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The Crossover Phenomenon in Young Adult Literature

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THE CROSSOVER PHENOMENON IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

(TITLE)

BY

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Introduction

Growing up as a child of the nineties, I was smack dab in the middle of one of the biggest movements in literature in recent years, and I had no idea it was going on. When I was nine, a humble book titled *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (which I will refer to hereafter as simply *Harry Potter*) was released and I, being the fickle pre-adolescent that I was, did not immediately like it. A few months later, whether it was because I decided to give it another chance or the media frenzy surrounding the book forced me to reconsider my initial judgment, I pick up *Harry Potter* again and the rest is, as they say, history. I was about to go on one of the most exciting and ground-breaking rides in not just children's literature but all literature, without even knowing it.

There was something akin to a perfect storm during that period in time: the general population seemed hungry for a work similar to *Harry Potter* and the story behind J. K. Rowling's path to this point in her life are just a couple of the contributing factors to why *Harry Potter* was a huge as it was, not to downplay the overall quality of the work. But now, thirteen whirlwind years later, the phenomenon known as the Harry Potter series has officially come to an end, with the release of the last Harry Potter flick breaking nearly every film record in existence. However, the focus of this research is less about the impact *Harry Potter* had on literature on a global scale, though it's doubtless that research along these lines could be done. Instead, the Harry Potter phenomenon is merely the precursor to my main focus: "crossover literature," a phenomenon in its own right.

Literature that has what is known as "crossover" potential means that it is read by more than those who it was originally intended for, e.g. Forty-year-old moms who read *Twilight* (who have created a group known as, creatively, Twilight Moms; we'll come back to *Twilight* later).

Crossover literature has been around for years in the sense of children and young adults reading adult titles. Some of the more classic examples that come to mind are *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll. Both of these novels were written in the latter half of the 19th century, long before the idea of young adult literature (YAL) had even been considered. Now books are crossing over in the opposite direction, with adults clamoring to read young adult works. Heading well into the 21st Century, the fact that young adults are reading books for adults is still as prevalent as ever, but adults are starting to take part in a crossover of their own.

The crossover literature phenomenon has its roots in *Harry Potter*, beginning when the boy wizard made his way across the Atlantic in 1998, also creating what I like to call the first “bang” in the crossover literature “Big Bang.” Adults weren't ashamed to be seen reading a book intended for younger readers, and publishers and marketers took notice. Each Harry Potter book release saw a surge in popularity, but it wasn't until the release of *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* in 2000 that this series would carve out a serious place for itself in the history of literature. This was the first Harry Potter book to have a simultaneous midnight release in both the United States and the United Kingdom; previously, the UK publisher had exclusive rights to release the Harry Potter books first, allowing for secondary releases across the globe several months later, showing that Potter's popularity was increasing rapidly. It also set the bar for first prints: the run was 3.8 million copies, the largest first printing of any book—adult, youth, or otherwise—ever. And only a few years later in 2004 would Harry again shape how people perceive literature by “forcing” the *New York Times* to create a separate Bestseller's List for children's books, solely because too many precious spots—formerly filled by adult books—were being taken by the Harry Potter books. *Harry Potter* was quickly becoming more than just a passing fad in youth

literature.

The second “bang” in the crossover Big Bang came in 2005 with the release of Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight*. Though not as pow-worthy as *Harry Potter* had been, it created enough of a frenzy in its own right, owing a little to *Harry Potter*'s frenetic success: publishers and marketers were looking for “the next Harry Potter” and they along with readers seemed to believe it fit the bill. *Twilight* also seems to have pioneered the recent success of the “paranormal romance” genre in YAL. Barnes and Noble now has an entire section dedicated to just this genre, a huge leap considering the first young adult section in Barnes and Noble—that is, a separate section outside of the children's alcove—was created less than a decade before. Bookstores were discovering that young adults were hesitant to find new YAL when it was shelved among children's literature, inspiring these stores to create a new section just for teens (Beckett 224). And, like *Harry Potter*, it wasn't just teens reading *Twilight*; as mentioned above, Bella and her crew of vegetarian vampires found a warm place in the hands of older readers as well.

With these first two “bangs” (and a third to come), the idea of crossover literature became a reality for several parties involved with literature in general. Everyone that can fall under this blanket of involvement—teachers, librarians, scholars, authors, readers—should know that they are part of something huge. No longer are some books simply “adult” or “children's” or even in the previously-already-hard-to-define YA category; the flexibility of books seems to be at its highest right now, with readers for certain titles (like *Harry Potter*) covering a very broad spectrum. And this matters. Librarians in particular, who have the job of reader's advisory and gatekeeping, now must deal with the crossover potential of books and tune into their patron's individual desires. In a related vein, patrons are now open to a wider gamut of reading since some YAL can easily act as both a YA and an adult title; one of the more notable examples is

Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, which I will discuss later. Just because a book claims to be YAL doesn't mean it can't easily find its place among adult readers as well, and publishers and marketers—big players in this phenomenon—are aware of this as well.

Publishers are having a harder time than ever deciding in which market an author's work might fare better: adult or YA? An example of this struggle is the work *Star-Crossed* by Linda Collison, which is another title I will discuss in more depth later. Authors often believe their books should be published for one audience, while publishers think otherwise. Publishers' ideas about reader demographics can affect how books are packaged and marketed; what book covers are used; what colors, photos, illustrations, even actual book and font size. Small changes can affect who reads what, as can be seen when two different versions—an adult and a youth version—of the exact same book are released. All of these inter-related factors intrigued me and led me to research this new, explosive phenomenon in literature, along with my general love of reading both adult and YA titles as well.

As for the third and final “bang” in the crossover Big Bang (at least for now), that honor goes to *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins, the only author of the current “Big Three” who was a reasonably successful writer beforehand; both Rowling and Meyer were unpublished and very new to the literary world. This series, which also just wrapped up and is now on its way to becoming a movie franchise like the other two, is the third book that will be looked at more carefully later on. A decade after the release of *Harry Potter*, the reborn YAL and newly-labeled crossover literature is still going strong with no sign of stopping.

These three series can easily be seen as catalysts for this new crossover literature phenomenon, along with Michael Cart's involvement in 1999 to create the Michael L. Printz

Award for “the best book written for young adults,” garnering further attention to the YAL field. While it's impossible to say with certainty that these three series are the reason why adults now more than ever openly read YA titles, it is fair to say that these series played a significant role in encouraging this shift in readership. The timing of all these books seemed to fill the need of readers during this time, showing that several factors were in play when everything came to a head and started this phenomenon. The creation of the Printz Award only solidifies the importance of these titles within the YA community. And though none of the Big Bang books won, the Printz declared that YA books have a serious, important place in literature, and that they should be rewarded for their high level of quality.¹ This newfound attention may potentially encourage authors to look at YAL a bit differently and see it as more than just teen books filled with typical teen-related problems.

Within the last few years, adult authors such as James Patterson and John Grisham also began writing their own YA series. Suddenly, the YA market—a market that was just getting started 15 years ago—was flooded with new writers trying to make a name for themselves and veteran writers wanting to try something new. YAL has become one of the biggest literary markets around. Adults, for whatever reason, have slowly drifted into the YA pool to see what was available. Even younger readers, still years away from being considered “young adults,” were picking up titles that most marketers (and teachers and parents) would never have believed they would be interested in reading (or maybe even “should” be reading). YAL has become something much bigger than probably any librarian or scholar could have ever foreseen, pushing so far as to question what the label of YA means: is it an individual market, or is it a genre, like romance and fantasy? As several literary and scholastic journals have phrased it, YAL is “not just

¹ The Michael L. Printz committee has a hard time defining what quality is in YAL, meaning that the criteria for a potential Printz book can change over time (Cart 77).

for teens anymore.”

In addition to providing a broader look at the crossover literature phenomenon, including the redefinition of the young adult and the importance of “branding,” I will also take a closer look at three crossover titles that cover a nice array of issues and topics. Chronologically, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* will be first, and is an excellent example of the struggle between author and publisher of labeling novels with one audience in mind, and the effect those labels can have. Mark Haddon, who was an established children's author, wanted to break into the adult literary market, but his publishers saw *Curious Incident* as a novel for young adults. Next, *Star-Crossed* follows in a similar vein of *Curious Incident* with her publisher believing it was a YA title, though Linda Collison was a rookie to the publishing world and didn't have the same level of control that Haddon did. Finally, *The Hunger Games* will conclude the “Big Bang” and I will show comparisons between it and the other two series involved in this initial explosion. Like its predecessors, it is fantasy which also plays a significant role in its crossover potential.

By looking at crossover literature through these case studies and the other two works in the Big Bang, I'm hoping to better understand what makes a book or series a potential crossover success, and how I (as a future librarian) can learn to handle this dizzying market for my patrons. The role of marketing in the success of these titles is interesting in its own right, though excellent marketing alone won't create a blockbuster title. So many differing factors have to work together for a book to become a crossover book, let alone a successful one, and they're all worth looking at a bit more closely. Patrons will one day ask me for my opinion on a title, whether or not I think they'll enjoy it, and I want to be able to answer them confidently and understand *why* I think they would like it. Following the trends in YAL will keep me up-to-date with what's

happening in the YA scene, and where readers outside of the young adult audience can find enjoyment.

Redefining “Young Adult”

Before attempting to explore the YAL crossover phenomenon in literary works marketed to readers 12-18, it's important to have an idea how the term “young adult” has been defined in society and by those in the literary market. According to Michael Cart, “[U]ntil 1900, we were a society with only two categories of citizens: children and adults” (4) and the term “young adult” was rarely used before World War II (3). By the 1940s, “teenagers” (a term that was synonymous with “young adult” at this time [3] and wasn't officially used in print until 1941 [6]) were making their mark on society by enrolling in school and earning their high school diploma; nearly half of 17-year-olds were graduating (5). This, along with other milestones such as moving out of your parents' home or starting a family, were becoming the societal markers for transitioning out of adolescence to adulthood. The idea of the middle ground between the two—the young adult—was still in its early stages.

In the 1950s, though, two psychologists named Robert James Havighurst and Erik Erikson introduced society to the idea of “young adulthood” (Cart 6-7). They believed that young adulthood was between the ages of nineteen and thirty (Havighurst) or nineteen and forty (Erikson), and that *adolescence* was actually from twelve or thirteen to eighteen (7). From this psycho-social perspective, the biggest characteristic of young adulthood is the formation of love relationships and the struggle between intimacy and isolation (Harder), though outside of the psychological realm society might see this age range as being defined by things such as financial independence or marriage.

The age range society seems to associate with “young adult” echoes how interchangeable “teenager” and “young adult” were prior to World War II, and the Michael L. Printz Award committee reinforces this idea. The committee believes that a young adult reader is someone

between the ages of 12-18. For Havighurst and Erikson, this age range was classified as “adolescence” and focused on the characteristics people tend to associate with the contemporary young adult: peer relationships, identity, and role confusion (Harder). So why is it called “young adult literature” and not “adolescent literature” instead? The short answer, according to Cart, is that “there is no definitive answer” (Cart 7). However, in 1991 the Young Adult Services Division (YASD) of the American Library Association (ALA), “in concert with the National Center for Education Statistics, that young adults 'are those individuals from twelve to eighteen years old,'” making it “official” (7).

For contemporary teens, the struggle to attain adult status has become difficult, as British scholar Rachel Falconer writes in her essay “Young Adult Fiction and the Crossover Phenomenon”:

Being on the “edge” of adulthood in the twenty-first century is a more daunting experience than previously . . . Teenagers can become arrested in pre-adulthood, failing to secure jobs, mortgages or university degrees, or having taken the first step, may fall back into dependence on their parents. (92)

Today, age is less of a factor for making the shift from young adult to adult in society, though age still plays a crucial role in the idea of the young adult as a reader. And the literature dubbed YA is targeted toward that age range of 12-18, even though its readership has expanded over the years because of the changes in subject matter. The idea of “young adult” in literature was originally created to give this “new” age demographic their own literature to read that fit their developmental needs (Cart 8).

Young adult literature in its infancy dealt with issues that seemed relevant to teenagers of the sixties and seventies; high school, first love, and prom were popular choices. These books

catered specifically to young adults of that time, finding little audience outside of their intended one. But YAL of the 21st century has branched out into several different realms, and the realistic fiction (“problem novels” or “bleak books”) that dominated the market a couple of decades ago—and became what YAL was understood to be—have been forced to share the current spotlight with other popular YA genres, like paranormal romance and dystopia. Teenage protagonists still run rampant through YAL, but their issues stretch outside of high school, especially in fantasy works where nothing is “normal.”

Contemporary YAL has become rich in its variety of themes and genres, giving adult readers something to notice. Books about high school issues and developmental problems no longer make up the majority of the market; instead, novels with deeper characters with a multitude of problems—ones that aren't always exclusive to their age—are taking over the YA market. The creation of the Printz Award also helps establish the idea of a serious literary market blooming.

But there is another award that honors books written for “adults” that are read by young adults: the Alex Award, created by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). The Alex Award winners are “the ten best adult books for young adults” (Cart 121). Cart states, “[T]he Alex Awards themselves . . . [continue] to acknowledge the historical propensity of teens . . . reading adult books” (122), alluding to the young readers centuries ago who had no YAL to choose from. Now, not only is there an award for the best YA books for young adults, but there is also an award for the best adult books for young adults. At this rate, it feels like there is the possibility for an award honoring the best YA books for adults! (It could happen.) These awards show how YAL has morphed over the years to appeal to a wider audience.² Readers have become

² It's also worth noting the crossover that's happening on the other end of the YA spectrum: younger readers—those who would typically be categorized in literature as children or adolescents (there's that word again)--are also

fixtures in markets that previously didn't exist, forcing other involved—librarians, publishers, authors, marketers, bookstores—to take notice.

sinking their teeth into YAL. Younger readers reading titles that aren't intended for them can be exposed to language and issues that are considered by gatekeepers to be above their age level, creating dilemmas for a lot of parties involved, such as authors, teachers, librarians, and parents.

Case Study #1 – *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* by Mark Haddon

Before 2003, a popular opinion among critics was that crossover novels would be limited to only those within the fantasy genre (Falconer, *The Crossover Novel* 95); the events in fantasy novels were not restricted by the age of the character since events were usually fantastical and unreal, making age less of a factor than in realistic fiction. *Harry Potter* was the only series of the Big Three to be published at this time, and earlier fantasy works such as Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials* trilogy (1995, 1998, and 2000) and the continued popularity of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series seemed to emphasize this opinion that only fantasy had the potential to appeal to a wider audience. But Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, a British work published in 2003, challenged that opinion by becoming one of the first—often cited as *the* first (95)—contemporary realistic novels to successfully reach multiple audiences.

The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time is about Christopher John Francis Boone, a 15-year-old boy with autism living in England. Late one night, Christopher discovers his neighbor's dog Wellington impaled with a garden fork. He then makes it his mission to discover the murderer of Wellington and begins chronicling his journey in a journal while he searches for clues. As time goes on, Christopher uncovers more than he bargained for, learning that his mother was not really dead like his father had been telling him all this time. Christopher then runs away to London in search of his mother, a trip made all the more difficult due to his autism.

Small style choices pock the novel, making it unique in its delivery: the chapter numbers are prime numbers since Christopher loves math and prime numbers, and he fills his pages with

charts, diagrams, and math problems for the reader to help better communicate his thoughts. We learn that this book was written as an assignment for one of Christopher's teachers and, in Christopher's mind, is a murder mystery, modeled after the works about his hero, Sherlock Holmes (Haddon 5). Haddon's novel becomes Christopher's "real" first-hand account of his experiences with the murder of Wellington and living with his father; he refers to the book as "this" (Haddon 26), letting us know that *Christopher* is aware that he is the author. Perhaps the biggest reason this book was initially pegged to be for a YA audience is the fact that Christopher is fifteen and his story is told in first-person, a common perspective for realistic fictional YAL.

Rachel Falconer states that "Haddon had intended *Curious Incident* for an adult audience, while his literary agent thought it should be marketed for [youths]" (*The Crossover Novel* 96). According to Sandra Beckett, Haddon wished to get out of "the 'ghetto' of [youth] literature" by "[escaping] into literary fiction for adults" (241). Haddon, like many authors before him, believed that novels for younger audiences couldn't be considered as real literature. Perhaps in spite of Haddon's insistence, his publisher still believed that *Curious Incident* was a YA title, and he compromised by suggesting that the book be published simultaneously in both adult and youth editions, an unusual publishing move during that time (Falconer, *The Crossover Novel* 96).

Seeing that the Michael L. Printz Award honors only those YA works that have been published in the United States, it would be easy to believe that Haddon was unaware of the movement in YAL being made at the time before *Curious Incident's* publication. It's important to note that the United States opted to publish *Curious Incident* as an adult title only (though it continues to populate YA sections of bookstores and libraries). Because of this publishing choice, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* was not eligible for the Michael L. Printz Award. However, in 2004 Haddon's novel was awarded an Alex Award from YALSA, solidifying

its place in the adult literary market. Michael Cart has brought up the hesitancy of American publishers releasing simultaneous editions of crossover works, though he has no real answer as to why that is (115).

Within two weeks of publication, the adult edition had outsold the youth edition by nearly three times in Great Britain (1,866 to 559), and adult editions continued to outsell the youth editions (96). In 2003, it won the Whitbread Award for Best Novel—not Best Children's³ Novel—and also won Book of the Year (Falconer, *The Crossover Novel* 96). Yet this book still seems to be considered a YA book crossing over into adult literature in Great Britain, despite the difference between the sales figures and its adult-only publication in the United States; Falconer's book that dedicates an entire chapter to *Curious Incident* is titled *The Crossover Novel: Contemporary **Children's** Fiction and Its Adult Readership*. Though Falconer doesn't disclose why Haddon's publisher saw this as a book more for young adults than for adults, she hints that one of the biggest reasons was because of Christopher's age.

The age of the protagonist, especially in YAL, plays a central role in deciding which audience a book will appeal to, as Falconer explains:

In all the generic and stylistic variety that constitutes young adult fiction, there are at least one, or possibly two, relatively constant features: the central protagonist, who may also be the text's first-person narrator, is between 11 and 19 years of age, and the text's addressee, or implied reader, is assumed to be of a similar age. (*The Crossover Novel* 90-1)

And with this statement comes the assumption for adult literature as well, that only adults read texts with protagonists of a similar age, or at the very least they read texts about other “adults.”

³ There seems to be a common theme among British literary critics to use the term “children” for all youth literature, even YAL. Perhaps this is because the idea of the “young adult reader” is an American invention, much like the Printz Award.

But as we saw with *Curious Incident* and Christopher Boone, he became “a fictional child in whom adults are particularly invested” (97). Adult readers looked beyond his age—a feature that can drive adult readers away from YAL—because he didn't *act* his age, an important common thread among some crossover literature.

Falconer points out this theme, saying, “Like many protagonists of crossover fiction, [Christopher's] biological age of fifteen does not determine his emotional or intellectual age. Intellectually he is in some respects as mature as an adult, while emotionally he seems very young compared to the modern teenager (he never mentions sex or girls in his diary entries)” (*The Crossover Novel* 105). Because Christopher is autistic, he is immediately different from most of the young adult protagonists that populate YAL. His outlook on life is different, forcing him to see and describe things differently than the “average” 15-year-old might. Christopher insists that he “can't tell lies” (Haddon 19) and that “everything I have written here is true” (20), and as readers we believe him because of his bold honesty concerning his surroundings. Perhaps it is this disability that allows adult readers to look beyond his age.

Curious Incident showed that in contemporary realistic fiction, age could sometimes be just a number, and that a protagonist wasn't defined by how old they were; things like general character appeal and perspective were qualities to consider. Though some authors and readers are still struggling with this notion that a novel with a younger protagonist can be for adults too, Haddon's work began opening doors for crossover works outside of fantasy. The book, along with *Harry Potter*, inadvertently (since Haddon still believes it is an adult title) became a gateway for adults to see that titles aimed at younger readers weren't all about specifically teenage issues. But the publishing of two simultaneous editions also showed that some adults weren't quite ready to be seen reading a youth title, bringing the publisher's efforts into play.

Case Study #2 – *Star-Crossed* by Linda Collison

2008 was a big year for young adult literature: Both *Breaking Dawn*, the fourth and final book of Stephenie Meyer's Twilight Saga, and Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games* was released, as well as the much-anticipated film adaptation of *Twilight*. All three of the Big Three series were out, and it would be easy for other titles to get overlooked among all the excitement. *Star-Crossed* was one of those titles, a historical novel about a seafaring young lady who dresses as a boy to remain on a ship. Its author, Linda Collison, was new to the publishing scene; this was her first published work. While it didn't garner the publicity like *The Hunger Games* and *Breaking Dawn* did, in terms of word-of-mouth and marketing exposure, it is a terrific example of the power of publisher's persuasion and the level of authority some authors have when it comes to their book.

As we saw with Mark Haddon and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, Haddon was insistent that the book be published as an adult title; he didn't believe that *Curious Incident* was written for YA audience, though his publisher believed that Christopher's age (15) played a large part in determining the appropriate market. I had the opportunity to ask Collison a few questions about *Star-Crossed* and it seems that her experience with the publication of *Star-Crossed* wasn't too far removed from Haddon's.

According to Collison, she was initially taken aback when she learned that her agent was trying to market *Star-Crossed* as a YA title. She had written “from the first person viewpoint of a young adult but not necessarily for young adult readers” (Collison, Interview), and was actually unfamiliar with the YA market at the time. Even though her protagonist, Patricia MacPherson, is a teenager, Collison merely saw her as a vehicle to tell this historical story. In fact, Collison says she still has a hard time distinguishing the major differences between YA and adult fiction. She

points out that “YA literature is almost always a young adult,” and that adult literature can have young-adult protagonists as well, but they're usually coming from a different place; they have “deeper reflections [and] a broader perspective.” The fact that Patricia was a teenager had little to do with the perspective Collison was shooting for. In reality, Collison's choice was because she “write[s] for the forever teenager who lives within me” (Collison, Interview), not because she was trying to reach out to actual teenagers.

Collison made it sound like she had little say in how her novel was going to be presented. She comments that she only had to change two sentences in her original story “to make it more YA,” but that the overall content was kept the same.⁴ In fact, Collison was concerned about *Star-Crossed* being marketed for YA readers because of the maturity of Patricia and some of the scenes she goes through, like nearly being prostituted within the first few pages (Collison, *Star-Crossed* 6). However, Collison also notes that a lot of contemporary YA is even “darker” than her novel (Collison, Interview). Some of Collison's younger readers have told her that they see Patricia as unlikable, though Collison sees her as a multilayered character trying to hide her flaws by being brash.

It's also important to consider how *Star-Crossed* was packaged because the cover feels very YA. The cover is actually quite lovely, with the silhouette of a young woman near the bottom and her red hair cascading behind her. But her hair is also the ocean, with a large wooden ship floating on top of the waves against the backdrop of the night sky.ⁱ When I showed the cover of *Star-Crossed* to a local librarian who reviews historical fiction, she said there was little doubt that *Star-Crossed* was for young adults (Johnson). The novel itself is pretty hefty, clocking in at around 400 pages. But the size of the font is what made it feel like a YA title the most. Compared to *Curious Incident* (which was only printed in the US as an adult title), the font is large and

⁴ Unfortunately, she couldn't get back to me about which sentences those were.

bold, resembling a “large text” version of a book. Even *The Hunger Games*, which is a YA title, has smaller font than *Star-Crossed*. Larger font means it takes less time to read a page, giving the reader a sense of accomplishment as they fly through the novel which is an encouraging feature for younger readers.

Collison's uneducated opinion on the quality of YAL is strong, but not necessarily unfounded. Once again, she seems to share similar beliefs with Haddon that YA works aren't as serious as adult novels. Though she admits that she hasn't read too many YA novels, the ones she has read seemed “superficial” to her, “as if they were written for the market rather than evolving organically” (Collison, Interview). She believes that some authors, like the adult authors crossing over, write because the market is hot right now, not because they had something to say to young adult readers. However, she also leaves out the authors who write not just for the teenager within them but for teenagers everywhere, who have something to say to a younger audience. It's true that YAL—like all literary markets—is occasionally host to novels that were written because of the popularity of the market, not because the interest in the narrative; Collison's publisher is a good example of this, who looked beyond what Collison wanted for her book and instead decided what they thought would be best.

In Collison's view, teenaged protagonists don't automatically make a novel YA. She refers to earlier works like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Tom Sawyer*, *Huckleberry Finn*, and *Catcher in the Rye* as novels with young voices that weren't necessarily for specifically young readers. To her, *Star-Crossed* is a crossover novel, but crossing over to a younger market. Her definition of a crossover novel is pretty spot on as well, though she speaks of crossover novels of all kinds, not just YA works crossing over to adult readers: “To me, a crossover is a good story well told with convincing characters discovering something new about themselves or the world; a story that

appeals to readers of all ages” (Collison, Interview). A good story will always be the basis for why a book may potentially cross over; it might just need the push (desired or not) from publishers or marketers to make that a reality.

The Power of YA: Marketing, Branding, and Beyond

When *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* was released by Warner Bros. Pictures in 2001, Harry Potter was already a well-established household name. The first four books had already been released, with *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire* setting a new record for first print run of 3.8 million copies, as previously mentioned. Never before had people been immersed in a phenomenon quite like Harry Potter. A *Harry Potter* board game (2000), a *Harry Potter* video game (2001), *Harry Potter* Legos (2001), and countless other HP merchandise—including but not necessarily limited to clothing, toys, and accessories—soon flooded the market, allowing fans to become *fully* immersed in their favorite wizarding world when the books just fell short.

Harry Potter as a book was soon replaced by Harry Potter as a *brand*. The majority of the hype was still placed on the books, which were still being released, but now fans could pass the time waiting for the books by entertaining themselves with other Harry Potter paraphernalia. But a lot of critics see this swell of marketing hype as unnecessary pressure on Rowling. Scholar Sandra Beckett states, “Some critics have speculated that media pressure diminished Rowling's creative freedom, preventing her from writing real books for children as the series progressed” (206). Rowling has never openly said the momentum behind the series affected how she wrote the remaining novels, but the possibility is still there. Rowling's writing was no longer solely within the realm of literature.

As the popularity of Harry Potter continued to rise, book publishers and editors began to take notice and started looking for the next Harry Potter. As with editors of adult books, the editors of young adult books “now consider the film potential before signing an author” (Beckett 204). It seems that being a good book was slowly becoming only a small portion of the marketability of young adult literature. Jack Zipes, a scholar of youth literature, opined that the

youth book industry “has become more interested in creating consumer products than in nurturing high quality books” (qtd. in Beckett 202). From the marketing standpoint, a stand-alone book is okay, but one that can be marketed as a brand to the extent Harry Potter was is even better.

And this shift in marketing has created a lasting effect in at least one spot: most notably, the *New York Times*. One of the many things this newspaper is known for is its best-seller list, which until 2004 was open to all books (though it was mainly populated with adult titles). But when the Harry Potter series was released and began picking up steam, suddenly there was no room on the list for titles *besides* Harry Potter. Michael Cart points out this mini phenomenon in his book *Young Adult Literature*, saying, “By 2004 the *New York Times* had received enough complaints from adult publishers about the Potter books taking so many slots on its best-seller list that it responded by inaugurating a new—and separate—children’s best-seller list” (96). If non-YA readers needed any indication that YA was here to stay, this was it.

Not long after this change, the literary market got its next Harry Potter in the form of Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* (2005), which followed a very similar marketing path. A film adaptation was soon announced and slated for release in 2008. While video games and Legos weren’t created (can you even imagine?), *Twilight* did cover a lot of marketing ground in clothing, accessories, jewelry, and even cardboard cut-outs. Where *Harry Potter* could appeal to readers still interested in playing out their favorite scenes with Legos, *Twilight* fans were more interested in wearing clothing supporting which team they loved more (Edward or Jacob). Publishers were finding even more ways to reach their audience and potential buyers, cementing the idea that the branding of some YA titles was a profitable and worthwhile effort. Fans could connect with their favorite books even more, and marketers could reap the rewards.

Soon, novels were being promoted with the date of the book's release, and *Harry Potter* popularized—and made normal—the idea of midnight launches for books. A common marketing move in movies, midnight releases were making their way into the literature world, with bookstores like Borders and Barnes and Noble holding midnight launch parties for the Harry Potter novels, complete with costume contests, book-related food, and the inevitable counting down until midnight. Beckett marks the importance of this move, saying, “By focusing publishing and promotion, either nationally or internationally, on a specific date, publishers can turn the release of a book into a major publishing event in the hope of creating an out-of-the-gate bestseller” (220). Once again, publishers were looking for the next big thing in young adult literature, and by creating enough hype behind a title, they could potentially create a blockbuster.

Among all of this excitement in marketing, it’s also important to note the reaction of the authors both within and outside of the YA market. Publishers were looking for fresh voices for the YA scene (qtd. in Lodge 26), afraid they were “missing out on the next J. K. Rowling,” as Beckett puts it (207), and established adult authors were slowly trickling into the YA market as well. Beckett notes the issue that arises with these adult authors working their way into the market, saying, “[S]ome industry insiders [worry] that well-known newcomers [such as James Patterson and Clive Barker] and may edge out true [youth] authors” (190). Another one of these authors, Julia Alvarez, comments that “the rush of adult authors writing for young people to “one of those embarrassing high school fashion moments”: “You go out and buy an outfit [and] you think you're being so original. Go to school and everyone's wearing it” (qtd. in Beckett 165). As with the impact of the media on writers, some people believe that this will only hurt the young adult industry because “even the bad books [written by adult authors] will be published because of ‘the reputation of the writers’” (190).

Beckett points out that this shift of adult authors to young adult writing doesn't have to be all bad, though. She states, "While crossing over into [youth] literature may have a lucrative side, it would be unfair to think that these authors are all making the shift for commercial reasons" (170). But perhaps they were ready for something new, or maybe they just wanted to see what all the hubbub was about. We simply don't know all the reasons for why some adult authors choose to crossover. As for the rest of the adult authors, a lot of them still see the YA market as kiddie lit, echoing Mark Haddon's comment that it's the "ghetto" of literature (241), and Linda Collison's belief that YAL is for "self-absorbed, filled with angst, still becoming" readers (Collison, Interview). However, it's impossible for those authors to ignore the impact that young adult literature has had on marketing and publishing.

With all of this newfound, public attention on YAL, it was inevitable that even the packaging of the novels would undergo some shift in style. As seen with *Curious Incident*, the idea of two editions of a book—adult and young adult—is more common in Great Britain than in the United States, where only the adult edition of *Curious Incident* was released. Marion Lloyd, who is the associate publisher of Pan Macmillan, one of the largest publishing companies in the UK, says, "We're much more sophisticated in the way we package [youth books]. Our books look 'older' [i.e. like a book for adults] than they used to" (qtd. in Beckett 231), to which Beckett adds that "[m]any children's and young adult books are now indistinguishable from adult books" (231). The reason they're indistinguishable from adult titles? Because Lloyd claims "not to have published a [youth] book with a picture of a child on it in years" (231). Non-adult titles are working to not only shake the image of being "kiddie lit," but to also adapt a more serious feel in the process. A lot of the time, people do judge a book by its cover, and if that book looks like it's intended for a younger audience with content that wouldn't appeal to older readers, it could

easily be passed over by an adult.

Beckett remarks on this seemingly fickle attitude of adult readers of crossover titles in the UK, with the example of the two versions of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*⁵, saying, “The only difference between the adult and [youth] editions, with the exception of the price (adults were expected to pay more), are of a paratextual nature. As is often the case, the adult version has a more sober cover design so that adults feel comfortable reading it in public” (243). Adults in the United States are rarely given this option of buying an adult version of a popular young adult title, showing that maybe American readers are more accepting of reading crossover titles than other countries.⁶

But no amount of marketing, packaging, and hype can make a book a blockbuster success like any of the Big Three. As Beckett adequately summarizes, “The successful crossover cannot be achieved through marketing alone. If the book does not have that special magic, no amount of marketing wizardry will turn it into a crossover hit” (222). A crossover novel has to have that certain something that makes readers of all ages want to read it. As stated in the Introduction, there was just something about *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games* that readers, both young and old, wanted during that time. They fed into the adult readers’ desires for imagination, adventure, romance, and excitement. And in the following section, I’ll take a closer look at the impact the last of the Big Three, *The Hunger Games*, has had and is having on the world of YA.

⁵ Which is, for those that don’t know, the British title for *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*.

⁶ But Beckett makes a distinction in cover art between the UK and the US, saying that, “[I]t seems that in Europe children can still be depicted on the cover of both [youth] and adult novels” (245-6). In the United States, none of the seven titles between the *Twilight* Saga and *The Hunger Games* trilogy depicted a teenager on the cover. (*Harry Potter* is, once again, the exception to this.)

Case Study #3: *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins

At the tail-end of the Big Three, *The Hunger Games* was released in 2008 several years after both *Harry Potter* and *Twilight* had established themselves as crossover novels and cultural phenomena. Set in the world of Panem, where North America formerly was, *The Hunger Games* is a dystopian novel in which every year 24 adolescents must fight to the death until there is only one. And while this is all happening, everyone in Panem is forced to watch the spectacle, with some Districts (areas within Panem) enjoying it more than others. These games are put on by the ruling Capitol to remind the Districts of the rebellion that took place long ago (these are the 74th Hunger Games) and to assert the Capitol's power over Panem.

Compared to the other two series in the Big Three, this seems to be the most mature. While Harry battles evil and Bella pines for Edward, Katniss and Peeta—the two “tributes” from District 12—are in a battle for their life, and the danger is very immediate. Harry is also battling for his life, but the earlier books are peppered with innocence and naivety; everything is new and shiny to him. In Panem, nothing is happy and blissful, unless you live in the Capitol. *The Hunger Games* is really the darkest first novel out of the Big Three, with graphic displays of violence and death written out for the reader to imagine. Children and teenagers are senselessly murdered at the hands of one another, all for the enjoyment of the reigning government. But even with all of this morbidity, *The Hunger Games* has found a very strong reader base across the board. In fact, it even won the Rebecca Caudill award in 2011. The Rebecca Caudill Young Readers' Book Award is awarded to the books voted as the best of the year by Illinois readers grades 4-8, showing that readers of all ages found Katniss' adventures exciting.

In an article written by Laura Miller for Salon.com, she briefly interviews a ten-year-old named Caitlin who loves the first book, and who also recommended it to her grandmother who

soon became a fan as well. *The Hunger Games*, unlike *Harry Potter*, is aimed at young adult readers; it is (clearly) not a children's story. And unlike *Twilight*, this book has less romance and more action to appeal to both boys and girls (Miller). So not only does *The Hunger Games* appeal to a wide range of ages, but it also can appeal to both sexes, maximizing its potential readership.

The possibility of appealing to a broad audience is reflected in the final cover choice for the novel, which is an understated black cover with science fiction-type font and a mysterious golden bird holding an arrow. The ambiguity of the cover gives it a “unisex image” that doesn't specifically appeal to one age group or gender (Miller). But before this now well-known cover was chosen, Scholastic decided to promote the book going a different route, relying solely on the content of the novel to win over readers in the book publishing industry.

Collins' publisher Scholastic had faith in this story from the very beginning. In a world where books can easily be judged by their cover, Scholastic decided to refrain from glossing up the text when sending out initial proofs to people in the industry. Instead, they packaged the novel in a “Xeroxed, plastic-comb-bound manuscript” (Miller), giving first-time readers little to go off of. David Levithan, who is Scholastic's executive editorial director, and also the author of popular YA books like *How They Met* and *Boy Meets Boy*, admitted that “[binding like that is] not something we do very often” (Miller). Scholastic was so confident that everyone would instantly be pulled in with this story that they sent it out naked, a potentially huge risk but an even bigger statement.

Scholastic also had the advantage of working with an author who was already established within the business, giving them a bit more freedom to make bold statements with the proofs. Suzanne Collins had already written and published another series under Scholastic, the

Underland Chronicles, written for middle school readers (Miller). Unlike with Rowling and Meyer, who were no names in the business, Collins had a reputation and a track record in publishing. Even though publishers were still clamoring for the next breakout star in the same vein as Rowling and Meyer, Collins gave Scholastic the freedom to be a bit more daring in their initial marketing.

Collins also wrote in a style that was different from Rowling and Meyer. Nearly all of the chapters in *The Hunger Games* end in a cliffhanger, literally begging readers to continue on. *Twilight* shies away from these, and *Harry Potter* does occasionally use a cliffhanger, but neither do it as frequent as Collins; it soon becomes expected for a chapter to end this way. This style has roots in Collins' history of writing for children's television for Nickelodeon, which is episodic and has that "rising and falling tension" that draws readers in (Miller). The first chapter of *The Hunger Games* ends with Katniss Everdeen's little sister Prim being chosen for the Games, against all odds: "Effie Trinket crosses back to the podium, smoothes the slip of paper, and reads out the name in a clear voice. And it's not me. It's Primrose Everdeen" (Collins 20). The Reaping is where the names of both tributes are drawn from a giant lottery-type ball holding slips of paper with everyone's name on them. Different factors such as age and trading lottery slips for food stuffs affect how many times a name is in the ball. Prim, being only 12, had only one slip of paper in the ball, whereas Katniss had 20 (Collins 13). By ending the chapter with a highly improbable (though not impossible) event happening, readers can't help but wonder what's going to happen next.

All of this excitement created within the industry for an uncovered book really displays how simple word-of-mouth promotion, from one friend to another, is still the best way to sell a book to others. Both Miller and Sandra Beckett make note of this effective method of marketing,

with Miller remarking, “The only thing that reliably sells books is word of mouth, preferably a personal recommendation from a trusted friend.” Beckett expands on that idea, stating, “The successful crossover cannot be achieved through marketing alone. If the book does not have that special magic, no amount of marketing wizardry will turn it into a crossover hit” (222). Even behind Scholastic's doors, employees were clamoring to have a look at this new book garnering so much attention (Miller). *The Hunger Games*, as well as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, were as successful as they were only because readers enjoyed them. Readers (obviously) still have a lot of power determining what books are popular.

With now three exemplary models that show how truly successful books can be, it's important to remember that these are still youth books. Very rarely does the publishing industry go to as much length to put out the good word about an adult book; these levels of promoting and excitement seem reserved specifically for youth titles. Miller notes this difference, saying, “It's hard to imagine the first book in any adult series being greeted with a comparable level of grass-roots hoopla: buzzed, booktalked, and big-mouthed for months before it appeared on any bookstore display table.” Children and young adults are still at that age where getting really, *really* excited about a book is encouraged by teachers and librarians, and with the crossover of some titles, that excitement can begin to permeate into adult readers as well. They become infected by the anticipation and hype being put toward a book, something that doesn't happen as often with adult titles. Mature adults, it seems, shouldn't be this excited about a book. But sometimes they can't help it.

And, like those crossover blockbusters before it, *The Hunger Games* has been made into a film. Perhaps it's because of Collins' background in television writing, but this novel presents itself as being the most “made for the screen” out of the Big Three. In the novel, we're invited to

watch the spectacle of the Hunger Games through the eyes of those watching in Panem, and in the film we get to live out that fantasy. Currently, it is the first film since James Cameron's *Avatar* (2010) to hold the top box office place four weekends in a row and holds the 18th position on the all-time domestic grossing chart with \$359.2 million (“All Time Domestic”). It also has the third-largest opening weekend ever, behind the final Harry Potter film, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows Part 2*, and *The Dark Knight*, with \$152.5 million (“Biggest Opening”). At this rate, more box office records are on the horizon with the second novel in the trilogy, *Catching Fire*, already slated for November 2013 (“Catching Fire”).

Though all three books in the Hunger Games trilogy have been published, fans are still right in the middle of the phenomenon. Where the Harry Potter and Twilight series have come to an end (or are nearing the end), *The Hunger Games* still has a couple of years of excitement surrounding it, surely to be laced with companion books for the novels and films, and even more merchandise to sell. An obvious bestseller is the Mockingjay pin Katniss wears in the novel, but there are also t-shirts, board and card games, and action figures to help replay your favorite scenes. It will be interesting to see how far *The Hunger Games* phenomenon will escalate, and if another YA series gets pulled into what Miller calls “the Holy Grail for [youth] book marketers.” Perhaps the Big Three will become the Big Four, or perhaps a new group will be created for new set of readers to reflect what they are hungering for at the time.

Conclusion

Even though the Harry Potter series, as both books and movies, is finished, and Twilight is wrapping up as well, we can see that there's still potential life after all seems to be said and done. Readers aren't quite ready to say goodbye to some of their favorite literary characters and crave a place to interact with them in new, interesting ways. *Pottermore*, a website created by J.K. Rowling and Sony, is the new hub for everything Harry Potter, allowing fans to continue spending time with Harry, Ron, Hermione, and the rest of the wizarding world. Though nothing of this magnitude has currently been slated for the Twilight series, there could be something on the horizon to keep Twilight readers satiated with all things Bella, Jacob, and the Cullens while mourning the end of their beloved series. The Hunger Games is still knee-deep in its own phenomenon, with at least a couple more years of movies to go and the same possibility of living on after the movies are over.

What is was about these three series that spoke to so many people is inexplicable. Content-wise, the only thing they have in common is that they're all some form of fantasy, which is important to consider. There's something about the fantasy genre that can speak to readers of all ages. When characters are going through something other-worldly, it's difficult to pinpoint exactly what audience is being written for. Everyone reading fantasy is experiencing something new to them, regardless of their age. Other than the common thread of fantasy, though, each story is completely different from the other, and all appealed to something that readers didn't know they wanted at the time. We wanted a young boy wizard on an adventure to defeat evil. We wanted an "Everygirl" whose heart was being fought over by two mythical beings. We wanted 24 teenagers to fight to the death. When plots are spelled out so plainly, these books can seem like nothing special, but something about them appealed to readers, and their popularity took off

like wildfire.

Because of the Big Three, the marketing of books will be approached a bit differently now, and it also showed that readers of all ages may have more in common with one another than they believe. Books never seemed to be on the same level of marketable potential as films and TV shows did, but now they can garner just as much hype as a blockbuster movie, if not more so. The story isn't over once the final page is written, giving an extended shelf life to titles that before may have had their place in popularity and then faded into the background. A book can now become more than just a book: it can become an event, something that millions of people can participate in. But even with all of the cross-marketing into games, movies, and toys, it still comes back to the book. People who've only seen the Harry Potter movies are not participating in the phenomenon in the same way the people who've read the book are. They can enjoy the films on their own merit, but it requires reading the book to fully submerge yourself in this phenomenon.

The worlds of *Harry Potter* and *The Hunger Games* lend themselves to being explored in ways that the Twilight Saga doesn't. As Harry Potter has shown, readers want to become students at Hogwarts and go on their own journey through the school. *The Hunger Games* could give readers an opportunity to lead a rebellion against the Capitol, or take place in their own version of the Hunger Games. While gruesome, that feature is something about the world of Panem that readers obviously find engaging, so who's to say that fans wouldn't want to take part in their own online version of the Games? Though *Twilight* does have elements of action and adventure, its main genre is romance. *Twilight* doesn't give readers that same open-endedness of further exploration like the other two series do.

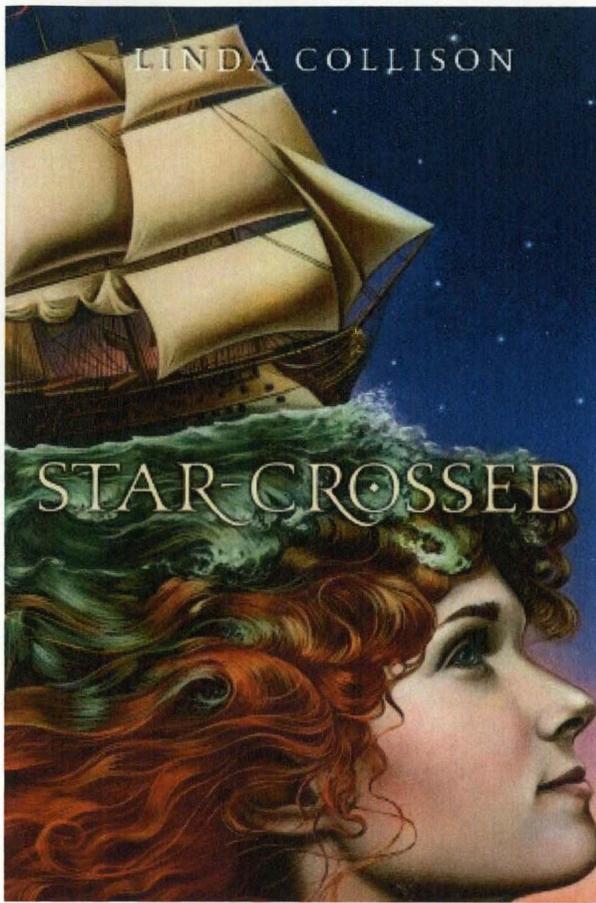
Publishers and marketers can now take books beyond the books alone and reach out to

adults who may never have considered the potential of a young adult novel. They can reach readers with games, clothing, accessories, toys, costumes, and additional assorted items that become little badges of honor, showing that a reader participated in this phenomenon. Though it's tough to say if this is true for *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, it seems nearly impossible to believe that there's a person out there who's never heard of Harry Potter in one form or another. How many other works (movie, TV, books, whatever) can say that? Thinking back on other phenomenons of the past, my best comparison would be to the Star Wars movies. Even if you've never seen the films, there's a very good chance you've heard about them, especially with the release of other merchandise like clothing, games, action figures, and costumes. Rarely is there such a work that completely immerses itself in pop culture that it would be hard not to hear about it, but *Harry Potter* is one of those works.

Looking into the future, it's hard to say whether or not these three series will still carry the same weight they did when they were first released. An effort is being made to lengthen Harry Potter's relevance, but how long that will last is questionable. Perhaps these three series will have a firm place in the YA canon, or maybe they'll fade into the background and become just another book. While these books are extremely popular at the moment, popularity is different from being a "classic" in literature, and the Big Three may be deemed just a phenomenon instead of classics. It will be really interesting to look back fifteen or so years from now and see just where these three series have taken readers, and if readers still hang on to that part of their life.

As a future librarian, I will no longer be hesitant to suggest YAL to an adult patron simply because it's for young adult readers. This phenomenon has showed people that some books can go beyond the intended audience and appeal to a variety of readers. I will be able to confidently

tell them that they should try looking in the YAL section for something new because they might be surprised at how many quality titles sit in those shelves, titles they would have originally shied away from because they didn't want to be seen reading below their level. If I know that adults readers are familiar with the Big Three and enjoyed those series, I can helpfully point them toward other YAL to show them that there's more than just *Harry Potter*, *Twilight*, and *The Hunger Games*. I hope that my role in readers' advisory can lead future patrons to a book or series that they found just as engaging as any of the Big Three. Who knows? It might be the next Harry Potter, and no one wants to miss out on that.



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