

Dare to Disturb the Universe: Pushing YA Books and Library Services—with a Mimeograph Machine

Library Connection Editor's note: *English and reading teachers today often coordinate with their local librarians in promoting books and reading to their students. Booktalks, booklists, special programs, and more are offered to get teens turned on to literature. How did librarians first begin to leave their mark on teen clientele—the same teens we find in our classrooms? Cindy Welch reveals an interesting “library connection” that helped to make it happen, as she shares a little-known bit of important YA history. —Diane Tuccillo*

In the same way that the maturing body of YA literature in the 1970s provided insights, affirmations, and beacons of light for teens, there were fledgling professional publications that performed a similar service for teachers and librarians who worked with those teens. You might not know that one of those early publications was the mimeographed *News of ALAN*, which eventually became the *ALAN Newsletter*, and which finally evolved into this journal, *The ALAN Review* (Nilsen).

You might not also know that

in the 1970s, in a similar fashion to *News of ALAN*, there was another mimeographed marvel that set the stage for teen library services and the associated promotion of YA literature for young adult librarians: the *Young Adult Alternative Newsletter (YAAN)*. This served as the YA librarian's parallel to *News of ALAN*, and provided much of the foundation for the successful library programs, collections, and related promotion of literature to teens that we see today—book-talking, the creation of booklists, afterschool library activities, and more.

YAAN was a reality check in a changing world, a conversation with friends near and far, and a chance to re-think—or even outsmart—the “Establishment.” From 1973 to 1979, YAAN focused on YA services (programming, outreach, professional development, etc.), and it was an inspiration for progressive librarians who wanted to extend their traditional role and to become points of light for the teens they served.

Then, as now, public libraries and schools were deeply embedded in the communities and societies that surrounded them. What hap-

pened in the streets found its way into the literature and into libraries. The widespread social unrest that characterized the 1970s American “scene” was evident in professional debates about the nature and scope of library work. Federal funding from the 1960s, most notably the 1964 Library Services and Construction Act (LSCA), had spurred tremendous growth in public library buildings and collections. As part of that growth, librarians reexamined their shelves and their service philosophies, and sought new ways to reach out to minority and other underserved groups, creating (among other things) more specific services and collections for teens.

The heyday of this stimulus funding coincided with the first young adult literature “golden age,” when books such as Alice Childress's *A Hero Ain't Nothin' but a Sandwich* (1973), Robert Cormier's *The Chocolate War* (1974), and Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975) made their appearance. There was strong motivation to be socially conscious, the legacy of the turbulent and politically active 1960s. High schools were experimenting with the concepts of open classrooms, nongrad-

ing, and creative elective classes. YAAN was very much a publication in and of its time.

Addressing a Gap in the Literature

In 1973, at the American Library Association (ALA) Midwinter Conference in Washington D.C., a group of librarians sat late into the night discussing their work. Their main consideration was how they could improve services and collections for teens. This conversation was precious because, in these pre-wired days, collaboration and contact with other YA librarians was limited to biannual conferences and combing through mainstream publications, such as *School Library Journal* (SLJ) and *Wilson Library Bulletin* (WLB), for the few articles and stray columns dedicated to work with teens. Author and former YA librarian Patty Campbell called it a “very lonesome business”¹ working with teenagers in public libraries.

Carol Starr, at that time the YA librarian from Menomonee Falls, Wisconsin, returned from the 1973 ALA conference, powered up her IBM Selectric typewriter, wrote three pages of single-spaced text about conference news, YA programs, and membership in the Young Adult Services Division (YASD). She consulted a directory of public libraries in the United States, and a few short weeks later mailed the first issue of YAAN to approximately 300 YA librarians in “any city of any major size whatsoever.”² From 1973 to 1979, YAAN appeared an average of five times a year and was virtually the only nationally distributed publication

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that focused specifically on service to teenagers in public libraries. The only other teen services-specific journal came along in 1978, when *Voice of Youth Advocates* (VOYA) started, and practitioners could read both periodicals through November 1979, when YAAN ceased publication.

YAAN, much like Alleen Nilsen’s dittoed, press-on-lettered beginnings of *The ALAN Review*, was a homemade labor of love (Nilsen 331). It was mimeographed on its trademark legal-sized gold-enrod paper, had approximately a thousand subscribers, and was known from Nova Scotia to New Mexico.³ Mary K. Chelton, noted YA services expert, declared that, “until [Starr] started the *Young Adult Alternative Newsletter*, I never realized what a national community of practitioners would mean intellectually or politically . . . [she created] a vehicle for an entire generation of YA librarians to communicate with each other” (32).

The Content That Rocked

Starr’s newsletter was a feast of YA programs, free materials, success

stories, and affirmation. Over the years, the content evolved from bite-sized news bits to a mixed bag of shorter and longer announcements, articles, book award lists, and conference program information. Every issue included reports of or ideas for programming, updates on YASD division news, recommended professional resources and free materials that could be sent for or shared between readers. In contrast to most youth publications of the time, there was also a decidedly feminist leaning and the occasional curse word. According to Chelton,

There was an idiosyncrasy to YAAN that gave it a personality all its own. You didn’t have to write in a box, there wasn’t a style manual necessarily, and as long as you weren’t screaming obscenities, you could say anything you pleased . . . you felt like you were talking over the back fence to people.⁴

Material came from conference attendees, friends, acquaintances, and subscribers. Contributors were often first-time authors, something that energized and affirmed practitioners who discovered they had valuable information to share with their peers in the wider world. They became part of a larger, reflective community of practice, and much of the material in YAAN was an exchange of “here’s how I did it; how did you do it?” correspondence.

YA Services Reborn

Experimentation and reform, signs of the turbulent times, were particularly welcome among young adult librarians, whose client group was actively pushing for change. Patty Campbell observed that teen librarians “were in sync with what was happening that decade. We

were ‘with it,’ and we were looking at the kids to find that out.”⁵ Just as a new breed of YA literature was bursting onto the scene with its unflinching look at reality—à la *Go Ask Alice* (1971), Piers Paul Read’s *Alive* (1974), and Katharine Patterson’s *Bridge to Terabithia* (1977)—YA librarians were itching to tune in and turn on high-powered programming options that were firmly seated in teens’ real lives. But change wasn’t welcome in all library quarters. At one point, a colleague told Campbell they didn’t want “any of that circus stuff in here.”⁶

The “circus stuff” was actually a different model of teen services. No longer were active YA librarians content to dwell on literacy and homework help. Miriam Braverman, in her 1979 title, *Youth, Society and the Public Library*, indicated that the “developments in the 1970s reflected the youth movement of the 1960s,” as YA librarians “sensitive to the culture and concerns of youth, broke through the constraints of the ‘conventional wisdom’ in young adult work, and developed exciting and original programs and services” (ix). Teens had become an identifiably distinct cultural group, and YA practitioners wanted to reflect the range of needs displayed by their teen patrons.

YA Librarians Come into Their Own

The Age of Aquarius called for consideration of the whole teen, as well as materials and services that spoke to larger social issues. Scandalized library staff came face to face with YA librarians who wanted to have water “couches”—

they weren’t allowed to call them beds—in the teen rooms and who collected films with titles such as *About Sex* and *Invasion of the Teacher Creatures* (Starr, “Selected Films” 4), along with educational comic books about sexually transmitted diseases.⁷ Innovative programming topics included filmmaking and rock music, and there were sessions about health issues (VD, acne, diet) and drug abuse. School visits were likely to include booktalks and information about astrology, drug abuse, films, and the library’s growing popular (vinyl) record collection.

Former YA librarian and noted booktalking expert Joni Bodart described YA librarians this way, “We were all outrageous and it was hard to convince average librarians that we were worth something. . . . We were very proud of the fact that we were unconventional; that we were different, free.”⁸ According to Chelton,

Those of us who had not come out of children’s services . . . were desperate to free ourselves of the sort of hidebound excessive deference kind of crap you got in children’s . . . [they] wouldn’t know a real kid if they fell over them. They loved children’s literature and that was it, and it drove us crazy. No matter what we did, we

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were always seen as irreverent non-deferential outcasts.⁹

It may sound from the comments as though literature was not a part of the scene for teen librarians of the 1970s, but YAAN routinely published award lists, solicited booklists (on behalf of readers), and notified librarians when books were being converted into films or television shows.

Fighting Tradition

Chelton’s comments highlighted an ongoing friction between children’s librarians and YA librarians. Fresh approaches to services (and literature) related to sex, drugs, and rock ‘n roll made for uneasy coexistence. The fact that both children’s and young adult services sprang from a common root, and still shared custody of the 12–14-year-olds, also contributed.

Membership in either the Children’s Services Division (CSD) or the Young Adult Services Division of ALA included a subscription to the joint member journal, the *Top of the News* (TON). YA librarians, however, felt that TON favored children’s literature and services. An analysis of ten years of TON content, conducted by YA librarian Lisa Naef, revealed striking differences in coverage of children’s and YA subjects. Between 1962 and 1972, TON ran 279 YASD items as compared to 595 CSD items, including articles, news bits, and booklists (Starr, “TON” 1). This disparity left many teen librarians feeling as though they were operating in a solitary universe.

Other professional development periodicals available to YA librarians in the early 1970s were

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about the youth services profession as a whole (for example, *American Libraries*, *Library Journal*, and *WLB*), or like *SLJ*, in that their focus was first children's literature and, to a lesser extent, services, and then teens—again, literature first and then, finally, services. Even when content appeared, journal production time was as much as a year to 18 months, making even the freshest material stale by its delivery date.

Alternative library publications such as *U*N*A*B*A*S*H*E*D™ Librarian* (1972), *Booklegger* (1973), and *Emergency Librarian* (1973), had plenty about literature and authors, but only occasional material on service work with teens. There were a few regional publications, such as *Gambit*, a collection of programs published by the Maryland Library Association, and Boston Public Library's *Idea Sourcebook for Young Adult Programs*. Interestingly, although the concern was about service, programming and outreach were often anchored by and to the literature. In a *YAAN* cover article from September 15, 1975, noted YA advocate/activist librarian Margaret Edwards commented:

It is good to see that, while there are many *activities* featured that appeal to teenagers, *books* are never forgotten. [Italics added] One community filled a bulletin board with snapshots of the teenagers whose annotations of a favorite book appeared on shelves with the books themselves. The an-

notations were then collected in an attractive booklist. (Edwards, "YA Garden" 1)

Handbooks, standards, and guidelines were also few and far between. YA librarians of the early 1970s could consult *An Ample Field*, written in 1950 by Amelia Munson, *Young Adult Services in the Public Library*, published by ALA's Committee on Standards for Work with Young Adults in 1960, or *Guidelines for Young Adult Services in Public Libraries*, published in 1966 by YASD. Edwards's seminal *Fair Garden and the Swarm of Beasts* appeared in 1969. In terms of practitioner resources, this was a short list.

YAAN Stands Alone

It was within this gap in the professional literature that *YAAN* was born, and response was swift and affirmative. Editor Starr noted that the first issue generated an additional 300 names for her mailing list. One delighted reader gushed, "Isn't it nice someone knows I exist?" (Gushikuma).

YAAN was deliberately informal in format and style. Throughout its run, it kept a homemade appearance and contributors were lightly edited. Starr admitted she liked the idea of a somewhat radical approach to YA services, and *YAAN* was the literary embodiment of the "anything goes" YA services in the 1970s. "Rather than go through ALA [as a publisher] and have it run by people in their 40s, entrenched in their ways . . . we could publish it ourselves and we owned it."¹⁰ Starr borrowed format and attitude from the underground press movement that started in

the 1950s in America and gathered steam through the mid-1960s. Librarians came on board for the movement in 1967 with Celeste West's journal, *Synergy*, which scholar Toni Samek said "defined an alternative library culture that worried less about the library as keeper of the cultural record, and more about the library as an active agent for change" (Samek, "Unbossed" 134). That approach was at the heart of the 1970s model of YA services and was reflected in *YAAN* content.

YAAN was celebrated by reviews and recommendations in professional journals, both alternative and mainstream. In the winter 1976 joint issue of *Booklegger* and *Emergency Librarian* that focused on library education, Carole Leita listed *YAAN* among titles of the "library free press . . . a network of free-speaking library periodicals which you can use to keep in touch with reality—and hope." Readers were encouraged to "take a walk on the wild side" (Leita 24). *Emergency Librarian*, in another issue that same year, called *YAAN* . . .

Gold! YA librarians (and others) have certainly struck pay dirt when they start reading this newsletter. It is crammed with what is happening in YA services and what you can do to make them happen in your library . . . Articles on new approaches to service as well as lists of books loved best by YAs make this newsletter irresistible to those struggling in an attempt to serve YAs. ("Small Mags" 24)

Wilson Library Bulletin, a mainstream journal, called *YAAN* a "lively alternative . . . [a] peppy informative newsletter . . . written in good socko style" ("Librarians Monthly Almanac" 356).

TON did an extended review of the newsletter in 1974, a year after YAAN first appeared, and reviewer Jana Varlejs managed to sound complimentary and disapproving at the same time.

The tone is not necessarily evangelical, but it is certainly upbeat . . . It is of course unreasonable to expect YAAN to be all things to all YA librarians, and it is clearly unreasonable to expect it to be truly “alternative” while its editor personifies—simply by virtue of her office! [sic]—the YA establishment¹¹ . . . It is, however, a measure of YAAN’s success that it has already done more to generate ideas and reinvigorate the mutual supportiveness which has always characterized the YA field. It has also raised the expectations of many librarians who have felt the need for the newsletter on YA services, and who now hope that YAAN will not only continue to meet this need, but that it will also expand and become a forum for the debate of issues as well. (Varlejs 436–37)

Increasing the Presence of YA Training Materials

As the 1970s progressed, more resources became available for librarians working with teens, but YAAN continued to inspire a new generation of YA librarians. Chelton used it as a resource in her YA service classes at Rutgers and as a model for an internal newsletter in her day job with the Westchester County (New York) library system. YASD distributed YAAN in a 1976 packet of basic materials it marketed as the YASD Survival Kit. Professor Larry Amey, who along with his students created the Canadian library publication *Young Adult Hot Line*, declared:

The *Young Adult Alternative Newsletter* (YAAN) pointed the way toward a new model for youth service . . . the

yellow-colored, long-format newsletter was packed with descriptions of exemplary and original YA programs, tips for practicing librarians, and avant-garde advocacy for teens. YAAN was outspoken, hard-hitting, and committed. (Amey x)

YAAN’s emphasis on service, through which teenagers could connect to literature, and its fresh and contemporary tone made it unique and essential. It was timelier and more specific than the mainstream publications, and new ideas and best practices circulated much more quickly and efficiently than through mainstream channels. In fact, one 1978 article identified YAAN readers as “the vanguard in young adult services” (Kingsbury 22).

Over the seven years of its existence, YAAN was arguably one of the most important professional education tools in the young adult librarian’s arsenal. Diane Tuccillo calls YAAN a predecessor to modern YA-centric blogs and websites, describing it as “one of the earliest forms of networking . . . a real foundation for what we ended up with now” (12).

In our world of point-and-click instant information and connection, it is difficult to conceive of a time when practitioners could be so united by their love of YA literature

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and dedication to service for teens, but so separated by distance and time. This exploration of a “little-newsletter-that-could” shows us from where we have come and reminds us of the direction in which we are still moving as we work toward making libraries better and more relevant places for our teen clientele.

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Notes

- ¹ Patty Campbell interviewed by Cindy Welch, May 25, 2009.
- ² Carol Starr interviewed by Cindy Welch, January 22, 2005.
- ³ Starr, interview.
- ⁴ Mary K. Chelton interviewed by Cindy Welch, June 4, 2009.
- ⁵ Campbell, interview.
- ⁶ Campbell, interview.
- ⁷ Joni Bodart interviewed by Cindy Welch, May 25, 2009.
- ⁸ Bodart, interview.
- ⁹ Chelton, interview.
- ¹⁰ Starr, interview.
- ¹¹ Starr was then serving a one-year term as president of the Young Adult Services Division of the American Library Association.
- ¹² Diane Tuccillo interviewed by Cindy Welch on May 22, 2009.

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