, or if their parents or relatives were drug addicts, it was never openly discussed in my classroom. Fortunately, that's not how the world operates today.

What the 1960s, my generation, did was take all those hidden, serious issues and decide that we need to talk about these things – we need to talk about death and dying, we need to talk about drugs and drug abuse, we need to talk about casual and sexual relationships – in the open. And, as such young adult books followed right along.

Also, the explosion in media, like Netflix and Amazon, has made it possible for people to see themselves as they'd never seen them before. When I was growing up in the 60's, there were two television channels, and all you saw were people who looked like Ken and Barbie dolls. Now we have a multitude of channels, a multitude of opportunities, and a multitude of books that show people in all walks of life. This change in social mores has been a change for the good, as things that were once considered taboo and hidden are not considered real and relevant.

TS: You've partially answered this already in your discussion about the role of media and publishing, but what do you think has contributed to the change in young adult literature over the past 20 years?

JH: Much of the change has come from the way the world has changed as far as technology is concerned, with instant access and instant gratification. Kids want that, and they also want bright lights, bells, and whistles because their video games have those. Also, the world in which many of them live is a very violent, ugly place, and they want their books to reflect that, too.

JK: In addition to the changing mores and the willingness to talk about ideas once considered taboo, the internet has had a tremendous influence. All of a sudden, with the availability of smartphones and laptops, the world became smaller. Now, kids could not only read young adult books but also talk to young adult authors online. Earlier, meeting a young adult author at the ALAN Workshop was like meeting a rock star. Now kids still feel the same thrill when meeting an author in person, but they can get to the authors faster. They can email authors a question or Skype with

them, and that's just wonderful. Also, because of the internet, kids can become authors themselves faster. They can have a wiki, they can have a blog, and they can self-publish.

If you watch television, you will notice that very few people talk about books, or, at least, books for young adults. Yes, the movies promote young adult books, but few programs are devoted to interviewing authors about their books for teens. However, the internet does fill this gap. Now you can find not only the latest young adult books quickly but also read them online. Kids can find young adult books at the flick of a switch. Last summer, I had a student in my class last summer who said, "I do book reviews. I get books from the publishing company, and I have 30,000 followers." I was just taken aback. When I was a kid, I was lucky if I had six friends. I can't imagine 30,000 followers. Through the internet, the world becomes smaller and, I think, better.

TS: Where would you like to see young adult literature go in the future?

JH: There are groups of underrepresented populations in young adult literature. What once were minorities are no longer minorities, and they [those young people] need to be represented in books. Until the world wakes up and sees that, we need more books that focus on representing other cultures and backgrounds. For instance, representations of Asian Americans are missing. We need books besides anime that speak to that experience.

Of course, my interest LGBTQ has been there a long time. That is growing and has been, but there isn't a lot for middle school aged readers, which is sad because that's the age where young people are questioning their sexuality and wondering what the heck is going on with them. We know sexual confusion issues happen even in elementary school, but it's really in those tween-plus years where they begin to grapple with it.

The other area is nonfiction. It's become very important, and it's ignored in a lot of classrooms. I don't know why teachers in content areas don't use nonfiction more. I'm on the committee for the *VOYA*, the Voice of Youth Advocates, journal again this year to select the nonfiction honor books for middle school. I did Steven Bickmore's blog on it a week or two ago. The books I read for that committee were fascinating.

JK: Great advances are being made in the graphic novel. Graphic novels – books that combine words and pictures – are going to places where I never thought they would go. Graphic novels are wonderful for reluctant readers and for voracious readers. Kids who are reluctant to read can see pictures and words together, and there's nothing better.

For young adult literature in general, I'd just like to see books for teens to continue to gain prominence. We saw in the PBS series *The Great American Read*, which examines America's 100 best-loved books, that many of the books were young adult novels, and that was a thrill. You open up the *New York Times's* Book Review section, and the editors devote pages upon pages to young adult books, that's a thrill. I would just like to see the interest in young adult books continue to grow and provide more avenues for middle school readers.

TS: As you think about the use of young adult literature in the classroom, what excites you, or what do you wish you saw more of?

JH: There are a lot of resources out there to help teachers use young adult literature, once they understand the books' values and buy into the texts. However, there are teachers who still think that young adult literature is not really literature. I lost a job over it; in my denial letter, it stated "young adult literature does not add to the body of scholarship about secondary education." This wasn't that long ago. For young adult literature, access and respect still has to be earned for some stakeholders.

At the college level, we can get future teachers all excited and help them select young adult books to teach. Of course, if they are in middle school, they are on board because they see these books in the classroom. I don't have any trouble convincing them to use young adult literature. However, for students who want to teach high school, they tend to replicate how they were taught. Our research shows us that this happens.

Organizations like ALAN and SIGNAL help librarians and some classroom teachers, but their message does not always reach policymakers who determine the curriculum. What every district needs is somebody who is committed to young adult literature.

JK: Young adult literature should be across the curriculum. It shouldn't be just the home of English teachers. It should be the principal or the math teacher or the science teacher holding up a book and saying, "I read this book, and all the kids in our school should read this book." I think young adult literature should be the domain of everyone, and reading should be in every class. Teen reading shouldn't be just the home of English teachers, it shouldn't just be 'the Friday afternoon, well there's nothing else to do, so pull out your copy of Harry Potter and read activity.' Kids' reading books should be front and center.

TS: Shifting our focus to the books you edited for Rowman and Littlefield, how did you come up with the idea for the original edition of *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today*?

JH: Jeff knew the editor at Rowman and Littlefield at the time. Back then, they didn't have anything in their quiver on young adult literature. That's how that got started, was through an editor approaching us.

JK: Judy and I thought that there needed to be a book that talks about young adult literature that has many voices and that talks about teaching young adult literature as both a genre and as teaching methodology. We felt that those two had to be there together.

TS: What about the other books you've worked on together for Rowman and Littlefield? Where did the ideas for those come from?

JH: We approached Rowman and Littlefield with the book topics and asked if they were interested, and they would typically be very open to anything we suggested.

JK: Judy and I came up with the idea for *Young Adult Nonfiction* together, and Judy came up with *Teaching Young Adult Literature*. She said, “Here’s a perfect opportunity to talk about what we want to talk about and align it with the Common Core.”

JH: We did those two books to meet classroom teachers’ needs at the time. Having an updated second edition of *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today* also came from Rowman and Littlefield, and this is a book that can go on with other editors because the chapters are totally different each time. When we first started on the second edition, Jeff asked, “How are we going to get contributors?” I said that we should ask all of the authors from the original book, and every one of them wanted to do it. Besides some of the research pieces at the beginning, the rest of the chapters changed a great deal.

JK: When Rowman and Littlefield asked us if we would do a second edition, we said, “By all means.” As I said at the outset of our conversation, young adult literature changes every day. Who knew *The Hate U Give* was going to be so popular? I remember going to an ALAN conference and sitting down at one of the wonderful publishers dinners. I asked the individual sitting next to me who he was, and he said, “I’m John Green, and I am an author.” This was before John Green was John Green. The next thing I know, John Green had four books on the *New York Times* bestseller list.

TS: One of the aspects that I admire about the books you’ve published with Rowman and Littlefield is how they focus on the use of young adult literature in the classroom while also using research to support the use of these books. How important was the presence of both pedagogy and research?

JH: The presence of both was intentional. Typically, books and articles tend to focus on one or the other. Some books with ideas for teaching tend to focus strictly on the teaching with a tiny bit of rationale in each chapter. That can be good for classroom teachers. However, our books were designed to be a balance.

JK: The combination – the presence of young adult pedagogy and research – is essential because I believe that both are an art – the teaching about the book and the teaching about using the book in classrooms. There are so many ways to teach young adult literature, and teachers should be aware of those ways and not afraid to use those ways. Moreover, teachers need to not be afraid to use these methods to encourage their teen readers. This is especially important today given the high-stakes testing and high-stakes curriculum movements. I observe classrooms all the time, and my immediate impression is that they’re trying to teach children and adolescents how to be minor literary critics. I don’t want young people to become minor literary critics. I want them to talk about books and the ideas in it and, most importantly, how they feel about these ideas.

TS: One of the strengths of your books is that they can be used by a range of audiences. Teachers who need ideas for incorporating young adult literature into the secondary classroom can use them, and the books also have

research that makes them a good resource for academics. How do you hope scholars and teacher educators use your three books?

JH: The idea of using the books as professional development is key, particularly with *Young Adult Nonfiction* and *Teaching Young Adult Literature*. Also, I like the idea of the books being used in undergraduate or graduate adolescent literature classes.

JK: I hope the books are used in dissertations. Someone once asked me, "What kind of books do you write?" I said "I write books that show up on the reference lists of scholarly articles." You and I know, Terri, that we, as teacher educators, don't write books or articles that appear on the evening news. What we do as teacher educators and scholars of young adult literature is add to the body of research about young adult literature; we build upon each other so that there is a core of academic learning that we find to be truthful and honest and real. That's why I love working with kids on dissertations because I know researching and writing a dissertation changes their lives when they are done. There's nothing better than learning to be an academic because what you do is say, "I'm going to take this very small piece of the puzzle and add another layer to it so someone will take my study and add to that." What you're doing is contributing to the body of truth.

JH: We see *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today* cited a lot, which is good news.

TS: What was the process like compiling and editing *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today*? Did you meet with any skepticism or resistance from the publishers?

JH: Rowman and Littlefield were on board because it was their idea. They were missing this piece. They had a few books on young adult literature at the time, but those books were outdated. Also, they had nothing that was an edited collection like ours. Wisely, they recognized that their offerings then were missing that piece, and now they have several adolescent young adult literature titles out there. This basically began with the first edition of *Teaching Young Adult Literature Today*.

JK: Everyone was very open to what we were doing, and we found authors readily willing to contribute.

JH: When we started, we went to what was then NCTE's Conference on English Education (CEE). It's now the English Language Arts Teacher Educators (ELATE). There was a commission within the CEE called the Study and Teaching of Adolescent Literature that we used to start soliciting proposals. Other people sent proposals as well.

JK: When we started working on the first book, I realized there wasn't a lot out there on the study and teaching of young adult literature. I remember when the internet first came alive. I searched for work related to young adult literature, and my name kept popping up. And I thought, this can't be true – there must be others writing about young adult literature. Then I realized that there were very few people doing this work. You think of publications like

Voices from the Middle, *The ALAN Review*, and *VOYA*, and you think of groups like the International Literacy Association, NCTE, ALAN, and the Young Adult Library Services Association, and that was about it at the time.

TS: What do you hope the future of young adult literature research is?

JH: I hope it looks at the readers instead of the authors and doers. Who is reading these books? How does it influence them? How do they choose the books they want to read? Marketing tends to cater to white, middle-class females. That's fine, but what about a pregnant 15-year-old Hispanic teen? What has she found out there that speaks to her? I think we need to focus on who's reading the books and not so much on us. However, this is very difficult.

Also, I'd like to see research on an evolution in a school district as young adult literature is integrated into the classroom. We could track that story to see and write about what happens. That would be valuable for others to read about so they wouldn't be scared of using young adult literature in their classrooms. Something like this would show that it could be done.

JK: I'm involved with doctoral students now, and these students do quantitative and qualitative research. I'd like to see more qualitative and quantitative research about the study of young adult literature both inside and outside of the classroom. I would especially like to see quantitative research, like how many teens are reading? What are the number of books being read? What are the number of genres they are reading? I know that English teachers are scared off by numbers, but given proper training and guidance, they can use quantitative research. Sometimes it is easier. However, qualitative research is also important because it captures the voices of the kids, and nothing compares to it. Young people who are real readers, who read whenever and wherever they can, see things that adults don't see in books because books are their world. A kid in seventh or eighth grade who is hooked on a book series often knows everything about that series. Getting them to talk about that book in very specific terms is precious; they usually know everything about the book – the plot, the setting, the characters, what they say and do and even eat – and they know what the character believes and why. Knowing about the book is their obsession, and adults don't have that time or that luxury.

There is a great need to do qualitative and quantitative research about what kids are reading and what kids are not reading. I always say the classroom is the best place in the world to do this.

TS: Do you have any plans for future research or work regarding young adult literature?

JH: I don't have any plans for the future. I'm not going to do the professional gig anymore. I won't even be on a campus, and I would need a university home to get access to some of the work and scholarship if I wanted it. If the right opportunity comes along, however, I am game!

JK: I'm planning to do a book on getting boys to read.

TS: Is there anything else you want to share that we haven't touched on yet?

JH: I really appreciate your enthusiasm and sincerity. This is what I'm looking for, young blood coming along that still wants to carry the banner and the flag of young adult literature and sees the importance of organizations like ALAN and other venues.

JK: Young adult literature is a reflection of who we are in society. Look at the top ten books in young adult literature, and they reflect what young people value and what they are thinking and feeling. I know that, when kids read, they develop an inner world that sustains them. I tell my students that there comes a time in our lives when we're alone, but if you read, you're never alone.

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