The Top Young Adult Book Picks from This Decade 1999–2009

Every decade, Ted Hipple would ask young adult (YA) literature experts to identify their favorite books. Using the United States Postal Service, he would send letters, tally all of the responses, publish the results, present those titles at a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) convention session, and distribute a handout at an Assembly on Literature for Adolescents of the NCTE (ALAN) workshop. Since Ted passed away in 2004 and because I was asked the last couple of times to participate in his survey, I decided to replicate the survey—with some modifications—in his honor.

The Question

Although admittedly unscientific, on March 16, 2010, I posted this question on the Adolescent Literature Forum of the NCTE Ning: “In your opinion, what are the 10 best Young Adult (YA) books published between 1999 and 2009, with 1 being your favorite and so on?” The following day, I emailed all members of ALAN the same question. In both forums, I requested that members forward my email request to all the YA enthusiasts they knew in order to get as many responses as possible.

The Method

From then until April 15, 2010, individuals could name their favorites. My question was forwarded by ALAN members and posted on several message boards, including Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) and other communities on the NCTE Ning. Respondents were asked to provide three bits of information: the name of the book, the author of the book, and their own professional role as a user of YA literature—university professor, secondary teacher, media specialist, or author.

All submissions were checked via Internet to establish the copyright date of the first edition of each book. Those respondents who identified a book outside of the 1999–2009 range were given an opportunity to modify their submissions. The data of those who did not respond to the request to revise were discarded.

Numerical points were distributed according to the rankings given. If a person listed the book in 1st place, that book received 10 points; 2nd place, 9 points, and so on so that the book in 10th place received 1 point (see Appendix 1: Example of Scoring System Using My Ranked Selections). Another count was done by simply tallying one mark each time a title was mentioned in a person’s top ten list, regardless of ranking.

The Results

In short, responses were obtained from 197 people: 70 university professors (see Appendix 2: Professors’ Picks), 63 secondary teachers (see Appendix 3: Secondary Teachers’ Picks), 44 librarians (see Appendix 4: Librarians’ Picks), and 20 authors (see Appendix 5: Authors’ Picks). In all, 456 young adult titles were mentioned. The following titles led the list; each appears with its earned score representing the points received:
Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)
Feed by M. T. Anderson (2002)
Monster by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher (2002)
Unwind by Neal Shusterman (2007)
Sold by Patricia McCormick (2002)
Talgo by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)
Deadline by Chris Crutcher (2007)
The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)
Feed by M. T. Anderson (2002)
Monster by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher (2002)
Unwind by Neal Shusterman (2007)
Sold by Patricia McCormick (2002)
Talgo by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)

Discussion

When Ted Hipple published the results of his 2004 Best Young Adult Books of All Time survey in Don Gallo’s Young Adult Literature column in the January, 2005, English Journal, only 149 different novels were named from 78 respondents. Extrapolated from the full report, these were the top ten at that time, with the parenthetic number representing the votes each received:

• The Chocolate War by Robert Cormier (27)
• The Giver by Lois Lowry (22)
• Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (19)
• The Outsiders by S. E. Hinton (15)
• Hatchet by Gary Paulsen (13)
• Holes by Louis Sachar (13)
• Monster by Walter Dean Myers (13)
• Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes by Chris Crutcher (13)
• The First Part Last by Angela Johnson (11)

(Incidentally, in 1987, Ted Hipple conducted a very similar survey, and the top three in that survey were The Chocolate War, The Outsiders, and The Pigman by Paul Zindel.)

Of all those titles, only Speak was listed on both Ted’s 2004 list and my 1999–2009 list; perhaps the comment made by this respondent captures why:

“. . . Certain books such as Speak are so powerful, memorable, and life-altering that they will always remain among my favorites. I can still remember the first time I read Speak. I was blown away by the author’s deftly written prose and the way she blended humor and pathos throughout the story. Her skillful weaving of The Scarlet Letter and an English class and Melinda’s own experiences was—and still is—impressive.”

Beyond Speak, one can only wonder which of the books mentioned in Ted’s survey would replace some of the top picks from this current list—if any at all!
It was also interesting that the top four books of this decade were the only books listed on all four groups’ top ten lists, and even then, all groups did not agree on the rank order.

- *Hunger Games* was the teachers’ and librarians’ top pick;
- *The Book Thief* was the authors’ top pick;
- *Speak* was the professors’ top pick; and
- *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* was not the first pick in any group, unless one looks at the professors’ picks without ranking.

It was humorous that every time someone listed *Twilight* in their top ten, it was also accompanied by an apology of some sort. The following comment represents the predominant sentiment of those who included books from the *Twilight* series in their top ten:

“I chose these books as my top ten not just because I liked them. In fact, there are some I liked better on a personal level that I did not add to the list. I chose the Twilight series, for example, because of my students’ reactions to them. Anything that instills a love of reading in today’s teens deserves some recognition.”

Several people hated being limited to “just ten,” and some even included an addendum with “Honorable Mentions.” Among them is another series endorsement:

“Honorable Mention: *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* by J. K. Rowling (OK, the whole Harry Potter series is among the most fun reads—and I think that Ms. Rowling changed who was reading in middle school, so for that alone, I love her).”

The serendipitous comments by people who wanted to justify their selections (since I included no criteria for selecting the best books of the decade) were wonderful:

- “I selected these based on excellent and innovative craft, emotional resonance, and groundbreaking content.”
- “I picked these because I feel they are important in some way. Beyond being entertaining, they made me feel more complete somehow after reading them, like I was a fuller person for having read them, either from a shift in perspective, a new insight, or finding a richness that hadn’t been there before. That’s why. I hope your research on this is successful, and thanks for the chance to participate.”
- “I know folks will enjoy reading the article and arguing over the merits of the books. I often laugh when someone asks me about my favorite book, since it’s usually whatever book I happen to be reading at the time . . . . If you asked me another day, I might have a couple of titles that took the place of the ones above, but overall, these books speak to me, and I wouldn’t ever want to see them go out of print.”

**Conclusion**

Obviously, with technology, more people have the opportunity to participate, but the increase in the number of YA titles mentioned is astounding, especially since Hipple’s survey asked for the Best YA Novels of All Time up to 2004 and mine limited people to one decade of 1999–2009. Another difference is that Gene Luen Yang’s *American Born Chinese* is the first graphic novel to make the top ten list. When the survey is next conducted, will there be another kind of YA book that gets nominated—perhaps an ebook, interactive book, or a book with a role-playing game? Finally, what does make a good book good? Ted would say this Latin phrase, “De gustibus non disputandum est,” which, loosely translated, means, “There is no argument when it comes to taste.” As for me, I can honestly say that I have not read every book that was mentioned in the survey, and it is evident that YA literature has come into its own. If you’re like me, you have a lot of new books to read. Enjoy!

**Note:** For a copy of the complete list, email me at kaywell@usf.edu. I’d also like to thank USF students Jenn Gilgan and Courtney Pollard for their assistance in compiling the data.

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Appendix 1: Example of Scoring System Using My Ranked Selections


Appendix 2: Professors’ Picks

Top Ten Professors’ Picks with Points (n = 70)

303 Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
271 The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
264 The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
171 Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
120 Feed by M. T. Anderson (2002)
106 Monster by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
102 Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)
90 Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher (2002)
75 Sold by Patricia McCormick (2002)

Mentioned in Top Ten (no points)

( NOTE: Two in bold not included in top ten. )
40 The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
36 Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
34 The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
27 Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
21 Monster by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
18 Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)
15 Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher (2002)
15 Feed by M. T. Anderson (2002)
14 The First Part Last by Angela Johnson (2003)
11 Sold by Patricia McCormick (2002)

Appendix 3: Teachers’ Picks

Top Ten Secondary Teachers’ Picks with Points (n = 63)

264 Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
165 Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
140 The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
116 Unwind by Neal Shusterman (2007)
104 The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
70 Deadline by Chris Crutcher (2007)
68 Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
65 The Lightning Thief by Rick Riordan (2005)
64 Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)

Mentioned in Top Ten (Teachers’ lists - no points)

( NOTE: Four in bold not included in top ten. )
37 Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
23 The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
22 Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
16 The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
15 Unwind by Neal Shusterman (2007)
13 13 Reasons Why by Jay Asher (2007)
12 The Lightning Thief by Rick Riordan (2005)
12 Monster by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
12 Twilight by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
10 Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
10 Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)
9 Whale Talk by Chris Crutcher (2002)
9 Deadline by Chris Crutcher (2007)
9 Wintergirls by Laurie Halse Anderson (2009)

( NOTE: 15 Harry Potter series if added all together)
Appendix 4: Librarians’ Picks

Top Ten Librarians’ Picks with Points (n = 44)

190  Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
124  The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
 98  Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)
 92  Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
 54  The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer (2002)
 48  The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
 44  Twilight by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
 35  Monster by Walter Dean Myers (2000)

Mentioned in Top Ten (Librarians’ lists - no points)
(NOTE: Two in bold not included in top ten.)
 26  Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
 18  The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
 16  Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
 14  Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)
 9  Monster by Walter Dean Myers (2000)
 8  The House of the Scorpion by Nancy Farmer (2002)
 8  Twilight by Stephenie Meyer (2005)
 7  13 Reasons Why by Jay Asher (2007)
 6  Feed by M. T. Anderson (2002)
 6  The First Part Last by Angela Johnson (2003)

Appendix 5: Authors’ Picks

Top Ten Authors’ Picks with Points (n = 20)

89  The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
37  Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
36  The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
35  Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
29  Feed by M. T. Anderson (2002)
25  The Amber Spyglass by Philip Pullman (2000)
23  Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (2000)

Mentioned in Top Ten (Authors’ lists - no points)
(NOTE: Two in bold not included in top ten.)
 9  The Book Thief by Markus Zusak (2005)
 6  The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian by Sherman Alexie (2007)
 5  Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins (2008)
 5  Feed by M. T. Anderson (2002)
 4  Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
 4  Stargirl by Jerry Spinelli (2000)
 3  The First Part Last by Angela Johnson (2003)
 3  How I Live Now by Meg Rosoff (2004)
 3  Crank by Ellen Hopkins (2004)
 3  Boy Meets Boy by David Levithan (2005)
 3  The Amber Spyglass by Philip Pullman (2000)