



## Forever Young: A Rationale for Dividing the Juvenile Book Category

MONICA MILLER

◀ READ REVIEWS

✍ WRITE A REVIEW

CORRESPONDENCE:  
monica@mcmiller.ca

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Children's publishing in Canada has a relatively short history. The first full-colour Canadian children's book was published in 1968<sup>[1]</sup> but the literature has grown steadily, bloomed, and thrived. A recent article in *Quill & Quire* even suggested that we've entered a second "golden age" of Canadian kidlit<sup>[2]</sup>. Data from BookNet Canada supports this suggestion; the Canadian Book Market 2013 indicated that the Juvenile market consisted of 33.24% of total sales by volume <sup>[3]</sup>. According to BNC, this percentage has been increasing for several years, reporting a 4.1% increase from 2013 to 2014 <sup>[4]</sup>. Some critics might dismiss it as simply the recent trend of adults consuming young adult (YA) fiction, pointing to indicators such as *Twilight* celebrating 10 years, and countless book-to-screen adaptations like *Divergent* and *Hunger Games*. According to Nielsen Market Research, in the first nine months of 2013, YA literature accounted for 18% of children's unit purchases in the US, down from 21% in the same period in 2012, reflecting the impact that the *Hunger Games* trilogy had on the category in 2012 <sup>[5]</sup>. However, these anecdotal cases, although supported by some sales data, really only tell part of the story. The other part of the story remains a mystery due to BISAC codes.

Book Industry Standards and Communications (BISAC) Subject Headings are used for a number of purposes in publishing, embedded within the metadata of every title. Though they are standardized throughout the industry, categories can be subjectively ascribed based on a specific publisher's list or store's clientele. BISAC codes are also used to help build bestseller lists and assist online retailer algorithms to show results in a particular genre. Currently, young adult titles are lumped into the Juvenile BISAC heading, along with picture books and everything in between. The problem with having a sole "Juvenile" header in the BISAC subject list is that, unless we have access to publisher data, we cannot separate out particular age ranges. For example, it is not possible to see the trends in Teen Fantasy because the Juvenile Fiction category simply lists "Fantasy & Magic" (JUV037000). There is no way to isolate the teen titles within this subcategory without examining the specific titles via ISBN. Even though each bookstore and publisher will categorize their books according to how they perceive their audience (probably separating teen, picture books, and middle-grade chapter books), the current BISAC subject headings will still only reflect the single category: Juvenile.

Although there are a variety of opinions on how the juvenile market is divided, these appear to fall into three general categories: illustrated picture books, juvenile, and teen or YA. Booksellers and publishers have their own systems too; they want the right audience to find a title where they expect it to be located. A larger issue arises, however, when you try to assign an age group to a specific category—some consider middle grade to be 8-12, YA to be 14+, and then a crossover area of 12-16, which others call the "teen" category. All these age groups can be confusing when considering how varying degrees of maturity and different reading levels factor in, especially as children progress at different rates. The Book Industry Study Group (BISG) has been researching the viability of splitting YA into its own BISAC subject heading. I would take it a step further and recommend dividing the current Juvenile section into three parts: Children, Juvenile, and Teen. Of course, each publisher is free to choose which BISAC heading best suits a title, with *Harry Potter* probably staying in Juvenile and *Twilight* going in Teen.

As noted, categories help position a book in a number of ways, but most particularly, in terms of "discoverability." This somewhat jargon-y term is actually why correct categorization has become so important. In the postmodern world, our attention is being demanded constantly on all fronts, assaulted from all sorts of stimuli, and having to process all types of verbal and non-verbal communication. We

use genres and categories as semiotic tools for making sense of the world, and then assessing its value to us as individuals. It's no wonder we are exhausted-having to sort through unwanted messages just adds to our current information overload. However, this wasn't always the case-previously, the market for literature was a lot smaller and more refined. Rachel Malik suggests varying levels of literacy actually helped the evolution of style and genre [6]. For example, the serialized novels of Charles Dickens and other authors of the Victorian era inspired a new class of reader, one enjoyed the humour, characterizations, realism, and social criticism. Dickens was writing in a particular style, which appealed to particular audiences yet didn't alienate others. These were lower class, illiterate labourers, who gathered socially to hear the monthly stories read aloud. Although this literature wasn't directly meant for the lower classes (as they couldn't read), it still resonated with them in particular ways. It may be a bit of a stretch, but I see a parallelism in how we are experiencing a surge in young adult literature today; it may not be initially intended for adults, but adults are still consuming and enjoying these stories. How is this any different than introducing a middle-grader to the teen section, or introducing a teen to relevant adult titles? At the upcoming Young Adult Services Symposium 2015 (organized by the Young Adult Library Services Association, a division of the American Library Association), there is even a panel sharing ideas for programs and services to "transition middle school students to the YA collection" [7].

A big part of the debate in splitting the juvenile market is how we define YA. Writing for *The Guardian*, Imogen Russell Williams stated "Writers across the board at [Young Adult Literature Convention] agreed that the *sine qua non* of YA is an adolescent protagonist, who will probably face significant difficulties and crises, and grow and develop to some degree." [8] Essentially, this limits YA fiction to coming-of-age stories, which I would disagree with. It is rare to find any protagonist-focused novel (adult or juvenile) that eschews character development of some kind. In fact, literary critic Leslie Fiedler saw countless canonical American literary characters, such as Twain's Huck Finn and Melville's Ishmael, refusing to become adults [9]. Most definitions of YA seems to be transfixed with just the age of the protagonist, but there are many more factors that need to be considered by a publisher when positioning a title, such as the intent of the author and the level of maturity being targeted. There are also many *Bildungsroman* narratives that are positioned for adults, such as *The Lovely Bones* by Alice Sebold, *The Lord of the Flies* by William Golding, or *Kicking the Sky* by Anthony De Sa, which have been intentionally categorized as adult literary fiction due to their mature subject matter. I think a more useful definition can be found in what Karyn Silverman wrote for the *School Library Journal* blog: young adult literature is a story about the business of adolescence [10].

Speaking at a previous Young Adult Literature Convention (YALC), Meg Rossoff stated "55% of YA titles are bought by adults" [11], and there are many adults who (proudly) read YA and teen literature, as we can see reflected in popular culture. Even *Harry Potter*, which was first published in 1997, had two separate US editions: one design for children and one for adults. Books surpassing age boundaries is not a new phenomenon; consider *Watership Down* by Richard Adams, *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Outsiders* by S.E. Hilton, *Anne of Green Gables* by L.M. Montgomery, Roch Carrier's *The Hockey Sweater*, or Robert Munsch's *Love You Forever*, to name but a few. In a 1998 *Quill & Quire* special report on children's publishing, this crossover appeal was already in full swing: "The books themselves have changed the way we compartmentalize what we see as suitable adult and children's fare, and we are more and more coming to see they can be literary and art forms for all ages". [12]

The subsequent "book-shaming" around reading YA is both disgraceful and counter-productive. We should celebrate the fact that authors are writing stories that work for multiple reading levels and interests-as we do when children's movies can also entertain adults (think *Shrek*, *Toy Story*, or *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*). In June 2014, there was controversy following a *Slate* article titled "Against YA", where Ruth Graham criticized grown-ups for reading books meant for children, stating "the once-unseemly notion that it's acceptable for not-young adults to read young adult fiction is now conventional wisdom ... [but] Adults should feel embarrassed about reading literature written for children." [13] Graham believes that these books of realistic fiction aimed at young adults are cannibalizing the adult literary market. I disagree: if someone is reading-no matter what they're reading-that should be celebrated, not chastised. Personally, I read all kinds of fiction, from literary, translation, and fantasy, to young adult and science fiction. Why does it matter what category in the bookstore or library it is found? Mark Medley, writing for the *National Post*, posted a satirical response to Graham about "getting rid of the YA" in his home, going so far as to ditch his "well-read copies of *To Kill A Mockingbird*, *The Little Prince*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, and [his] Oxford edition of the Complete Works of William Shakespeare, because, you know, *Romeo and Juliet*. They were, after all, teenagers, and one can never be too careful." Medley mocks further, insisting that children shouldn't be allowed to read adult books, such as *Lord of the Flies*, *Hamlet*, or *Of Mice and Men*. He (sarcastically) declares that books should have rating systems, and patrons should be carded before they can enter the adult

section of bookstores. "No one should be allowed to read outside his or her demographic. ... Everyone would stick to age-appropriate books. After all, the point of literature isn't to learn about people and places and situations other than your own. There's no room for wonder, for magic, for fun. Books are meant to confirm our preconceived notions, not expand our horizons." [14]

Medley drives home a key point about the intention of literature: to expand our horizons. As demonstrated by numerous anecdotes and data, the YA market is burgeoning-and it certainly isn't a new phenomenon. BISG, which oversees the BISAC Subject Headings, has been conducting research for more than a year regarding proposed changes to the BISAC Subject Headings to "allow for the classification of young adult / teen, middle grade, and picture books." [15] Because these surveys, interviews with industry stakeholders, and committee meetings are only open to BISG members, and the results have not been announced, I cannot comment on the proposed changes. However, the BISG website states that these are "new sections specifically for young adult/teen fiction and nonfiction codes." [16] The new edition for BISAC Subject Headings is due for release in Fall 2015, but as of yet there is no set date [17].

Ultimately categorization is not a science-even selecting the BISAC subject code for a book is a form of marketing. A publisher is stating, through bibliographic data, how their title should be positioned to an audience: if it is appropriate for a particular age, if it contains certain topics. Then, it is at the discretion of the librarian or the bookseller as to how they place the title in their establishment. But if it is possible to give publishers a more precise tool for positioning their titles in a world beset by an onslaught of information, perhaps they can improve discoverability among the intended audience.

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**Footnotes**

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A juvenile delinquent is a young person, particularly a teenager under the age of eighteen, who breaks a state or federal law by committing a crime. Teens are still immatures and do not think like adults, therefore they are prone to making mistakes or committing crimes that are not fully in their control. Teens can break laws for various reasons, and there are a number of factors that can lead them to juvenile delinquency. In this article, we have listed down some of the reasons why teens become juvenile delinquents and what causes them to commit crimes. Let's have a look at them: Broken Famil