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[Introduction to] Constructing the Adolescent Reader in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction

Elisabeth Rose Gruner
University of Richmond, egruner@richmond.edu

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Recommended Citation

This book examines the way young adult readers are constructed in a variety of contemporary young adult fictions, arguing that contemporary young adult novels depict readers as agents. Reading, these novels suggest, is neither an unalloyed good nor a dangerous ploy, but rather an essential, occasionally fraught, by turns escapist and instrumental, deeply pleasurable, and highly contentious activity that has value far beyond the classroom skills or the specific content it conveys. After an introductory chapter that examines the state of reading and young adult fiction today, the book examines novels that depict reading in school, gendered and racialized reading, reading magical and religious books, and reading as a means to developing civic agency. These examinations reveal that books for teens depict teen readers as doers, and suggest that their ability to read deeply, critically, and communally is crucial to the development of adolescent agency.

NOTE: This PDF preview of [Introduction to] Constructing the Adolescent Reader in Contemporary Young Adult Fiction includes only the preface and/or introduction. To purchase the full text, please click [here](#).

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Introduction: Young Adults, Reading, and Young Adult Reading

This book begins in my classrooms, in three specific, ongoing, and related student concerns about teen readers and their reading. First, confronted with young adult literature that they deem “bad”—by which they usually mean of poor literary quality—college students often defend it for their imagined child and adolescent readers, on the grounds that “at least they’re reading.” I’ve heard this defense offered up for books as disparate as the *Baby-Sitters Club*, the *Twilight* Saga, and the Harry Potter series, all of which seemed to be subject to professorial disapproval. The students are afraid—or even sure—that the books they are championing are too popular to be literary, but they value them nonetheless. Their baseline assumption that all reading is good, however, quickly runs up against its own limits and the second concern. When confronted with literature they deem “bad”—in this case usually for controversial or challenging content rather than literary quality—those same students may challenge its “appropriateness” and argue for restricting its readership. Books as disparate as *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (race), *Weetzie Bat* (sex/sexuality), and *The Giver* (death/eugenics), among others, have raised these challenges over the years, and I’m sure my colleagues can name many others. Is reading an unalloyed good, then, as the first comment suggests, or is it not? This seemingly naïve question has proved, in my classrooms at least, one of the most difficult to answer.

The third concern is closely related to the second. Certain characters, students often find, are either good or poor role models for the readers they imagine encountering them. A book's appropriateness for young readers, then, might be determined not simply by a specific kind of content, but by the presence or absence of positive role models within the text. Students in my fairy-tale classes, for example, frequently end up debating whether or not to continue reading "Cinderella" to children, given the perceived antifeminist qualities of its heroine. Readers of the *Twilight* saga similarly debate Bella Swan's status as a role model, given how passively she accepts her vampire lover's rules for her behavior. Role model criticism, while rarely practiced by professionals, still has great currency in the classroom, if only because it is so often the first move of a beginner critic.¹

In thinking about these questions and the relationships between them, I too began to look for role models—specifically, of readers. If reading is as important as we think it is, surely writers are finding a way to signal that importance. Who is reading in the books my students were reading? Who are the imagined readers for these books? And what kind of reading are they modeling for their readers? That search led to this book. What I found is that contemporary YA novels depict reading as neither an unalloyed good nor a dangerous ploy, but rather an essential, occasionally fraught, by turns escapist and instrumental, deeply pleasurable and highly contentious activity that has value far beyond the classroom skills or the specific content it conveys. As I will argue, books for teens depict teen readers as doers and suggest that their ability to read deeply, critically, and communally is crucial to the development of adolescent agency.

In the rest of this introduction, I focus first on the relevance of this claim: why does it matter what is happening in young adult fiction? I next focus more closely on the claim itself, clarifying terms that are often used interchangeably and exploring the implications of various approaches to

¹In my article, "Cinderella, Marie Antoinette, and Sara: Roles and Role Models in *A Little Princess*," I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the value of role modeling. In brief, it seems to me that novels depicting readers, especially, speak to their own readers about the value of reading in ways that we should pay attention to. While we cannot posit a one-to-one relationship between character and reader, such novels "nurture the narrative imagination," expanding the opportunities to think about how reading works (Gruner 1998, 180).

reading. I then outline my interpretive methods, after which I provide a brief map of the book's organization. At a time when YA fiction's popularity seems to be ever-increasing despite widespread anxiety about reading's diminishing importance,² it seems critical to be clear-eyed about what reading does, why it is valuable, and how to promote it in a rising generation. This book is my contribution to that effort.