Chapter 1

The Lowdown on YA Fiction

In This Chapter

- Understanding what YA fiction is and isn't
- Exploiting YA's unique opportunities
- Facing YA's unique challenges
- Reaping the rewards of writing for young adults

The Me Generation. Generation X. Generation Next. Each new crop of teens has its own culture and view of the world and their place in it. Their fiction — collectively called *young adult fiction* — shifts with the ebb and flow. This constant state of flux creates new opportunities for aspiring and veteran writers alike. Understanding YA fiction's changing nature gives you insight into how you can fit into its future. This chapter offers a glimpse into its transitive nature while listing core traits that distinguish YA fiction despite its flux, along with the unique challenges and opportunities you face as a YA writer.

Introducing YA and Its Readers

Young adult fiction is distinguished by its youthful focus and appeal. The main characters are usually young adults (exceptions include the animal stars of Kathi Appelt's *The Underneath*), and their stories, or *narratives,* reflect a youthful way of viewing the world that puts them at the center of everything. Characters act, judge, and react from that point of view until they mature through the events in the story.

One of the unique aspects of YA novels is that they have nearly universal appeal; YA fiction offers something for every interest and everyone who can read at a middle school level or higher. The audience includes young teens who fancy tales of first love and other relationships, older teens who can't get enough of other teens' troubles, and even grown-ups who like stories that help them remember what life was like when they thought they knew it all.

Knowing what makes a YA a YA

It's easy to think that having a teen lead is what makes this fiction "young adult" fare. That matters, yes, but it's not a defining factor on its own. Many adult books feature teenagers but have adult themes and exhibit adult sensibilities, sophistication, and awareness. Here are six traits that together help distinguish young adult fiction, all of which I talk about extensively in this book:

- **Teen-friendly casts:** Teen novels star young adults with similarly aged peers who all exhibit youthful *characterizations,* or ways of thinking and behaving. These characters usually lack the empathy of an adult, worrying about how things affect them first and foremost. They don't put themselves in others' shoes well or readily, nor do they analyze why they or other people do things — at least not at the beginning of the story, before they've matured through their adventures. Adults are generally background characters or not present at all. (Chapter 5 gives you direction on writing characters that teens love.)
- **Universal teen themes:** The themes in young adult fiction are *universal* ones that real teens struggle with every day. The stories deal with issues and developmental hurdles that affect every generation, such as peer pressure and falling in love for the first time. (Flip to Chapter 2 for pointers on your theme.)
- **Accessible narrative styles:** The stories are structured with clarity, accessibility, and teen social culture in mind — perhaps with frequent paragraphing, lots of white space, short chapters, or structures that mimic journaling or electronic correspondence, such as texting or e-mail exchanges. All these style decisions depend on the intended audience's specific age and sophistication level.
- **Youthful narrative voice:** The narrators' choice of words and the sophistication of their views reflect the dramatic, often self-centered mindset of teens. Teen characters who narrate their own stories sound like real teens thanks to relaxed grammar and syntax and immature observations, whereas the adult or all-knowing *(omniscient)* narrators demonstrate an appreciation of how the teen mind works. Although first-person narration isn't a requirement, it's common enough to be called another helpful defining characteristic of YA fiction. (Chapter 9 helps you choose your narrator and have her tell the story from a teen's unique point of view.)
- **Moral centers:** Young adult stories generally have moral centers, with their young characters growing and changing in a positive way. Even if the story does not have a happy ending, the story ends with the maturing of the main character, with that new wisdom being the positive factor. These novels avoid preaching, however, letting the story demonstrate the lesson while the readers interpret the "message" for themselves, which increases their sense of independence. You reveal this wisdom through your story's plot. (Chapter 6 walks you through building a perfect plot.)

- **Teen-friendly concepts:** The themes may be universal, but the plots that embody those themes are unique and particularly intriguing to young adults. The events are believable within a teen's experience as well as within the fictional world of the story, and they take place in settings that teens can relate to. The stories are often timely, reflecting current events, politics, or social norms. (Chapter 7 explains how to ratchet up the tension in your story, and Chapter 8 helps you create a believable setting.)

Above all, young adult fiction is not watered-down adult fare. The stories are rich, artistic, and compelling. They respect the audience instead of coddling or talking down to readers. The "young adult" moniker is about the age and sensibility of its audience rather than the quality of the story's content.

The book that changed everything: *The Outsiders*

"Young adult literature" has only been a formal category since the late 1950s, about the time the American Library Association formed its Young Adult Services Division (now known as the Young Adult Library Services Association, or YALSA). In fact, the term *teenager* had been widely recognized only the decade before, so it's understandable that it took a while before writers focused on the angsts and dreams of that new age group.

Prior to that, stories written about kids and childhood were mostly written with adult readers in mind, and the ones written directly for young readers were often thinly veiled morality lessons rather than novels intent on exploring the experiences of that audience. There were notable exceptions like J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*, which signaled an interest in the emerging teen psyche in 1951 with its brooding young man caught between the worlds of childhood and adulthood, but otherwise writers had yet to connect with this emerging audience in a collective way. Even when folks did start writing novels with young adults officially in mind, the fledgling category got little respect as anything but fluffy entertainment.

Then came 1967. That year, Viking Press published 17-year-old S. E. Hinton's *The Outsiders*, and a gang of greasy no-gooders who smoked, drank, "rumbled," and knocked up girls totally changed the tone of books written for young people. Young readers finally saw themselves in a book — their own worries, their own interests, their own potential triumphs.

The publication of *The Outsiders*, with its "real" teens, ushered in the 1970s "issue book" or "problem novel." This literary phase had authors tackling universal teen problems with fervor. Getting your period, having your first sexual experience, smoking, rape . . . these books served up social angst galore. And teens gobbled them up. Judy Blume was perhaps the queen of the issue novel, captivating young readers with hits like *Forever* and *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*. The topics were big, and the young characters embodied the issues and fought the battles on their own terms. Young adult fiction had come into its own.

Understanding why YA fiction is for kids

Young readers want see themselves in their books, and young adult fiction satisfies that need. Teens get stories that reflect their situations and concerns, and they feel empowered reading about kids their own age who solve their own problems. For young readers who aren't at the top of the reading spectrum, teen fiction offers reading experiences that respect and welcome them rather than intimidate. Advanced readers who are educated or sophisticated enough for books with adult themes get challenging, inspiring stories about kids their own age. All these readers can learn about our crazy, ugly, wonderful world from the safety of their reading nooks, and kids can immerse themselves in a book to escape the troubles of real life just like adults do. Young adult fiction offers teens stories about themselves and their world.

Every young adult novel is written for a very specific age range, which determines everything from theme to sentence length. I break down those age ranges in detail in Chapter 2, but for now, understand that *young adult fiction* is actually an umbrella term for two very different publishing categories:

- Middle grade fiction, aimed at kids ages 9 through 14 (also referred to as *MG* or *tween fiction*)
- Young adult fiction, or YA, for teens ages 12 through 17 (also called *teen fiction*)

Looking at why it's not just for kids

Even though young adult fiction's primary audience is tweens and teens, adult readers get great pleasure from these novels as well. More and more adults are discovering that young adult fiction is more than stories about high school girls who get crushes on high school boys and then teen angst ensues. These novels have edgy storytelling and offbeat humor; they have strong narratives, plot, and characters; and they scrutinize the complex concerns of young people under all sorts of lenses. Above all, they entertain.

In fact, some of the most ardent fans are 21-and-overs. *The New York Times* reports that 47 percent of 18- to 24-year-old women and 24 percent of same-aged men buy primarily young adult books. The same is the case for one out of five 35- to 44-year-olds. And YA lit book clubs for adults are plentiful. These adults love the timeless themes, they enjoy the trips down memory lane, and they relish the strong storytelling that fills YA fiction. A young adult novel has lessons and entertainment for every age, and the stigma of reading "a kid's book" has long since disappeared.

Books with equally strong appeal for young and old readers alike are said to have *crossover appeal*, meaning they cross over the line that divides the adult and young adult markets.

The other book that changed everything: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*

After deep explorations into teen issues in the 1970s, young adult fiction faltered as the old issue books started feeling stale, safe, and irrelevant to kids of the '80s. As would happen time and again, the category was about to undergo change. American teen culture was venturing into darker, edgier handling of teen topics, and the market for young adult fiction sagged under the restlessness of the next emerging teen culture.

The mass market teen romance phase of the 1980s was the first real sign that the shift was taking place. There also arose an interest in multicultural stories that reflected the full range of American demographics. But the category didn't take a solid upswing until the mid-1990s with the publication of a new kind of teen novel that featured edgy, realistic themes. These books mesmerized young readers — and unsettled adults. Complex, compelling, and often experimentally structured novels like Ellen Hopkins' *Crank* pulled no punches. They showed life at its grittiest, tackling universal problems from an entirely different aesthetic. This shock-and-awe version of issue books breathed new life into the young adult fiction category. The gloves were off now, and teens responded by opening up their own wallets, for the first time taking the reins in buying paperbacks themselves in mall-based stores.

Still, an upswing is no volcanic eruption. That had to wait for the arrival of a bespectacled young wizard named Harry Potter. No one was prepared for the book that rocked the publishing world. A dozen publishers rejected J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* before it was finally published in modest numbers in England in 1997 and shortly thereafter in America as *Harry Potter and the Sorceror's Stone*. At that point, a publishing phenomenon erupted. Both kids and adults loved the series, taking it to such sales heights that when the seventh and final volume was published in 2007, it sold a record-breaking 8.3 million copies in the first 24 hours. The series became a media empire complete with its own merchandise, movies, and even a theme park. The books were sold in chain stores, mall-based stores, and retail and warehouse stores. Harry Potter was everywhere.

The subsequent publicity boon for all young adult literature was immense. Initially books about wizardry benefitted from the interest the series, but that eventually spilled over into all categories and genres of YA lit. New and reluctant readers had discovered the joy of reading, while kids who'd been readers their whole lives found their interest turning to passion, and older readers rediscovered the world of YA literature. Thanks to Harry Potter, young adult literature reached a new level of mass-media exposure, paving the way for the commercialization that defines today's young adult fiction marketplace.

Over the years, young adult fiction has developed into an age-defying literature, most significantly with the publication of J. K. Rowling's famous Harry Potter series. When that now legendary wizard hit the scene in 1997, kids suddenly found themselves competing with adults twice or three times their age for the front of the line at Harry Potter launch parties. And then with the explosion of paranormal hits and mainstream crossovers in the early 2000s, YA fiction attained a new level of prosperity and audience appeal. Wonderfully, the classics still hold strong, creating a rich market for young adult fiction.

And let's not forget the Nostalgia Factor. Nostalgia calls adults back to the books they remember from their own teen years, like Katherine Paterson's *Bridge to Terabithia* or maybe their favorite issue books from the 1970s. Adults reread these books and share them with the young adults in their lives.

Maneuvering through the Challenges

With such a wide readership, writers of young adult fiction have great opportunities. They also have challenges that writers of adult fiction don't toil against: reluctant readers and gatekeepers.

Reaching reluctant readers

In education and publishing circles, *reluctant readers* refers to those teens and tweens who aren't so keen on spending their free time — or their assigned time, for that matter — with a book. What makes them so reluctant? Many simply haven't yet found joy in reading. Or they see reading as a chore when they could be indulging in "fun" things (such as TV, movies, video games, hobbies, and activities with friends and family) or going to school, doing homework, and participating in extracurricular activities. And then, of course, some young people simply lack solid reading skills.

Reluctant readers make up much of your potential audience, especially in the middle grade realm. You can take this into account in your fiction by

- **Putting big words in contexts that make their meaning clear:** Some kids love consulting their dictionaries, but reluctant readers aren't in that group.
- **Writing clear, tight sentences:** Even the best readers don't want to fight their way to the meaning. Keep it accessible.
- **Keeping up a fast pace:** Young readers generally don't have the patience of adults, who may stick with a slow-starting book because they've heard great things about it or are especially intrigued by the promises in the jacket flap copy.
- **Hooking young readers instantly:** Help young readers get emotionally invested right off the bat . . . or risk losing them.

Writing stories with high teen-appeal is especially important with reluctant readers, so give careful consideration to your target audience; identifying your target audience is a vital prewriting phase I cover in Chapter 2. Give these kids a reason to read instead of succumbing to frustration or to the million other things screaming for their attention.

You may hear of a subcategory of young adult fiction called *Hi/Lo*, as in *high interest, low reading level.* These books are created specifically for reluctant readers. They're packaged to look like any other book, but the text is written with their needs in mind. The stories are short, from 400 to 1,200 words, and they have many illustrations. Hi/Lo books feature distinct characters who are quickly characterized — no going on and on about anything in a Hi/Lo, which uses quick pacing to keep interest. Sentence structure is short, simple, and clear. Storylines are straightforward and avoid jumps in point of view or time. Because boys are three times more likely to be reluctant readers than girls, Hi/Los are commonly geared to boy interests, emphasizing funny situations, sports, disasters, teen conflict, family/friend problems, and street kids and gangs, and they embrace the sci-fi, mystery/spy, and adventure genres. Hi/Lo is a small, specialty subcategory. I focus this book on *trade fiction,* or the general market, which sells through standard outlets to the general reader.

Pacifying gatekeepers

Unlike writers for adults, you don't have direct access to your audience. Instead, you and your novel must wend your way through a group of people who in one manner or another screen books before they reach the kids they're written for. I'm talking about librarians, teachers, parents, book reviewers, even booksellers. These are the *gatekeepers* of young adult fiction. Every one of them has opinions about what young people should read, with some of those gatekeepers holding the purse strings.

This means you have to please a lot of people before you ever get to your primary audience. Edgy stories that offer rougher views of the world may not squeeze through the filters. Language, sex, and violence all get careful screening. In principle, that's not necessarily a bad thing; adults *should* be aware of what the young people under their wings are reading. But it does add a many-people-deep wall that writers for adults don't have to work around . . . or under or over or right through in some paper-and-ink version of the old Red Rover child's game.

Cases of banned books and censorship arguments periodically crop up in the young adult fiction news, reminding the world of the most ardent gatekeepers. But your chief awareness should lie at the level of everyday screening for age and individual appropriateness. Keep in mind the role of gatekeepers in your readers' lives as you make decisions about your story's content and word choice. Young adult novelists must by default consider their gatekeepers . . . but whether you choose to pacify gatekeepers, work within general boundaries, or blow the boundaries apart is completely up to you.

Understanding types of children's book publishers

Most people can name some big publishers, but the children's book publishing industry also has specialty publishers who target specific customers through various outlets. You should know the differences among the players if you're to become an effective player. Here's the lineup:

- **Traditional trade publishers:** These are the companies most people think of when they hear "publisher." Sales reps market their books to bookstores, libraries, and schools, and the books are reviewed in dedicated book media such as *School Library Journal.* These houses operate with a *traditional publishing model,* which pays authors advances against royalties while handling the editing, marketing, sales, order fulfillment, and monies. Smaller houses may offer royalties only, no advances. In most cases, the author holds the copyright to his story. (More on advances, royalties, and copyright in Chapter 17.)
- **Mass-market publishers:** These companies have the same advance and royalty structure as traditional houses, but the copyright may be in the company's name, or the author and house may have a joint copyright. Mass-market publishers may also publish the paperback editions of novels originally published in hardcover by a traditional trade publisher. These books are marketed to and stocked by bookstores and discount retailers such as Wal-Mart. These books get reviewed in some dedicated book media.
- **Packagers or book developers:** These companies generally come up with the concepts and story ideas before hiring writers to execute those plans, usually for a one-time flat fee. The packager develops the content, takes care of all editing and packaging, and then sells the project to traditional or mass-market publishers, leaving distribution and marketing to that purchasing publisher. The copyright may be joint or in the packager's name.
- **Educational publishers:** These companies publish curriculum-based material intended primarily for use in schools. They may pay advances against royalties, royalty only, or a flat fee. They usually employ a sales force that markets directly to educators in their schools or at conferences. These books are reviewed in education journals.
- **Small presses:** These companies may publish just a handful of titles a year. Not all of them publish young adult fiction; they often specialize in one or two book categories. They may offer advances against royalties, royalty-only contracts, or flat fee contracts. Small press books sometimes get dedicated book media reviews. They often market through *direct mail catalogs* sent directly to potential customers or through *wholesalers* (also called *distributors*), which means they hire independent companies to stock and distribute their books. Because of their small-operation status, they may cease operating suddenly, so there's higher risk in publishing with a small press.
- **Vanity publishers:** Also called *co-op publishers* or *subsidy publishers,* these companies handle the production of the book while the author foots the bill. The author also pays for the marketing and promotion (if there is any) and handles the distribution. Vanity publishers offer a percentage (varying from 3 to 40 percent) of each book sold, although sales numbers aren't usually high, and the publisher owns the ISBN (the 13-digit International Standard Book Number that uniquely identifies your book). The publisher may send out books for review at author expense, but dedicated book media rarely review them.

The Society of Children's Books Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) warns its members to avoid any publisher that requires authors to pay for publication of their work. The distinction between vanity publishing and self-publishing is becoming quite murky as the author-services companies that aid in self-publishing expand their services menu. See Chapter 14 for more on the murkiness.

- **Self-publishing:** This kind of publishing puts you in the driver's seat, with all the control as well as all the monetary risk. You design, edit, produce, market, and distribute your own books. You own the copyright and your ISBN, and you keep all the money generated. Self-published books rarely get dedicated book media reviews. They can be sold through online booksellers as well as through personal author websites and at appearances, and they may be sold as e-books or take advantage of print-on-demand technology and so don't necessarily need to be physically stocked.

  Self-publishing favors those who already have a platform and can sell the books as ancillary products, such as through back-of-the-room sales at speaking engagements, or when there are small, identifiable, reachable target audiences. The means for self-publishing are changing as the publishing world evolves to include electronic technologies, and opportunities for individual authors are expanding. I've dedicated Chapter 14 to self-publishing.

Enjoying the Perks of Writing for Young Adults

You may have challenges that writers for adult fiction don't have, but you also have something special going for you: your audience. Young adults are a devoted readership that's vocal about their passions — and their defiance. Their loyalties and rebelliousness create opportunities for you.

Getting new waves of readers: Long live the renewable audience!

Because new readers age into the young adult market each year, the audience for your fiction is a constantly renewing one. This is a boon for you. For each set of newcomers, the old is new. First time love is as exciting and confusing for the new batch of readers as it was for their older siblings. I talk about picking universal themes that you know will resonate with your targeted age group in Chapter 2. Your task is to come at your theme in a way that makes it fresh and relevant to those new teens on the block.

Gaining a following: The young and the quenchless

When young people like a book, they can be passionate, vocal fans. They tell their friends about it, and then their friends read it and tell their friends about it, and then you have more fans. And with social media, telling one friend can mean telling dozens at the same time. Don't discount the role of peer pressure in teen book-selecting. No young person wants to be the last to read the latest hot pick, so word of mouth is a big deal with this audience. Just as booksellers hand-sell in bookstores by recommending their favorite titles and authors to customers, so, too, kids push their picks. Get them liking, and get them talking.

You also find that teen readers stick with an author or series with fierce loyalty. They line up outside stores to buy an author's hot books, and teens even create their own book trailers (see Chapter 15). If you can hook 'em, you own 'em. Teens want *more*. And because adults are now sticking with young adult fiction even when they grow out of the official age ranges, you may keep your readers longer than you think.

Breaking the rules

A great part of writing for teens is that they're open to new ways of telling stories. They don't yet know all the "rules" adults follow — not that they'd care about them if they did know. Young adults like to test boundaries. In content, teens like to flirt with danger while secure in the belief of their immortality and safety. And in seeing rebellion and rule-breaking in stories, teens feel empowered and thrilled and validated.

In terms of writing style, teens are quite open to *different.* They haven't become wedded to the old ways, so young readers are more likely to embrace new stuff. They let a story talk about itself, for example, jumping out of the narrative to address readers. They're also willing to walk the line between fantasy and real. And still being so close to their picture book days and thus very visual, they welcome the inclusion of visual elements when that suits the story.

An example of middle grade fiction that breaks the mold is Brian Selnick's *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*, a 526-page book that blends words and pictures in a novel that had expert librarians scratching their heads while they decided what it was. A picture book? A graphic novel? A full-fledged narrative novel? They decided picture book, awarding it the 2008 Caldecott Medal for Illustrations (of which it has nearly 300), even as the National Book Award committee called it a finalist in the Young People's Literature category.

Let this knowledge free you up to explore and experiment with your own fiction, finding the right way to tell your story.