The Library Connection

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**Best of the Best:**
Twenty-Five Years of Best Books for Young Adults

In 1930 the American Library Association began producing annual lists of recommended books aimed at young adults. For the next 36 years, that list became the product of ten separate committees and appeared under seven different names. Finally, in 1966, the committee stabilized under the auspices of the Young Adult Services Division (YASD) and adopted the name that remains today, Best Books for Young Adults (BBYA). Since then, 1,337 distinctive books have been designated as "The Best."

Not all of those books have endured. Some reflect a popular culture now alien to the intended audience; others simply didn't appeal to a great many young adults in the first place; and still others failed to sell their projected numbers and were consequently remaindered. Many, though, have survived; they remain popular with teenagers and form a viable core of modern young adult literature.

Occasionally librarians and teachers need to look back at these books, to take a break from the frenzy of concentrating on the latest hot title or promising new author, to examine their literary heritage and reflect on the field from a broader perspective than simply the latest publishing season. At a successful preconference to the American Library Association's annual convention in 1994, interested members of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) did just that by creating a superlist of the top one hundred books from the last twenty-five years of BBYA.

This preconference was the fourth in a series of such events. The first, held in San Francisco in 1975, was the brainchild of Carol Starr (then YASD President) and Regina Minudri. As Minudri recalls: "Our intention was to revisit all the BBYA lists and reevaluate the titles. We wanted to come up with a 'Best of the Best' list that would have titles that stood the test of time. Our focus was to select good books that had remained popular with young adults."

Attendees registered for one of three five-year segments, focusing on books published from 1960 to 1974. They read from their designated periods, considering books selected by original BBYA committees; books that appeared on other yearly compilations, such as the Iowa poll; and books that escaped critical notice at the time of publication but emerged as cult favorites among teen readers. Borrowing from the Newbery-Caldecott balloting system, each caucus worked independently of the others. Groups turned their individual tallies over to Minudri who announced the final selections at a culminating banquet. So intense were the discussions, that the audience cheered when favored authors and titles made the final list, "Still Alive in '75."

The process was repeated in 1984 ("Best Books -- and You!") and then again five years later ("Still Great in '88"). Each session was marked by intense book discussions, emotional balloting, and a celebratory announcement of the final list.
"Here We Go Again...The Silver Anniversary of the Best of the Last 25 Years" kicked off the Miami convention on June 23. Organized by Michael Cart (author and Booklist columnist), Barb Lynn and Mike Printz (American Econo-Clad Services), and Pam Spencer (Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology), this preconference truly reminded participants of the historical significance of both the BBYA committee and its annual selections. The keynote address reviewed the history, while a second presentation, this time by Michael Cart reminded the audience of the serious, and frequently life-threatening, issues that confront young adults today. Cart concluded his remarks by stressing the need for realistic, honest, and challenging literature that would address the harsh concerns that plague teenage readers: gang warfare, murder, sexuality, suicide, and drug abuse.

Moving from past to present to future, a panel of respected editors of young adult literature (moderated by Sally Estes, editor "Books for Youth" for Booklist and composed of Marc Aronson, Henry Holt; David Gale, Simon & Schuster; Dick Jackson, Orchard Books; Robert Warren, HarperCollins; and Linda Zuckerman, Harcourt Brace/Browndeer) looked at where they saw young adult literature heading in the next few years. Each spoke passionately about the field, underscoring the real interest in and concern for young adult literature as a viable genre. These editors praised committees such as BBYA for highlighting young adult literature, and, although they reiterated that books appearing on BBYA often showed increased sales, underscored the importance of the committee's discussions. As Marc Aronson noted, "BBYA is a kind of sounding board of our industry. It helps us to take stock, to see how our work is being received, to plan ahead for the future."

But the heart of this silver anniversary was the creation of a new list. Participants read from lists first created in 1966, when BBYA established both its name and its affiliation, to books recognized by the 1992 committee. (Those of you mathematically inclined who realize these numbers don't compute should note that the disparity in years and number of lists come from a break in naming the lists in 1989. At that time the list was renamed "Best Books for Young Adults -- 1990" to conform to the standard set by the Newbery-Caldecott Awards. The 1990 list consists of books published in 1989, but designated BBYA in 1990. For succeeding lists, the date indicates the year the list is issued and includes books published the previous year.)

This preconference instituted one notable change from previous procedures. In the past, discussion groups divided into historical periods, with each group responsible for covering those books published during a particular time span. While this system allowed participants to judge books within their historical contexts, it also added a particular burden to each committee. Each focus group wanted to be sure that enduring authors, such as Robert Cormier, S.E. Hinton, Richard Peck, and Paul Zindel would be represented, but, with the secrecy surrounding the deliberations, didn't know if other groups would recognize them in their designated publishing years.

Consequently, in the 1988 list, for example, eight authors (Alice Childress, Robert Cormier, Chris Crutcher, Rosa Guy, M.E. Kerr, Richard Peck, William Sleator, and Paul Zindel) were represented with two entries, while S.E. Hinton received three (The Outsiders; That Was Then, This is Now; and Tex) and Cynthia Voigt nabbed four (Homecoming; Izzy Willy-Nilly; The Runner; and A Solitary Blue). There was no inherent problem with repeatedly recognizing these authors on one list, but participants nonetheless voiced their dilemmas with having to consider each in a vacuum.

In order to eliminate that problem, the 1994 deliberations focused not on years of publication but rather on authors. There were ten separate groups formed, with each group responsible for those young adult authors whose surnames began with specific letters of the alphabet. For example, Group One, which in previous discussions would have examined books from 1966 to 1971, this time around considered authors with last names beginning with "A" and running through Bredes. While groups were free to select more than one book per author, this time they did it by looking at a complete body of works rather than one or two isolated entries within a certain period.

Each of the ten groups, with approximately eight members to a group, selected ten books apiece, thus creating a "Best of the Best" list of 101 titles (Lynn Madaras's What's Happening to My Body? A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Sons and What's Happening to My Body? A Growing Up Guide for Parents and Daughters were counted as one title). From this list, five books (I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, The Friends, The Bell Jar, Bless the Beasts and the Children, and Deathwatch) have appeared on all previous such lists. An even dozen of the selected books (Forever; Sex Education;
What the list highlights is the diversity that we know of as young adult literature. Although novels comprise the greatest hunk of the selections, there’s also poetry (American Sports Poems), short stories (Sixteen), graphic illustrations (Maus), exposés (And the Band Played On), remembrances (Shrapnel in the Heart), essays (American Heroes: In and Out of School), personal narratives (Boy), and advice (The New Teenage Body Book). Some books have endured for a quarter of a century (Run Softly, Go Fast) while others represent newer works (Prized Possessions). The list includes adult books for older readers (The Joy Luck Club) as well as books for middle schoolers (Probably Still Nick Swanson); books for realistic fiction fans (Scorpions), fantasy mavens (Eva), nonfiction addicts (Cuckoo’s Egg), humorists (Dealing with Dragons), social activists (There Are No Children Here), historical fiction enthusiasts (Ruby in the Smoke), romance lovers (Annie On My Mind), mystery buffs (Are You in the House Alone?), folklore fanciers (Beauty), adventure seekers (Interstellar Pig), sports fans (Vision Quest), horror devotees (The Silver Kiss), and those youngsters just looking for a good read. These “Best of the Best” titles are listed below.

An annotated list, complete with bibliographic information, appears in the October 15, 1994, issue of Booklist. That same issue also includes a column by Michael Cart reviewing his comments at the preconference, an interview with past and present BBYA consultants Barbara Duree and Sally Estes, and a book quiz based on the list. Individual brochures, complete with bibliographic information and annotations, are also available from ALA. To place an order, call 1-800-545-2433 and ask for the YALSA office.

**BEST OF THE BEST**

Adams, Douglas -- Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Angelou, Maya -- I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings

Anonymous -- Go Ask Alice

Anthony, Piers -- On a Pale Horse

Avi -- Nothing But the Truth

Baldwin, James -- If Beale Street Could Talk

Barlow, Wayne Douglas, and Ian Summers -- Barlow's Guide to Extraterrestrials

Block, Francesca Lia -- Weetzie Bat

Blume, Judy -- Forever

Boston Woman's Health Book Collective -- Our Bodies, Ourselves

Bridgers, Sue Ellen -- Permanent Connections

Brooks, Bruce -- The Moves Make the Man

Cannon, A.E. -- Amazing Gracie

Card, Orson Scott -- Ender's Game

Carter, Alden R. -- Up Country

Childress, Alice -- Rainbow Jordan
Cole, Brock -- Goats
Corman, Avery -- Prized Possessions
Cormier, Robert -- We All Fall Down
Crew, Linda -- Children of the River
Crutcher, Chris -- Athletic Shorts
Crutcher, Chris -- Stotan!
Dahl, Roald -- Boy
Davis, Jenny -- Sex Education
Davis, Terry -- Vision Quest
Deuker, Carl -- On the Devil's Court
Dickinson, Peter -- Eva
Duncan, Lois -- Killing Mr. Griffin
Fox, Paula -- One-Eyed Cat
Gaines, Ernest J. -- The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman
Gallo, Donald R., ed -- Sixteen
Garden, Nancy -- Annie on My Mind
Gies, Miep and Alison Leslie Gold -- Anne Frank Remembered
Goldman, Peter, and Tony Fuller -- Charlie Company
Grant, Cynthia D.-- Phoenix Rising
Greenberg, Joanne -- Of Such Small Differences
Guest, Judith -- Ordinary People
Guy, Rosa -- Friends
Hayden, Torey L. -- Ghost Girl
Hentoff, Nat -- American Heroes
Hinton, S.E. -- The Outsiders
Hobbs, Will -- Downriver
Holman, Felice -- Slake's Limbo
Hoover, H.M. -- Another Heaven, Another Earth
Houston, James -- Ghost Fox
Jacques, Brian -- Redwall
Jones, Diana Wynne -- Howl's Moving Castle
References


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Members of the NYPL’s Best Books for Teens 2014 committee are: Co-chairs, Anne Rouyer, Mulberry Street Library and Andrea Lipinski, Kingsbridge Library; Elizabeth R. Bird, BookOps; Shauntee Burns, St. George Library; Amalia Butler, Muhlenberg Library; Amber Certain, Columbus Library; Sandra Farag, Mid-Manhattan Library; Jennifer Gaeta, New Dorp Library; Ashley Gonzalez, St. Agnes Library; Mina Hong, Epiphany Library; Thomas Knowlton, MyLibraryNYC. That was a real challenge to select only 25 books. I wonder if an adult books for teens list might be added in the future. That was a popular category.

These books will get you through the best of times and the worst of times. The best reads broaden your horizons, give you a new perspective, or offer valuable advice to you as a reader, which is especially great for people who have their whole lives ahead of them. Whether you’ve just turned twenty and want to up your reading game or are on the verge of thirty and looking to take in the last moments of your “best years,” any of these choices would be a perfect addition to your reading list. Here are 21 books to read in your 20s.

1. “Beloved” by Toni Morrison. Amazon. This book was named “the single best work of American fiction published
The members of the Best Books for Young Adults Committee are: Summer Hayes, chair, King County Library System, Foster Library, Tukwila, Wash.; Martha Baden, Alice Boucher World Languages Academy, Lafayette, La.; Teresa Brantley, Salem Middle School, Apex, N.C.; Louise Brueggemann, Morton West High School, Forest Park, Ill.; Megan P. Fink, Charlotte (N.C.) Country Day Middle School; Michael Fleming, Pacific Cascade Freshman Campus Library, Issaquah, Wash.; Rebecca Hunt, Wayne State University School of Library and Information Science, Detroit, Mich.; Alissa Lauzon, Haverhill (Mass.) Public Libr...