



## Trends in Young Adult Literature. A Glance at American and British Fantasy with an Eye on the Transylvanian Variant

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**Abstract.** The present paper looks at the main contemporary trends in writing literature for young adult readers. The theoretical part focuses on possible definitions and characteristics of young adult literature by distinguishing it from children’s literature and adult fiction, as well as by establishing the different age groups these novels are written for. The practical part of the paper gives examples of different types of novels written for this particular audience, such as J. K. Rowling’s prominent *Harry Potter* series, but also Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* or Meg Cabot’s *Abandon* trilogy. At the end, the study also presents a Transylvanian author who has recently started writing fantasy for young adults, namely Balázs Zágoni, and his *Black Light* series.

**Keywords:** young adult fiction, fantasy, myths

Young adult fiction is a relatively new field with its emergence usually linked to the publication of S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* in 1967, but which has thrived ever since (Trupe 2006). It is to be considered a literary category embracing several genres such as fantasy, science fiction, or dystopia. Though there was literature written for young adults before 1967, a switch then took place. Young adult fiction has been characterized by a more complex plotting, motivation, and moral ambiguity than prior to the 1960s. There has also been a higher interest in experimenting with the form of the novel within the category beginning from the mid-twentieth century (Trupe 2006).

Nevertheless, young adult fiction or adolescent literature does not have an equivocal definition. It is difficult to define because the line that separates it from children’s literature and from adult fiction is quite flexible, on the one hand, and because the group of young adults or adolescents is hard to set as a fixed one, on the other. Adolescence generally refers to “the years between the onset of puberty and the establishment of social independence” (qtd. in Curtis 2015, 1). However,

this is quite a vague definition since, according to some, this is true of youngsters between the ages of ten and twelve (Moje et al. 2008, 110), while others widen the range, stating that teenage years overlap the phase starting from age nine up to eighteen but “may incorporate a span of nine to twenty-six years (APA, 2002)” (Curtis 2015, 1). A further way of grouping adolescents is roughly putting these years between the ages of eleven and twenty-one, with three different stages called early (eleven/twelve–fourteen), mid- (fifteen–seventeen), and late adolescence (eighteen–twenty-one) (Swartz and Wild 2012, 203). If we look at the issue from the perspective of literacy, then adolescence begins in the fourth grade, when the spectrum of texts broadens. There is also a shift from predominantly story-based narratives to “expository or informational texts” (Moje et al. 2008, 110). The widening of text types is possible due to the increasing ability of the students not only to understand what they are reading but also to integrate and critically reflect on it, as well as to apply the knowledge they have gathered and, for example, write something based on that (Guthrie and Metsala 1999, 382).

According to the age group a literary work is destined for, young adult fiction can be differentiated from the canon of children’s literature as addressing youth of nine and above. However, this also implies a difference regarding the subject and genre of the texts between narratives meant for children and those for adolescents. Grenby relies on Perry Nodelman’s view, who says: “children’s literature is frequently about coming to terms with a world as defined and governed by grownups and not totally familiar or comprehensible to children” (Nodelman qtd. in Grenby 2008, 165). Good fantasy, for example, renders this experience by transporting its characters into another, often strange and perplexing world. Thus, children are not put at disadvantage and can feel equal to adults since in the new realms presented in children’s books nobody – neither they nor the adults – know the rules (Grenby 2008, 165). Among the genres frequently used in children’s literature, we can find nursery rhymes, fairy tales, fables, myths and legends, picture storybooks, or fantasies – appealing also because they can easily be adapted to give moral, practical, and psychological lessons (Grenby 2008, 166).

Delineating young adult fiction from literature for adults is also quite difficult. Most scholars set the age group between twelve and seventeen/eighteen (e.g. Trupe 2006, Donelson and Nilsen 2009); however, as we have seen, the upper age boundary can vary from eighteen to twenty-one or twenty-six. There are many topics and genres that are frequently read by both teenagers and adults. This is due to the fact that there are many similarities between writing for the two target audiences. Teenagers are taken just as seriously by authors of young adult fiction as adults are. There is no need to refine or dumb down these texts. Young adults need the same demanding language use, the richness of feelings, style, complexity, and honesty. They live in and perceive the same world as grownups do; the only

difference might be that they do not have the necessary tools to deal with this reality (Kalapos 2021). One of the tasks of young adult fiction – representing the core of the difference between adult and coming-of-age literature – is precisely to provide teenage readers with a world where they are not lied to, where they are taken seriously, and where they can hide if they feel like it. Books written for them should trigger reactions, feelings, changes on their part and should start a dialogue about uncomfortable and painful issues (Kalapos 2021).

Adolescence, puberty, or young adulthood is an extremely turbulent period in any individual's life; it is the time of both great physical and emotional changes and of growth. It is the age of becoming someone (else). According to Patty Campbell:

The central theme of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the question “Who am I and what am I going to do about it?” No matter what events are going on in the book, accomplishing that task is really what the book is about, and in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization for the protagonist that helps shape an adult identity. (2000, 485)

Thus, the end of the book should always refer to a new beginning. Literature for young adults should deal, and it mainly does so, with topics that help the youth understand and handle the changes they undergo, touch upon serious issues, such as life and death, the human psyche, the labyrinth of rationality and emotions, family against individuality, gender questions, the journey of self-finding and sexuality.

Another interesting aspect to take into consideration when writing for and talking about young adult fiction is that literary texts for this group always have to be up to date and talk about things that youth can relate to. Thus, this type of literature is continuously changing, just as the group of age it is intended for. Becoming an adult also means that teenagers try to show that they are different from their parents, which means that each generation tries to be unique. This, in turn, makes young adult fiction into a contemporary medium, where each generation wants to have and has their own stories (Donelson and Nilsen 2009, 1). If we look at what is trendy among adolescents, we mostly find contemporary fantasy works instead of the canonical classical books by Lewis Carroll and his *Alice in Wonderland*, Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, William Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, or J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. By taking a look at the titles mentioned above, we can easily recognize that the fantastic literary mode has been present in previous literary epochs too, building the core of the genres of allegory, fairy tale, or mediaeval romance. In modern and contemporary literature, fantasy has evolved into a genre (Shippey 2000, viii).

The genre of modern fantasy is hard to define because it deals with a variety of subjects and applies several topoi. The widest approaches stem from Tzvetan Todorov and Rosemary Jackson, who define it as an “impossible and unexplainable” narrative (cf. Mendlesohn and James 2012, n. p.). While Todorov highlights that in the case of fantastic texts readers are in doubt about the (ir)reality of the narrative, to Jackson fantasy is a sort of “desire” (in Mendlesohn and James 2012, n. p.), as well as “the literature of unreality” (in Havířová 2007, n. p.).

Modern fantasy can thus be perceived as “a conversation that is happening [...] between the authors of the texts and the readers” (Mendlesohn and James 2012, n. p.), revolving around the credibility of the narratives. Accordingly, there are several categorizations of fantasy. For example, fantasy narratives can be grouped based on the fantastic tropes they use. Some texts have tropes at their centre that are completely impossible, while others share only a small number of tropes at the periphery or ones that make the reader doubt whether the text is fantastical or not (cf. Attebery in Mendlesohn and James 2012, 29).

Another viewpoint of categorizing fantasy takes into consideration the way the fantastic enters the text as well as the rhetorical devices needed to build the distinct realms. There are four such modes: 1. the portal quest, which introduces a new world; 2. the immersive fantasy, in which the narrative is part of the fantastic world; 3. the intrusive fantasy, where the fantastic intrudes into the primary world; 4. the liminal fantasy, in which magic might or might not happen (Mendlesohn and James 2012, 29–30). For example, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* belongs to the mode of immersive fantasy, where “the protagonist is part of the fantastic world.” These types of fantasy are written based on the tradition of the great epic poems but are set in an imaginary realm (Mendlesohn and James 2012, n. p.). In his trilogy, Tolkien created a very credible world within the imaginary, with a geography, i.e. Middle-earth, and inhabitants, i.e. people, hobbits, elves, the good and the evil, with languages and a valid mythology and history. Thus, Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* is considered the first piece of modern fantasy setting further characteristics for the works of its type. The last mode mentioned by Mendlesohn is also important because it allows us to view fantasy according to its own criteria and not to those of mimetic fiction or the canon (Mendlesohn and James 2012, 29–30).

Thus, every piece of modern, or, I would dare to say, contemporary fantasy, is situated somewhere between reality and the fantastic, and at times it is quite unclear where one begins and the other ends. The resulting ambiguity gives the genre its strength: “the supernatural and the normal exist together in fantasy texts, in various proportions and combinations, but [...] there is no ratio which governs their relationship. To increase one is not to diminish the other” (Grenby 2008, 150). Though it may serve as an escape from reality, fantasy is usually rather a way of just rewriting it. Even if fantasy seems disengaged from reality, one can

spot its entanglement in the ideologies of its day, for example (Grenby 2008, 154). In my opinion, it is this intricate relationship with reality that distinguishes fantasy from other related genres, such as science fiction and dystopia, and at the same time turns it into what I would call an umbrella genre. Science fiction novels and dystopias also deal with the connections between the real and the fantastic, just from different perspectives.

While, for example, magical realism – e.g. Jorge Luis Borges and Gabriel García Márquez – presents events that are unbelievable but still realistic, science fiction works on a similar basis, yet the other way around: “If magic realists revel in the impossibility of the things they show, goading readers into accepting them in spite of their better judgement, science fiction writers delight in the plausibility of their fantasies, daring their readers to disbelieve things which have been made to seem almost true” (Grenby 2008, 150). Dystopias, or anti-utopias, are often seemingly indistinguishable from science fiction works or combine the elements of the two genres (cf. Cuddon 1999, 960), proving that they, too, are a type of fantasy, with an eye on apocalyptical themes and worlds.

The difficulties of defining fantasy let the genre be best characterized by an in-betweenness, that is, between genres, different canons, between high or low literature, the literary canon or popular fiction. It may well be due to this liminality that young adult readers find contemporary fantasy works so intriguing. This is part of the reason they can identify with the world of fantasy so easily. Young adults do not necessarily want and get a mirror to the world in these novels, what they are looking for is much rather an experience, a form of living. The works they read connect them, “literature becomes a way of sharing lives together, to communicate sorrows and joys” (Sinha 2018, III).

If we look at some of the bestselling authors and novels out on the market for young adult readers, for example, J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series, Lois Lowry’s *The Giver*, or Meg Cabot’s *Abandon* trilogy, we can see that all of them belong to the umbrella genre of fantasy, being either pure fantasies or dystopias, dealing with slightly different topics, but all related to the coming of age. All of these novels were awarded different prizes, usually within the category of best children’s book in the case of *Harry Potter* and *The Giver*, with Meg Cabot’s *Abandon* labelled as young adult fiction. Thus, if we were to talk about the canon of young adult fiction, the above-mentioned novels would be part of it. In the consumer society of the twenty-first century, only a text that is widely read, one that has enduring literary quality and has influenced the field, can be considered canonical (cf. Malo-Juvera and Hill 2020, 6). In this respect, the novels to be discussed here are representative of the category of contemporary young adult fiction.

J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series and Lois Lowry’s *The Giver* are both situated at the centre of the canon of young adult literature (Malo-Juvera and Hill 2020,

6–13). They engage readers in lived or imagined teenage experiences and despite the point of view – third-person narrative – enable identification, bring about empathy with the narrator and/or the main character. Young adult fiction always deals with the dominant norms of the society that the protagonists have to traverse (Malo-Juvera and Hill 2020, 3).

Though the first three volumes of the *Harry Potter* series are recommended for children from seven to ten, the other volumes are meant for older generations, entering adolescence. At the time the story begins, Harry's character is eleven years of age, and he turns seventeen when the story ends. Young people tend to read about people of their age or older, which would mean that the series is actually roughly read by youngsters between seven and sixteen or seventeen years old. However, in spite of the early age at which they read these stories, their effect can be seen later on, even during their university years. We have many students whose favourite book is *Harry Potter*, probably due to the fact that they could grow up together with the characters of the novels and consider these as part of their own development. The themes of the volumes become more serious as the story unfolds and as the characters grow older. The shift occurs in book four when Harry witnesses the return of the Dark Lord and the death of one of his schoolmates. When his parents were killed, he was only an infant, not conscious of what was happening. This time, with Cedric Diggory's passing away, Harry understands the meaning of death (cf. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*):

He had no memory of ever being hugged like this, as though by a mother. The full weight of everything he had seen that night seemed to fall in upon him as Mrs. Weasley held him to her. His mother's face, his father's voice, the sight of Cedric, dead on the ground all started spinning in his head until he could hardly bear it, until he was screwing up his face against the howl of misery fighting to get out of him. (Rowling 2000, 714)

In the next book – *Harry Potter and the Order of Phoenix* –, he is already able to see the Thestrals too, which only those are capable of who have met death.

As far as the type of fantasy is concerned, in the case of J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*, we partly have to deal with the Tolkienian line, that is, immersive fantasy, or mythopoeia, using Tolkien's terminology. Rowling creates a new world using known creatures and characters from world mythology and combines them in creative ways, adding new elements to them as well. However, when the story starts, we are not fully aware of this fantastic world, yet it is as if Harry were part of our everyday environment; thus, the first mode, that of the portal quest, is also present. Closely connected to this type of fantasy is also the intrusive category through the presence of the Dursleys and their point of view concerning the magic world. The Dursleys are horrified whenever magic events or phenomena

happen; however, these do not alter their everyday life, which is another sign of the intrusive category. At the same time, Rowling's series fits into the fourth category listed by Mendlesohn, namely liminal fantasy. In this case, there is a borderline between the real and the magic world. The characters of the real world, e.g. the muggles, may not notice the presence of magic traits around them, yet they can still perceive the presence of wonder. On the other hand, characters belonging to the magic realm take good care of not being disclosed to men of flesh and blood.

Lois Lowry's novel *The Giver* was awarded the Newbery Medal in 1994 and was a bestseller at the time, ranked eleventh on the list of the American Library Association in the 1990s, being one of the four best children's novels according to a 2012 survey. The protagonist of the novel is a twelve-year-old boy, Jonas. Thus, we can conclude that, again, the target readers would be aged between seven-eight and twelve-thirteen; if we take the identification criterion of the readers into account, just at the beginning of adolescence.

As far as the genre is concerned, in the case of Lowry's novel, we are dealing with a piece of fantasy, yet this time the fantastic world is of a dystopic sort. It depicts a world in which communities are isolated from each other, where we cannot speak about traditional families but families consisting of nurturers instead of parents, to whom the children are not biologically connected. There is a Committee of the Elders who assign each child a work at the age of twelve. This way, twelve becomes a threshold in the life of children within the novel. This is when they officially become adults and have to undergo an initiation. Jonas does not get a usual place of work, as it is called the next Receiver of Memory; the novel then follows his traineeship. His assignment leads to his alienation from his friends and is extremely difficult because of the high level of responsibility he has to take. The Receiver of the Memory bears all the history of humanity, which no one else has access to. The other members of the community are void of memories and do not know what they have been trained to do; their whole way of life is a lie lacking human values and feelings such as love or free thinking. The Giver, Jonas's teacher and mentor, and Jonas decide to give people back their memories. At the end of the novel, Jonas flees together with baby Gabriel, the next Receiver; however, we do not get to know whether their escape was successful or not. Yet, memories return to the community once they have left the territory: "Behind him, across vast distances of space and time, from the place he had left, he thought he heard music too" (Lowry 2014, 189).

Lowry later expanded the series to a quartet, adding *Gathering Blue* (2000), *Messenger* (2004), and *Son* (2012) to the series. The latter ones are already labelled young adult fiction – Jonas appears in them, and so his development can be followed, just like in Harry Potter's case. The fantastic world created by Lowry manifests itself in the form of an imagined future. The dystopia also

allows the readers to identify with the protagonists, however, in a different way to that of Rowling's *Harry Potter* series. This is not a magic realm with mythic creatures and the mythic battle of good versus evil but a dehumanized world – “it underscores the dangers of creating a peaceful and egalitarian society at the price of rigid conformity that stigmatizes not only intense emotion and spontaneity but also privacy and creativity” (Trupe 2006, 126). In this world, one has to regain emotions and basic human values.

A third type of contemporary fantasy for young adult readers is represented by Meg Cabot's *Abandon* trilogy, which consists of the volumes *Abandon* (2011), *Underworld* (2012), and *Awaken* (2013). The protagonist of the series is a seventeen-year-old girl named Pierce Oliviera, and thus the addressed age group is presumably between fourteen-fifteen and from seventeen to twenty. The trilogy fits into the mode of the portal quest, since the fantastic appears in the text after Pierce's drowning: “Once, I died. No one is really sure how long I was gone. I was flatline for over an hour. [...] That's the first thing everyone wants to know when they find out I died and came back” (Cabot 2011, 2). The moment she finds herself in the Underworld, where she then escapes from, she is followed in everyday life by the Furies and Hades. Thus, just as with Rowling's *Harry Potter*, we can speak of the intrusive category as well since magic, unreal elements intrude into everyday life with Pierce's return into the world of the living.

Cabot's series is built upon the ancient myth of Persephone and Hades and discusses themes such as death, love, sexual relationships, and friendship. Death and going to “Heaven” or “Hell” afterwards are associated in the trilogy with the thought of every action having its consequences. The fact that Pierce falls in love with John is not simply another love story between two young people but is a proof of acknowledging that we are mortal, the world and we are in a continuous change, and everyone dies. Pierce's battle with her foes is an example of real-life situations, which can be unpleasant. However, she finds the strength in herself to protect her world and learns how to adapt to new challenges. Pierce does not only embody the archetypes of the immature child and the maiden but also that of the independent leader. Her path is of the kind that young adult female readers can identify with. Having lost the comfort of being a child and of not finding her place in a new, unknown environment, the story gives a hand in the process of growing up, in the process of individuation.

A further taboo the trilogy deals with is sexuality and sexual relationships. Through Pierce and John's relationship, the readers are confronted with the roles of dominancy. It is only after John lets go of his dominant male pride and Pierce accepts her role as female partner that they can talk about a serious relationship with children, parenthood, and marriage.

Lastly, Cabot's trilogy is also notable due to its new interpretation of the ancient myth of Persephone, Demeter, and Hades: “You don't have to worry about that

girl, though. She's just a character from a book. Her name was Persephone, and her being kidnapped by Hades, the god of the dead, and taken to live with him in the Underworld was how the Greeks explained the changing of the seasons. It's what's known as an origin myth. What happened to me? That's no myth" (Cabot 2011, 1). This way the author brings a piece of old culture closer to the young generations and applies it to their world. She uses a style and language that are enjoyable for adolescents and can show them patterns that work in their everyday struggles.

The above-mentioned young adult novels are well-known international bestsellers, on the one hand, following in the footsteps of classic canonical literature, on the other hand, setting the path through experimenting with old and new creative techniques and subjects for further accomplishments within the field. Some of them, for example, *Harry Potter* and *The Giver*, have also been adapted and brought to the big screen. Within the genre of modern and contemporary fantasy, there are thus certain patterns that characterize works written for adolescents. Most of these patterns are based on one or on a mixture of the four modes of fantasy mentioned by Mendlesohn and are closely connected to Tolkien's theory of (sub)creation as a role model.

Transylvanian writer, film critic, and editor Balázs Zágoni – born in Cluj-Napoca in 1975 – also applies these patterns in his two-part series *Black Light* meant for young adult readers – namely *A gömb* (The Sphere, 2018) and *Odaát* (On the Other Side, 2019). The author himself considers the novels heterotopic ones; next to the presence of the fantastic elements, they contain sci-fi and dystopic traces. From this perspective, his series is best comparable to Lois Lowry's already discussed *Giver Quartet*. The author started out from the question what life would be like in this region in fifty years' time. The protagonist is thirteen-year-old Vic, a boy who lives with his father in a mushroom colony outside the city. Vic encounters a sphere, which is a strange transparent entity that saves his life and with which he can communicate telepathically: "The Sphere is the opposite of drones in all aspects, though each can fly. [...] It is a flawless, transparent thing. About as big as I am"<sup>1</sup> (Zágoni 2018, 28). Throughout the novels, Vic struggles to choose between his family and the benefits stemming from his friendship with the mysterious sphere. While the plot is adventurous, it cannot really be considered a novelty based on its structure; however, it discusses problems that are of interest and are closely connected to Transylvania and East-Central Europeanism due to its language, for instance. It handles food and fuel shortage, climate change, the falling apart of the European Union and the emerging city-states, the differences and divergence between cities and colonies, or the rapid technological developments:

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1 Translated by the author of the present paper.

It is true that three years ago, when horsefly drones appeared, they caused huge distress in all the colonies. There had been those tiny drones in use earlier with four small propellers, which had been developed decades before in order to deliver not too big items to houses. Then I noticed that these drones would fly more often towards us, the woods and the colonies, where it is uncommon for anyone to order anything at all.<sup>2</sup> (Zágoni 2018, 7–8)

All these subjects are seen through the eyes of the first-person narrator, Vic himself, who among these troubling times is confronted with the everyday problems of teenagers, family relationships and love, but also with having to grow up quickly and taking adult-like decisions.

The first part of the series, *The Sphere*, was awarded the best young adult novel in Hungary in 2019, recommended for ages twelve and above. It was a great success both in Transylvania and in Hungary. A slight criticism hinted at the choice of first-person narration in the first novel, which was changed in the second one to letters by Vic retold by Laila. While it is easier to identify with a first-person narrator, it seems improbable for a thirteen-year-old to be able to relate the happenings with the precision of an adult.

In fact, out of the four authors, Rowling and Lowry chose third-person limited omniscient narrators, which also make identification possible but at the same time give an outside view of the happenings. The last two writers, Cabot and Zágoni, opted for first-person narration, yet, while in the case of Pierce she is more credible because of her age, Vic is less convincing. Nevertheless, each of the authors finds it important to create characters that teenagers, i.e. the target readers, can easily identify with, which is another essential feature of young adult novels.

Summing up, based on the prevailing academic studies and the examples presented in this paper, young adult fiction is a highly prolific field worth keeping an eye on because it both mirrors and influences teenage readership. This field is in a continuous change just as the targeted group, liminal and often not taken seriously exactly due to its in-betweenness. The most important aspects that have to be taken into consideration when discussing young adult fiction are the public, the group of age, the topic handled age-specific, the style and language, the type of narrator and genre-specific patterns, as well as the way they build myths and mythic patterns into the narrative. The latter aspect proves and ensures the presence and continuation of literary tradition from the beginnings up to the present, engulfing the literary canon and popular fiction as well. At the same time, it highlights the existence of basic building blocks – i.e. mythic elements – that underlie human thinking and thus shape everyday life too. This way, a close reading of these books also makes it possible for us readers, regardless of age, to become more conscious of the patterns that influence our thoughts and daily lives.

2 Translated by the author of the present paper.

Only time can tell which of the nowadays-popular young adult novels will persist and become part of the canon; however, from the perspective of the present time, the discussed books are certainly popular and influential among teenagers. Some of them – e.g. *Harry Potter* or *The Giver* – have already become part of the school curriculum or can at least be chosen instead of or next to classic young adult novels, precisely because of their popularity and actuality. Readers can relate to them more easily and enter a dialogue based on them. These novels often manage to make even those youngsters read who are reluctant to do so when it comes to mandatory books. In the age of computer games, television, and the Internet, this fact is definitely welcome by most teachers and parents.

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