



## Young Adult Authors Describe Their Commitment to Adolescents

This chapter begins with brief introductions, in alphabetical order, of the YA authors who responded to a questionnaire I created. Similar to the survey of young adults, the questionnaire for authors also had four questions:

1. Why is it important to write for young adults?
2. How did you start writing for young adults?
3. What books did you read as a young adult?
4. What would you suggest that young adults read?

Following the introductions of the YA authors, I have grouped their responses to each question, aligning similar views. Overall, this chapter gives a sample, from the authors' perspectives, of their commitment to adolescents and of the wide range of writers creating stories for young adults.

Obviously, not every author writing books, short stories, or other literature for adolescents can be included in this chapter, but these authors represent a range of those writing for young adults, from some of the pioneers in YA literature to some of the newer authors. They are authors that teachers and librarians in particular should know about since many of their books are ones that the teen survey respondents recommended. Additional resources for background on these and other YA authors are found at the end of the chapter.

### **Laurie Halse Anderson**

After writing several picture books for children, Laurie Halse Anderson launched herself into the young adult field with *Speak*, a gut-wrenching story

about a ninth-grade girl who cannot talk about a horrifying incident she experienced at a party during the summer. Her actions make her an outcast in her new high school, until she can develop the strength to speak out. This brilliant first novel has earned Anderson a long list of awards, including a Printz Honor Book Award, a National Book Award nomination, and a Golden Kite Award. *Fever 1793*, Anderson's second book for teens, shows her versatility as well as her ability to create an engaging story from historical details. Her newest work is *Catalyst* (2002). (From authors4teens.com)

### **Ann Angel**

One of the newer writers to the young adult literature field, Ann Angel is a teacher and writer of YA literature who lives in Brookfield, Wisconsin. She has written several articles for *The ALAN Review*, including "The Voices of Cultural Assimilation in Current Young Adult Novels," which appeared in the Winter 2003 issue. She is currently editing a collection of short stories by new and known authors called *Defining Beauty*. Angel is donating profits from the book to the Vermont College for Writing for Children and Young Adults program for a YA scholarship. (From the author biography following her essay in the *ALAN Review*, Winter 2003)

### **Jan Cheripko**

Among Cheripko's publications is *Imitate the Tiger*, winner of the Joan Faslter Memorial Book Award, named a New York Public Library Best Book for the Teen Age, an IRA Young Adults' Choice, a Society of School Librarians International Honor Book, and an *American Bookseller* "Pick of the Lists." He is also the author of *Rat* and *Voices of the River: Adventures on the Delaware*, a photo essay that chronicles his ten-day, two hundred-and fifteen-mile canoe journey from Hancock, New York, to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, with a fourteen-year-old boy. Cheripko teaches at The Family School, a private school for at-risk young adults and speaks at conferences throughout the country about heroes, literature, and at-risk teenagers. (From the book jacket of *Rat*)

### **Chris Crutcher**

One of a select few to receive the Margaret A. Edwards Award for lifetime achievement in writing for teenagers, Chris Crutcher has been a leading author of books for young adults since his first novel, *Running Loose*, was published in 1983. Since then, every one of his novels and short stories has been a hit with teens, teachers, and librarians. In fact, the American Library Asso-

ciation lists five of his books among the one hundred Best of the Best Books for Young Adults published during the last four decades of the twentieth century. Informed by his background as a child and family therapist, Crutcher's portrayals of teenagers dealing with very painful personal conflicts are handled with humor, sensitivity, and insights that few adults ever achieve. His writing has the power to change lives. Other titles by Crutcher include *Athletic Shorts: Six Short Stories*, *Crazy Horse Electric Game*, *Ironman*, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, *Stotan*, and *Whale Talk*. Crutcher is from Cascade, Idaho and sets most of his novels in the Idaho-eastern Washington area. (From authors4teens.com)

### **Karen Cushman**

Karen Cushman has no trouble coming up with ideas for books and no trouble sharing them with her husband. But one day, as she started to tell him about a new idea she had, he handed her paper and pencil and told her this time he wanted her to write it down. What she wrote was the outline for her first book *Catherine, Called Birdy* (Clarion 1994), a Newbery Honor Award-winner. Cushman calls herself a "late bloomer." Growing up in a working-class family in Chicago, she never put much thought into becoming a writer. Though she wrote poetry and plays as a child, Cushman didn't begin writing professionally for young adults until she was fifty.

Cushman had always been interested in history. Her research into medieval England and its culture led to both *Catherine, Called Birdy* and *The Midwife's Apprentice* (Clarion 1995), her second book and winner of the prestigious Newbery Award in 1996. Cushman says, "I grew tired of hearing about kings, princesses, generals, presidents. I wanted to know what life was like for ordinary young people in other times." In her book *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple* (Clarion 1996), she strikes a balance between rich historical detail and the engaging voice of the storyteller. Cushman's books address many of the "issues a young person is interested in—issues of identity, responsibility, limitation, and what it means to be human in this world." She holds an MA in both Human Behavior and Museum Studies and lives on Vashon Island in Seattle, Washington with her husband Philip. (From [www.eduplace.com/rdg/author/index.html](http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/author/index.html))

### **Don Gallo**

Don Gallo, with the assistance and guidance of Lynn Malloy and Beth Duford, is the originator of the website Authors4Teens.com. In the education world, Gallo is known as an authority on books for teenagers and a trainer

of English teachers. But he is also known as the editor of a number of award-winning collections of short stories for teen readers, chief among them *Sixteen*, which is considered by the American Library Association as one of the one hundred Best of the Best Books for Young Adults published during the last four decades of the twentieth century. Educator and reviewer Chris Crowe calls Gallo “the godfather of young adult short stories.” Among Gallo’s edited short story collections are *Connections: Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults* (1989), *Short Circuits: Thirteen Shocking Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults* (1992), *Join In: Multiethnic Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults* (1993), *Ultimate Sports: Short Stories by Outstanding Writers for Young Adults* (1995), *No Easy Answers: Short Stories About Teenagers Making Tough Choices* (1997), *Time Capsule: Short Stories About Teenagers Throughout the Twentieth Century* (1999), *On the Fringe* (2001), and *Destination Unexpected* (2003). (From authors4teens.com)

### **Karen Hesse**

Hesse presents herself this way in her biography included on Scholastics Authors Studies Homepage ([www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/authorstudies/authorhome.jhtml?authorID=45&collateralID=5183&displayName=Biography](http://www2.scholastic.com/teachers/authorsandbooks/authorstudies/authorhome.jhtml?authorID=45&collateralID=5183&displayName=Biography)):

While growing up in Baltimore, Maryland, I dreamed of becoming many things: an archaeologist, an ambassador, an actor, an author. In 1969, I attended Towson State College as a theater major, but transferred after two semesters to the University of Maryland, where I eventually earned a B.A. in English with double minors in Psychology and Anthropology. From the time I was ten I thought of myself as “good with words,” thanks to a perceptive and supportive fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Datnoff. Though I gave up all my other career dreams, I never gave up dreaming of publication. It took more than thirty years to see that fifth grade dream come true.

I have earned wages as a waitress, a nanny, a librarian, a personnel officer, an agricultural laborer, an advertising secretary, a typesetter, a proofreader, a mental-health-care provider, a substitute teacher, and a book reviewer. In and around the edges of all those jobs, I have written poems, stories, and books, books, books. The seed for *Out of the Dust* grew out of a picture-book idea. Presented with an early draft of the forthcoming picture book, *Come On, Rain* (1999), my writers group insisted I elaborate on why my characters wanted rain so badly. I began researching times when people desperately wanted rain and *Out of the Dust* blossomed into existence. National Public Radio is a frequent companion . . . the inspiration for *The Music of Dolphins* came from an interview I heard on “Fresh Air.”

Karen Hesse lives in Vermont with her husband and two teenage daughters. Her book *Out of the Dust* (Scholastic) was awarded the Newbery Medal for 1998; other books by Hesse include *Letters from Rifka* and *Witness*. (From [www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/bibs/hesse.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/bibs/hesse.html))

### **Norma Fox Mazer**

One of the top writers of books for young adults for the past thirty years, Norma Fox Mazer has published more than 25 novels (three of them co-authored with her husband Harry), a large number of short stories including two books of her own, edited two collections of poetry and prose, and written several articles for professional journals. Nine of her books have been designated Best Books for Young Adults by the American Library Association, two of them among the 100 Best of the Best Books for Young Adults published between 1967 and 1992. In addition, her books have won two Lewis Carroll Shelf Awards, an Edgar Award for Best Juvenile Mystery, a Newbery Honor Book award, and a nomination for the National Book Award. Mazer continues to provide teen readers with realistic, thought-provoking stories about such topics as friendship, love and sex, sexual harassment, emotional abuse, physical survival, and inter-generational relationships. Her most recent novels include *Silver* (1988), *Babyface* (1990), *Out of Control* (1993), *Missing Pieces* (1994), *When She Was Good* (1997), and *Girlhearts* (2001). (From authors4teens.com)

### **Shelley Fraser Mickle**

Shelley Fraser Mickle grew up in Arkansas and Tennessee and graduated from the University of Mississippi in 1966. She studied writing at the University of Mississippi, the Harvard Extension School, and Wellesley College. She lives in Alachua County, Florida, with her three horses, Skip, Mullet, and Precious, and her dog, Stella. She is married and the mother of two children.

For five years, Shelley Fraser Mickle has been a regular commentator for Mid-Florida Public Radio, reading humorous essays. Some of these received a Special Achievement Award by Associated Press in 1997. These essays now frequently are heard state-wide on Public Radio’s Capital Report, broadcast out of Tallahassee, and she has been the guest commentator for the University of Florida football team for the last two years.

Her humorous essays have also recently become a part of the public radio program *Recess*. In August 2000 she began reading her humorous essays on NPR’s “Morning Edition.” Her novels include *The Queen of October*, *Replac-*

ing *Dad*, and *The Turning Hour*. (From [www.shelleywickle.com/biography.htm](http://www.shelleywickle.com/biography.htm))

### Han Nolan

The novels of Han Nolan are complex as well as compelling and thought-provoking, peopled with well-drawn offbeat characters who, like so many real-life teenagers, are longing to be loved, understood, and accepted. In recognition of her writing talent, each of her novels has received several awards, among them a National Book Award for *Dancing on the Edge* and a National Book Award nomination for *Send Me Down a Miracle*. There will surely be more to come. Nolan's novels include *If I Should Die Before I Wake* (1994), *Send Me Down A Miracle* (1996), *Dancing on the Edge* (1997), *A Face in Every Window* (1999), *Born Blue* (2001), and *When We Were Saints* (2003). (From [authors4teens.com](http://authors4teens.com))

### Katherine Paterson

Katherine Womeldorf Paterson was born in Qing Jiang, Jiangsu, China in 1932. Her parents were Christian missionaries there and helped develop her deep religious faith. While living in China, she not only learned the Chinese language but also respect for people's differences, humility, and patience during times of difficulty. By the time she was fifteen, the family had moved fifteen times. Because they moved so frequently, the young Katherine sometimes felt lonely and different from the other young people her own age. She loved to read and wrote stories as a way of overcoming her loneliness, yet she also made friends whom she could not bear to leave when the time came to move again. In an interview in *Bookpage* in March of 1993, she said, "I always knew I was worth something because I had many wonderful friends who knew all my faults and failings and they still cared for me." Katherine Paterson went to Kings College in Bristol, Tennessee and graduate school in Richmond, Virginia. Her teachers encouraged her to write seriously. It took nine years before for her first book, *Sign of the Chrysanthemum*, was published in 1991. During this period, Paterson was also balancing the roles of being a busy wife and the mother of four children and recovering from an operable cancer. Her family was touched by tragedy when her son's best friend was killed by lightning. In dealing with this tragedy and her personal grief, she wrote *Bridge to Terabithia*, her first Newbery Medal winner. She credits her experiences in China and Japan and her strong biblical heritage for adding deeper dimensions to her books and for making her the person she is today.

Katherine Paterson has won many prestigious awards for her books, recently receiving the Scott O'Dell Award. Among her other awards are the Newbery Medal, the National Book Award for Children's Literature, the American Book Award, the American Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults Award, the *New York Times* Outstanding Books of the Year Award, the *School Library Journal* Best Books Award, the Children's Book Council's Children's Choice Award, the Edgar Allan Poe Award runner-up from the Mystery Writers of America, and numerous others. She was honored with the Hans Christian Anderson Award, which is given every two years, in recognition of her lifetime contributions to children's literature. (From Catherine Morris and Inez Ramsey on [www.falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/index.html](http://www.falcon.jmu.edu/~ramseyil/index.html); site now inactive)

### Gary Paulsen

Born on May 17, 1939 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Gary Paulsen is the prolific author of more than 40 books, 200 magazine articles and short stories, and several plays, primarily for young adults. Paulsen's interests in books and reading came when he was a teenager and walked into a library to escape the cold of a Minnesota winter. Once inside, and much to his surprise, the librarian offered him a library card and a book to read (*Something About the Author*, 1995 [Vol. 79, Detroit: Gale Research, 159–165]). Reading helped Paulsen cope with a difficult family situation then and remains a constant in his life today.

Since the age of 15, Paulsen has worked at many jobs in an effort to support himself: migrant worker, soldier, field engineer, truck driver, and magazine editor (Handy, 1991 ["An interview with Gary Paulsen," *The Book Report* 10, no. 1, 28–31]). Paulsen used his work as a magazine editor to learn the craft of writing. In 1966, his first book was published, *The Special War*. Using his varied life experiences, but especially those of an outdoorsman—a hunter, trapper, and two-time competitor in the Iditarod, a 1,200-mile Alaskan dogsled race—Paulsen writes about what he knows best. This knowledge comes through clearly in the descriptive details he uses, making the reader feel part of the narrative.

Much of Paulsen's work features outdoor settings showing the importance of water and woods to the harmony of nature. He often uses a coming of age theme, where a character masters the art of survival in isolation as a rite of passage to manhood (From "Learning about Gary Paulsen," [www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/paulsen.html](http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvander/paulsen.html))



### Rodman Philbrick

Most teen readers associate Rodman Philbrick with *Freak the Mighty* and the popular feature film, *The Mighty*, based on the book. But Philbrick has also written an impressive number of other novels for adults as well as young people, most of them mysteries, suspense, horror, fantasy, and science fiction. In Philbrick's books, you'll be as likely to find a vampire, a werewolf, or an alien as you will a normal human character. He's also written a graphic novel—a novel available only on the Web—and recently, a historical novel in diary form for young people. Other Philbrick novels include *The Fire Pony* (1996), *Max the Mighty* (1998), *REM World* (2000), *The Last Book in the Universe* (2000), *The Journal of Douglas Allen Deeds* (2001), and *The Young Man and the Sea* (2004). (From authors4teens.com)

### Marilyn Reynolds

Marilyn Reynolds is the author of seven young adult novels and a collection of short stories, all part of the “True-to-Life” from Hamilton High series. Her titles appear on a variety of American Library Association's “Best Books” lists and are also found on the New York Public Library's lists of “Best Books for the Teen Age.”

Drawing on decades of experience working with at-risk students in California alternative schools, Reynolds takes on tough issues that permeate the lives of many of today's teens: abuse, teen pregnancy, racism, acquaintance rape, gay/lesbian harassment and bullying, school failure, sexual abstinence, and a myriad of other sub-issues.

Reynolds's personal opinion essays have appeared in the *Los Angeles Times* and other national newspapers, such as the *Dallas Morning News*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Her work has also appeared in small literary magazines, professional journals, and anthologies.

In an attempt to broaden her students' reading possibilities, Reynolds wrote *Telling*, the story of a twelve-year-old girl who was being molested by a neighbor. Seeing the responses of her students to this book encouraged Reynolds to write *Detour for Emmy*, the story of a girl who gets pregnant at the age of fifteen. Thus the “True-to-Life from Hamilton High” series was launched—other books in the series include *If You Loved Me*, *Love Rules*, and *Too Soon for Jeff*.

After a lifetime in southern California, Reynolds and her husband, Michael, now live in northern California, near Sacramento. She continues to work with at-risk students and to solicit their help in keeping her stories

realistic and believable. (From [www.morningglorypress.com/pages/fictrite.html](http://www.morningglorypress.com/pages/fictrite.html))

### Jerry Spinelli

Jerry Spinelli is probably the only author in history whose writing career began because of a lunch bag full of chicken bones. Since the publication of the hilarious *Space Station Seventh Grade*, Jerry Spinelli has brought laughter and tears to readers of all ages with his memorable characters, chief among which are *Maniac Magee*, *Crash Coogan*, and *Stargirl*. In 1991 he received the prestigious Newbery Medal for *Maniac Magee*, and *Wrinker* was a Newbery Honor Book in 1997. Spinelli's most recent books are *Loser* (2002) and *Milkweed* (2003). (From authors4teens.com)

### Ruth White

Ruth White was born and raised in the 1940s and 1950s in and around the coal-mining town of Whitewood, Virginia. She has many fond memories from her childhood of the hills, creeks, and of family read-alouds. Before she even started school, she knew she would be a writer, but it took years before she realized that the Appalachian region would be the best source for her books. For White, attending college was a rare opportunity; a turning point in her life was attending Montreat College in North Carolina. White holds Bachelor of Arts degrees in English and Library Science. She has worked in schools in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia both as a teacher and a librarian. She currently resides in Virginia Beach, where she works as technical services librarian for the Association of Research and Enlightenment. Among her novels are *Sweet Creek Holler* (1988), *Weeping Willow* (1992), and *Belle Prater's Boy* (1996)—all of which are award winners as ALA Notable Books. (From a Farrar, Straus and Giroux author pamphlet)

### Jane Yolen

She has been called America's Hans Christian Andersen as well as a Twentieth Century Aesop. But comparisons don't do justice to Jane Yolen, whose creative output and subsequent honors are enormous. Since her first book in 1963, she has published more than 250 others. Her creativity is not restricted to just one or two genres; she has produced children's picture books, novels for middle grade readers, young adult novels, nonfiction, short stories, books for adults, and even a comic book. She can re-tell fairy tales, imagining fantastical creatures such as werewolves, vampires, witches, ghosts, unicorns, and dragons; compile and edit anthologies of stories written by colleagues;

and collaborate successfully with other writers and illustrators, especially her own three children, Heidi, Jason, and Adam. She has written biographies, mysteries, adventures, songbooks, essays, and poems.

Her work has garnered innumerable awards and honors, including two Christopher Medals, two Nebula Awards, a Caldecott Medal, a World Fantasy Award, a Golden Kite Award, a Lewis Carroll Shelf Award, several Best Book of the Year awards, a California Young Reader Medal, and the Kerlan Award. And there is more coming from this amazing author. Yolen's YA novels include *The Devil's Arithmetic* (1988), *Sister Light, Sister Dark* (1988), *White Jenna* (1989), *Dragon's Boy* (1990), *Briar Rose* (1992), *The Books of Great Alta* (1997), *One-Armed Queen* (1998), *Armageddon Summer* (1998), *Sword of the Rightful King: A Novel of King Arthur* (2003), *Dragon's Blood* (1982), *Heart's Blood* (1984), *A Sending of Dragons* (1987), *Queen's Own Fool* (2000), and *Girl in a Cage* (2002). (From authors4.teens.com)

### Author Responses to Four Questions

In response to the following four questions, these outstanding writers share insights to their writings as well as reveal their commitment to young adults.

1. How did you begin writing for young adults? (In their responses to this question, many of the authors talk about how they began writing specific novels.)
2. What kind of writing do you do and how are these works helpful to adolescents?
3. Why is writing for young adults important?
4. What books would you suggest to young adult readers? Why? What books have influenced you most in life? Why?

#### Response to Question 1: "How Did You Begin Writing for Young Adults?"

Laurie Halse Anderson, the author of *Speak*, a book that many teens recommend, explains that the book started as a bad dream. "Literally, I had a nightmare about a weeping young girl and I wrote about her to find out why she was crying." Anderson didn't plan to write about date rape, being an outcast, or the hostile forces that can be part of the high school culture, but *Speak* addresses all of these, and Melinda is someone to whom teens can relate. Readers have told Anderson that *Speak* is "honest," and for Anderson, this is "the greatest thing anyone can tell an author."

In her second book, *Fever 1793*, Anderson researched the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1793 that ravaged Philadelphia. In researching the book, she read diaries and letters by teenage girls of the Federalist period and discovered that they had conflicts similar to what young women today experience: strife with parents and the desire to become an adult, but not too quickly. She provides a good reason for today's young adults to read historical fiction: the conflicts have not changed even though other cultural factors have.

Anderson wrote *Catalyst* from what she considered a "foreign point of view"—that of a teen who loves science and math. She focused on this subject after seeing so many teens "sacrifice their high school years on the altar of ambition," taking advanced courses and participating in multiple extracurricular activities to get into "the right school." So often these teens "burn out" in the mistaken hope they have to be successful and see themselves as failures for years after. "It's criminal and it made me angry. And when I get angry, I write" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Karen Hesse (*Out of the Dust, Witness*, and others) remembers *A Time of Angels* because this book relates to the themes of healing and support. In 1994 when a good friend of Hesse's was diagnosed with a brain tumor, Hesse asked how she could help. The friend asked to be surrounded by angels, and Hesse began writing one angel piece after another: poems, vignettes, character studies, short stories—"all the while keeping my friend at the center of my thoughts." Her friend recovered, and Hesse completely forgot about her file of angel writings. Her daughters found the file and convinced their mother to publish; one particular piece, "A Gift for the Angel," eventually became a longer work, *A Time of Angels* (e-mail to Mary Warner).

For several authors, writing for adolescents came from teaching or working with teens. Jan Cheripko knew in ninth grade, when his teacher at Valley Central High School in Montgomery, New York, told him that he had talent as a writer, that he would write. In 1990, after several years of working on newspapers, Cheripko began as an assistant editor for the magazine *Highlights for Children*. *Highlights* magazine was launching Boyds Mills Press, a children's book publishing company. While working with Boyds Mills, Cheripko began teaching at the Family Foundation School, a private institution for kids in trouble. That experience and his connections in the publishing world led to his first novel, *Voices of the River: Adventures on the Delaware*. He has since written *Imitate the Tiger*, a semiautobiographical story about a high school football player who has a drinking problem, and *Rat*, about a basketball manager who has to choose between telling the truth and keeping a friend.

Marilyn Reynolds (True-to-Life from Hamilton High series) worked for

over 25 years with at-risk high school students and, because she was with teens all day, did not really want to spend weekends and evenings writing about them. The nagging of Gloria Miklowitz, a prolific YA writer who taught Reynolds in a “writing for publication” course, eventually convinced Reynolds to try a novel. Over time, Reynolds had realized the best gift she could give her students at Century High School was the “gift of a reading habit.” She also knew that students need the “right book for them”—other than works like *The Outsiders*, *Go Ask Alice*, *Down These Mean Streets*, and *The Cross and the Switchblade*, where were student readers to go to find books with which at-risk teens could connect? Reynolds acknowledges it was “more out of desperation than ambition” that she tried her hand at writing (e-mail to Mary Warner).

In 1989, after more publisher rejections than she might have tolerated, Reynolds published *Telling*, the story of a 12-year-old girl who is being molested by a neighbor. While waiting for a publisher to accept the book, she had a manuscript copy in her classroom and watched her students actually coming to school early so they could get their turn at reading the manuscript. Their interest was her motivation; Reynolds went on to address the need for realistic novels about teen pregnancy. *Detour for Emmy* and *Too Soon for Jeff* address the challenges of teen pregnancy from female and male perspectives, respectively.

Another author who began writing for adolescents while she was teaching high school is Ann Angel. Angel, like many other writers who come to be associated with YA literature, didn’t begin writing for publication with this age group in mind until a few years ago. She began writing for teens, though, when she realized that this was the age of characters to whom she was most drawn: “I love the irony, the idealism and the immediacy of the young adult perspective” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Author Jerry Spinelli (*Stargirl*, *Wringer*, *Maniac Magee*, and other books) maintains, “I don’t write for kids; I write about kids.” (Spinelli’s distinction is well taken; after all, the best answer I can give to what I do is that I teach young adults, not just that I teach English.) Spinelli, like a number of other writers, has been caught in the publishers’ quandary about where to “put” certain books. He continues to simply write his stories, “not with kid readers in mind, or adults for that matter.” He likes to “interview [my] idea and ask it how it wants to be written and [I] go ahead and do it and let all that stuff about reading levels take care of itself” (e-mail to Mary Warner). *Space Station Seventh Grade*, originally titled *Stuff*, was “shopped around to adult publishers by my agent, who was told adults wouldn’t read this book about a 13-

year-old kid.” When the agent showed the manuscript to those working with juvenile books, “that’s where it—and I—landed.” Spinelli believes though, that possibly because he did not have kid readers in mind as he wrote, the book is “a fairly honest portrayal of adolescents (some of them, anyway); and the fact that it’s still in print over 20 years later suggests that this remains a story in which they can see something of themselves” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Another author who began writing, as he says, “for kids” is Gary Paulsen. Paulsen writes, “I began writing for young people because I believe it is artistically fruitless to write for adults. They have car payments and divorces and other worries, all of which takes them away from art. Kids are different—they’re open to new experiences and they throw themselves wholeheartedly into the act of reading a book if you capture their attention quickly. Young people take the books so personally—I’ve gotten letters chewing me out for things my characters did or situations I put them in. The letter writers wanted—needed—to let me know that, as far as they were concerned, I’d blown it. ‘You don’t know shit about football, Mr. Paulsen,’ was one deeply felt letter I received years ago when I was writing a series of sports books” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

For Rodman Philbrick (*Freak the Mighty*, *Max the Mighty*, and others), writing for young readers began very much by accident. After publishing more than dozen adult mysteries and suspense novels, he stumbled on a story “close to home.” A friend of the Philbricks had a boy with Morquio syndrome; he was a very bright, imaginative kid with an immense vocabulary. A year or so after the boy died in a tragic accident, Philbrick realized he could use parts of the boy’s personality, as well as his physical self, to inspire a fictional character. The real boy had a large friend who sometimes carried him around on his shoulders. Though Philbrick didn’t meet the friend until after he wrote the book, he used the image of the large boy to create Max, the shy, lumbering boy who narrates the story. At first, Philbrick wasn’t sure who the audience would be for this story, but as he wrote, he felt comfortable with having Max talk to kids his own age. Because the voice of Max came so naturally for Philbrick, he continues to write for younger readers as well as for adults (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Norma Fox Mazer (*When She Was Good*; *Girlhearts*; *Good Night, Maman*; and others) also did not set out to write for young adults. One of the first short stories she wrote (and subsequently sold to a teen magazine) arose from a painful adolescent memory, so when Mazer came to the point of writing a novel, doing so from the viewpoint of a young person seemed natural. “It was



natural. I had an open channel to and vivid memory of my own adolescence” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Like Mazer, who began writing short stories, Don Gallo (*Sixteen* and other short story anthologies) had worked primarily on nonfiction for young adults in the form of reading and literature textbooks and workbook lessons. In the early 1980s, Gallo realized that teens were reading novels by people like Richard Peck, M. E. Kerr, Robert Lipsyte, Norma Fox Mazer, Robert Cormier, and Walter Dean Myers, but that only a handful of YA authors had written short stories. He talked to a publisher about the need for short stories featuring teenagers and collaborated with authors about compiling an anthology. The result was *Sixteen*; Gallo has truly pioneered the genre of short stories for adolescents. Given the number of teens who are not open to reading novels or other full-length works, Gallo’s contribution is significant.

Chris Crutcher (*The Crazy Horse Electric Game*, *Ironman*, *Staying Fat for Sarah Byrnes*, and numerous other novels) had been working with “hard-time kids” for ten years in an Oakland, California, dropout school, and he was involved with “hard-time families” as a therapist in child abuse and neglect when he began to write novels. Crutcher didn’t know he was writing for “young adults,” a term he explains bothers him. “If I am an adult and I am young I’m at least eighteen years old, by definition. Also it [young adult] is a limiting term.” He did know that stories about teenagers came fast and furious to him; most of his books include stories that were inspired by the stories he heard, though he had to change names and mix-and-match for purposes of confidentiality and the storytelling art. Crutcher also remembers his own adolescence well and finds “it’s an easy place to go for stories” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Like Chris Crutcher, Ruth White (*Belle Prater’s Boy*, *Weeping Willow*, and others) remembered her own adolescence. “I think I chose to write young adult literature because adolescence was a very difficult time for me.” White feels her writing has always been catharsis. She also learned to know this age group when she taught seventh- and eighth-grade language arts. These students are her favorite age group because they are so lively and interested in everything. “They have not yet become skeptical, but they are old enough to think for themselves. And they have such a wonderful sense of humor” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

For Han Nolan (*If I Should Die Before I Wake*, *Dancing on the Edge*, *A Face in the Window*, and others), writing for young adults just happened naturally. When she began writing *If I Should Die Before I Wake*, she saw a teenager as her protagonist. “I guess that [a teenage protagonist] is because part of the

reason I wrote the book was in response to an article I had read about young Neo-Nazis” (e-mail to Mary Warner). She felt that telling the story through the eyes of Hilary and Chana was the best way to tell it.

Katherine Paterson (*Jacob Have I Loved*, *Bridge to Terabithia*, *The Great Gilly Hopkins*) was asked by the Presbyterian Church to write a book for fifth and sixth graders as part of a special curriculum. After she wrote this book, she decided to try writing other things. Seven years and many rejections later, her first novel, *The Sign of the Chrysanthemum* was published. Paterson had written the first version of this novel chapter by chapter in a county adult education class, Writing for Children.

Another author who began writing for younger readers first is Jane Yolen (*The Devil’s Arithmetic*, *Briar Rose*, *Children of the Wolf*). Yolen wrote a dozen or so books for younger children, and claims she began writing for young adults “when I finally had something I wanted to write about for teens” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Shelley Fraser Mickle’s (*Queen of October*, *The Turning Hour*, and others) four published books are adult novels that have also found an audience with young adults. She chooses young adults or children as her protagonists because of her childhood. At age six, Mickle contracted polio, and she spent much of her childhood in braces, wheelchairs, and hospitals. “Such an event quickly makes a young child old,” Mickle commented, “There is something in me that was frozen at that point of time.” Mickle is fascinated with children’s minds discovering that they exist in a world they cannot control. She sees this happening to children frequently as families break up in divorce and is drawn to trying to express for children and young adults this baffling and disconcerting experience of “being in a world that seems to be spinning off into directions where no maps exist” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Karen Cushman (*Catherine, Called Birdy*; *The Midwife’s Apprentice*; *Matilda Bone*; and others) wrote all the time as a child, but never thought about being a writer since she knew no one who wrote and “certainly no adult who wrote for a living.” For forty years she made up stories in her head but didn’t write them down. She’d frequently tell these stories to her husband; finally, when she told him in the late 1980s that she had a great idea for a book, he refused to listen and told her, “Don’t tell me. Write it down and I will read it.” Cushman’s books often build on history. She explains that *Catherine, Called Birdy* grew from her long-standing interest in children and history. She had often thought about what life might have been like for children in the past when they had no power and little value, especially girl children. Cushman wanted to tell the story of a girl from long ago who was



at odds with her family and her times, who didn't want to do what was expected of her, who thought she had no choices and no options. "I wanted to know what happened to that girl and the only way I could find out was to make it up. Three years later the story turned into *Catherine, Called Birdy*" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Madeleine L'Engle (*A Wind in the Door*, *The Swiftly Tilting Planet*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, and others), whose health prohibited her from answering the author survey, still provides some good answers as to why writing for young adults is important. In a special introduction by the author to the commemorative edition of *An Acceptable Time*, L'Engle explains that she writes books because she's still asking big questions about time, the future, and the mysteries of the universe. She understands that these questions and others have no finite answers, but "the questions themselves are important" (L'Engle 1997). L'Engle advises readers, "Don't stop asking, and don't let anybody tell you the questions aren't worth it. They are" (L'Engle 1997, L'Engle 2000). She also affirms why books and other literature can be a source of meaning: "Story always tells us more than the mere words, and that is why we love to write it, and to read it" (L'Engle 2000).

Another seminal author for young adults is the late Robert Cormier (*The Chocolate War*, *After the First Death*, *I am the Cheese*, and numerous others). Cormier shared several ideas about writing for teenagers in an interview with Judith Bugniatet, which was first published in the *ALAN Review* in winter 1985. Bugniatet told Cormier that his books were cathartic for her and that she couldn't read them without crying; she wondered how boys responded to Cormier's books.

Boys won't admit to me that they cried, but when I go out to speak to them, they will say things like, "That's exactly the way we feel." The things that upset some adults are not the things that upset kids. They're very sophisticated, today's youth, but they're still kids. They have questions about things, like masturbation, and one boy told me that when he read about that in *The Chocolate War*, and it was so casually referred to, it helped him because he had worried about what was wrong with him. It made him feel that he wasn't strange. (Bugniatet 1999, 9)

Cormier and the other writers express similar ideas; they write for young adults because adolescence is a time of multiple levels of experience and because young adults need the reassurance of those who have gone through what these teens are experiencing.

### Response to Question 2: "What Kind of Writing Do You Do?"

Several of the authors have similar perspectives about why their works are helpful for young adults. Han Nolan, like many of the other writers, doesn't set out to write a story thinking what lessons she can teach adolescents of today. Nolan wrote, "I just have a story to tell and because I enjoy writing about young people and exploring their inner lives, my books end up being about various young people and their struggles to be noticed, loved and accepted by the people who are supposed to care for them as well as other people in their lives" (e-mail to Mary Warner). Among the themes of Nolan's works are love, religion, tolerance, the search for self, and self-acceptance. She admits that her books don't always have the happiest endings, but believes her stories can give readers hope as they either recognize they are not alone in their feelings, or read about the lives of people quite different from themselves and realize that they have it pretty good. Nolan has received "some wonderful letters from young people and adults as well who tell me that this is true for them" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Some young people have told Nolan that they have changed the way they treat people in their schools. "One young person was so connected to one of my characters he felt he just had to meet her and talk to her because he knew she would understand what he had been through in his life" (e-mail to Mary Warner). Nolan's books have been used in schools and also by psychologists, though Nolan is not sure how psychologists have used the books. "I think my books, like many YA books, give young people a place and a time to think about their lives" (e-mail to Mary Warner). The books give teens a safe place to explore their beliefs about God, their thoughts about their relationships with their families and friends, and to question who they are and who they are becoming.

Like Han Nolan, Marilyn Reynolds wants teens to know that they are not alone. She writes books that deal with difficult issues that teens often are faced with—teen pregnancy, acquaintance rape, partner abuse, school failure, abstinence, gender identification. She believes her books offer a perspective that is sometimes hard to come by in the midst of crises. "They offer hope" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

"I take a universal issue, such as child abuse or the loss of a parent, and set it a time and place which is most familiar to me, which, of course, is the 1950s in Virginia, when I was an adolescent myself," says Ruth White. White asserts that a story is more believable if the setting is authentic; if the themes are universal, then the reader can relate to any setting. She aims for

authenticity and believability as the two basic characteristics of her books and hopes “young people of the [twenty-first] century can find themselves somewhere in [my] books” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Shelley Fraser Mickle follows on the same themes as Ruth White. “We all seek at early ages, beliefs or theories that we can hold onto in the face of diversity. Characters in my books come to an acceptance of the unexpected events in their lives and learn to persevere” (e-mail to Mary Warner). In *The Queen of October*, Mickle’s main character, a 13-year-old girl, learns that her parents’ divorce is not something she is responsible for and that love between parent and child does not die, though the love between parents may no longer exist. In *Replacing Dad*, Drew, a 15-year-old boy, learns that his mother’s happiness affects his life but that he is not responsible for her happiness. He develops strengths and his own serenity apart from his family and their needs, even as he realizes that his father can never be replaced and that his family is a source of strength for him; he grows from these experiences of adversity.

Mickle’s *The Turning Hour* offers direct coping skills for young adults to handle despair. She sees *The Turning Hour* as her most important book in that it deals with a 17-year-old young woman’s recovery from a suicide attempt. It also expresses her mother’s anguish and concerns through her own viewpoint. Mickle asserts, “The consequences to the drastic decision to commit suicide cannot be too graphic; we must as members of a nation that frequently suffers from media intoxication, never romanticize the act of teen suicide. And we must, through our opportunities to discuss the issue, prevent it from ever being seen as an act of honor” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Norma Fox Mazer writes, as does Shelley Fraser Mickle, fiction that is almost always family centered, almost always about relationships, almost always set in our present world with characters she hopes are both readily identifiable and deep enough to engage readers on more than a superficial level. Mazer is another author who affirms that she does not write with the intention of being helpful to adolescents. “I write because writing is like breath to me—it’s something I must do to feel wholly alive, so the basic impulse to write is selfish. It’s for me” (e-mail to Mary Warner). When she writes a novel, she’s consumed by the challenge and joy and difficulty and thrill of creating a world and the characters that inhabit that world.

Mazer is completely attached, as both writer and reader, to narrative, to story, to answering the question “And then what happened?” Inevitably, she explains, story or events alone cannot sustain a novel; rather the novel must have meaning and must answer questions: Why this story? Why these charac-

ters? In answering those questions during the writing and through the actions of the characters, ideas, values, and moral precepts are conveyed. “If my novels provide more than entertainment to young readers, if they open windows into other lives, if they provoke readers to think, if they deliver an emotional experience—if they do any of the above, then I’m well rewarded” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Most of Jerry Spinelli’s work is contemporary fiction. “To the extent that readers can see themselves in the stories, is, I think, a good thing in and of itself. To find their lives portrayed, dramatized—heck, enshrined—in *books* is to give them a legitimacy, an affirmation to the quotidian in their days that might not be available elsewhere” (e-mail to Mary Warner). Spinelli goes on to explain that beyond the simple, self-contained value of seeing one’s life reflected in fiction, there are, of course, “lessons.” He admits he tries not to think of a lesson that way, though, “lest they trump the story and the thing becomes tract or sermon instead of book” (e-mail to Mary Warner). So readers of *Wringer* or *Stargirl* might find encouragement to be true to themselves. They might learn in *Maniac Magee* to keep color a matter of skin, not heart; in *Crash*, about the perils of bullying; or in *Loser*, to take the real measure of winning and losing.

Gary Paulsen found that all of the sequels to *Hatchet*—*The River*, *Brian’s Winter*, *Brian’s Return*, and *Brian’s Hunt*—were written as direct responses to letters kids had written to him about Brian. “I was done with his story after *Hatchet* and never thought I’d revisit that character. But kids wanted to know what happened to him after he came back from such a life-altering experience—so I wrote *The River*. Then I got letters chiding me for getting Brian out of the brush before as they put it, ‘the going got really rough in the winter,’ so I had to amend the ending of the original story to set up *Brian’s Winter*. Then the letters came asking how after having learned so much about the wilderness and being self-sufficient, he could ever ‘fit back in’ to regular life. Since this has been a problem I have in my own life—I’m never comfortable when I’m not in the woods or on a dogsled or at sea—I wrote *Brian’s Return*. And yet still more letters about Brian—did he have any friends, did he miss talking to anyone, was he ever lonely—and so I gave him the best friend anyone could ever have, a dog in *Brian’s Hunt*” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Don Gallo comments that although anyone can enjoy and benefit from discussing short stories, it’s the reluctant readers—mainly boys—who seem to like them most. He knows that if you ask most avid female readers about short stories, they are less than enthusiastic because these readers want the

work to last, to extend the pleasure. But ask a reluctant male teenager the same question and the answer will more likely be that they like the short stories because they're short!

Good short stories though, Gallo explains, are no different from good novels in that their value is in the quality of the story and the realness of the characters. Among the advantages of short stories are the time in which they can be read; they take far less time than novels and that is helpful for readers with short attention spans. Short stories give readers enough of the writing style of an author, and, as opposed to novels which don't allow readers to skip sections if they are going to comprehend the total work, a short story can be skipped and readers can go on to another one that interests them more. "It's a buffet of choices as opposed to a single entrée. And in anthologies like mine that include a variety of authors, the choices are even more varied than if the stories were all written by the same author" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Several authors write historical fiction and see that it offers some particular gifts to young adult readers. Jane Yolen writes four kinds of books for teens—historical novels, fantasy/science fiction, short story collections, and realistic novels, though she writes fewer of the last kind. "Since I write to tell a story, not to be helpful for kids, I leave the understanding of that [how the books are helpful to young adults] to the critics and social workers" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Katherine Paterson started out writing historical fiction and has written seven volumes in this genre. Three of them are set in feudal Japan (written probably out of her homesickness for Japan) and one is set in nineteenth-century China (the country of her birth); these books explore what happens when in the pursuit of a righteous cause, people use unrighteous means. The remaining three of her historical novels are set in nineteenth-century Vermont—a way for Paterson to learn about her adopted home. Her seven contemporary novels each have their own history, but "I think all of them are searches for an answer to a question that troubled me" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

"I write historical fiction and I love to write historical fiction" is Karen Cushman's answer to what kind of writing she does. For Cushman, a historical novel is a realistic story set in the past; a story in which imagination comes to the aid of facts; a story that answers not only "what happened," but also "what were they like." She believes the most important attribute of a historical novel is that it tells a story that could not have possibly happened

in any other place or time, a story that results from the combination of character and circumstances.

Cushman believes that young readers benefit from historical fiction because it can give them a feeling for the living past by illustrating the continuity of life; it also gives readers a sense of history and their place in it. Historical fiction allows a glimpse of the lives of ordinary people who are like us in many ways, and thus it increases our sensitivity and understanding. "I'd hope my novels, although historical, speak to today's young people who may not be suffering from the feudal system or arranged marriages, but who still feel like Birdy, that they have few options, few choices, and little power" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Some issues cross time and place—issues of identity, responsibility, change and becoming, and what it means to be human in this world. Again, though, Cushman, like other authors, doesn't write "issue books" or books that impart specific ideas. She tells stories and hopes that readers will see themselves in the books and situations and get their own ideas. "Still I must admit I would like my readers to come away believing in the value of being yourself, against all odds; of independence, compassion, and compromise; of the necessity and possibility of remaking the world" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Quoting historical novelist Leon Garfield, Cushman comments, "If the young discover that in the past we have been governed, led, abused, and slaughtered by fools and knaves, then perhaps they will look about them and see that matters have not greatly changed, and possibly they will do so before they vote." This is why historical fiction is helpful for adolescents.

Laurie Halse Anderson wants her readers to stay up late in order to find out what happens next in her books. Readers have told Anderson that *Speak* encouraged them to speak out about sexual assaults. Some have been raped by boyfriends; others have been sexually harassed for years. One girl was gang-raped at a party by classmates she had to sit next to every day. Boys have written about being sexually abused by neighbors, or an uncle, or a babysitter. "There is so much hidden sexual assault and abuse in our country. Some kids say the book helped them find the courage to speak up about other issues in their life. Boys tell me it helped them understand the impact of rape, which many of them never took seriously before. Some of my favorite letters are the ones in which the writer reports she now looks at the outcasts in her school differently, and now she says hello and sits with them at lunch" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

*Catalyst*, Anderson's book about the stress in academics, has not been out



that long, but the early mail Anderson has received has been from high-achieving kids who are exhausted by the effort of appearing perfect all the time. “I guess that for some readers, my books provide a lens through which [they] can look at themselves a little differently. I have enormous respect for these readers. They have the courage to grow and change” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Chris Crutcher describes his works as novels and short stories about coming of age in America. Crutcher sees these books and works like these by many other wonderful authors as helpful in that they supply characters with whom readers can find intimacy, as well as information about responding to hard times that many readers might not have imagined on their own.

Ann Angel writes about themes of faith and hope, though she explains this isn’t in a religious sense so much as in a sense of transcending daily existence and believing in a power beyond humanity. In “Pink Gun,” she wrote about relationship abuse; in *Beauty*, a collection of short stories by new and known writers, she wrote about the topic of beauty; in “Bella’s Spirit Guide,” she has ghosts who come back to help their siblings; and in “Moon Daughter,” she writes of a reluctant healer who isn’t sure where his ability came from. Angel is currently writing a novel about a girl who leaves her baby in the garbage, thinking it’s dead. She is also editing a collection of short stories that deal with nontraditional perspectives of beauty in order to give young adults a starting place to consider that beauty isn’t necessarily what our culture defines as beautiful. “All of these stories I hope transcend daily lives and help teens think through their own choices and beliefs” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Regarding how her books can be helpful to young adults, Karen Hesse comments that this is difficult to answer since each reader takes what he or she is ready to take from a book. Her sense is that adolescents might read her books and have a range of possible responses. For some, truth will resonate; for others, the book may be a vehicle to help them navigate through troubled times; for still others, the book may lead them to a path for working through life’s challenges; or perhaps for some readers, there will be no immediate response, but in a year the reader may be ready to embrace the book and grow with the protagonist.

Hesse suggests that it’s possible to read *The Music of Dolphins* on a superficial level, but “it takes a maturing individual to comprehend the questions about humanity raised in the story” (e-mail to Mary Warner). A 10-year-old reader might enjoy *The Music of Dolphins* as a fast-paced story about a girl

who lives with dolphins; five years later, the reader will be able to use his or her emerging understanding of alienation to explore identity issues.

As far as the type of books Karen Hesse writes, she explains that she enjoys experimenting with form and content. Finding the perfect way to express the story through an organic form challenges and excites her. “I don’t set out to write a novel in an unconventional fashion. I simply try to tell the story as it might best be told, resulting at times, in an unusual form” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Jan Cheripko’s primary writing arena is young adult fiction, though he also enjoys nonfiction writing, such as biography. Like many other authors, he doesn’t think about writing to a specific audience; he is simply writing a story. His protagonists tend to be teens because they are the focus of his work as a high school teacher. Cheripko doesn’t know to what degree his writings are useful. He does know it’s rewarding to have young people tell him his books have meant a great deal to them. “I recall one boy in Queens, New York, telling me that he had never read a book in his life, but he read mine and it was his story” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

### Response to Question 3: “Why Is Writing for Young Adults Important?”

Having shared how they began writing for young adults, the writers get to the essentials when they respond to why writing for young adults is important. Katherine Paterson thinks that young people are searching for answers in a very troubling world. “I seem to be asking some of those same questions—I’m not so much giving answers as presenting a story which is my own search.” Society, Paterson goes on to say, is happy to give youth answers; in fact, “our culture is terrified that kids might think for themselves and not buy what’s being packaged” (e-mail to Mary Warner). Stories allow readers to find their own answers or lessons.

Jane Yolen’s comments follow the theme of Paterson’s. Yolen thinks reading helps kids of all ages come to terms with the chaos that is the world. “It gives them some control over the pacing with which they take in that information; it gives them time to ‘take the cup of borrowed courage’ on whatever journeys they find themselves” (e-mail to Mary Warner). Building on the journey motif, Ann Angel suggests, “Young adults are at a point in their lives where they’ve often secretly crossed into adult behaviors, but have no map to maturity in dealing with some of the adult choices they’ve made” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

“Because young adults are important, extremely important,” is Laurie Halse Anderson’s answer to Question 3. She points out that we value chil-



dren in our culture, but it seems the only thing teenagers are valued for is their money. They are viewed as an “important demographic” (e-mail to Mary Warner). At the age when they most need adult patience and understanding, teenagers are more often the object of greed or fear or disgust. Adolescence is marked by the loss of innocence. Teenagers need books, stories that will help them understand what they are leaving and what they are walking toward. They are filled with confusion and looking for understanding and (though loath to admit it) guidance. Books can provide this understanding and guidance.

“I don’t know that I ever write with the idea of being ‘helpful’ to adolescents,” Gary Paulsen comments. “At least in my case, reading saved my life. I was a terrible student, hated school, failed the ninth grade, and a librarian I didn’t even know gave me a library card and then handed me a book. That one woman helped me to find a place where it didn’t hurt, a place where I fit in, a place where I belonged—the pages of a book. She saved me, she really did. Everything I am and everything I’ve become, I owe to her. I know what books can do for young people firsthand—and maybe that’s why I write for them—to help them find the same safe place that I discovered” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Paulsen suggests, “Writing for young adults is vitally important because they have to be told the truth. I will never understand why anyone would want to keep a book from a child. Young people can learn how to deal with ugly or dangerous situations or controversial subjects or rough language or ideas and values that differ from the ones they’re being raised with at home through the pages of a book. Books can provide a safe harbor for kids to begin learning about the world, about people and situations they may never face or will have to deal with eventually. Books and the discussions they raise can serve as sort of a dress rehearsal, if you will—a place to begin to experiment with new ideas and look at life from a different point of view. I believe that exposure equals education. We can’t protect our kids from harsh realities forever and books provide a forum for discussion and debate and learning and tolerance and understanding” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Jan Cheripko sees his ability to write as a gift that he must use to the best of his ability. “Much has been given to me freely in my life. If my words can help young people realize that they, too, have been given much and that they have an obligation to give back, then I will have been successful” (e-mail to Mary Warner). Ironically, as Cheripko has worked closely with hundreds of troubled teens for almost two decades, he knows that the very happiness many teens seek in drugs, alcohol, sex, violence, or food can only be found in giving of themselves to their universe around them.

“Writing for young adults is important because they themselves are important,” Han Nolan responds. Adolescence is the time in people’s lives when they’re especially open to new ideas, to exploring who they are and who they want to become. “It’s a time when so many of us wake up to the world around us for the first time and we’re so greatly influenced by what we see in that world, and what we think about the things we see” (e-mail to Mary Warner). For Nolan the question is “what do we want to fill young people’s heads with because whatever it is, it will greatly impact the rest of their lives.” That means for her that she has a responsibility to her audience to treat them with respect, not talk down to them or try to imitate them, but try to understand them and speak to them from this place of understanding.

Norma Fox Mazer affirms Nolan’s view. Mazer comments, “Writing for any group of people is important, but young adults are so vulnerable, so swept by emotional and physical change, so suffused with emotion and questions and doubts that writing for them does seem to carry an extra weight of responsibility and meaning” (e-mail to Mary Warner). Ruth White concurs: “Adults often forget how hard it was to be part child and part grown-up. As writers, we need to make an effort to remember those years, and to write about them, in order to show the adolescent he/she is not alone, the confusion will end, and there is much to laugh about.” White also hopes that teens will learn to laugh at themselves, as we all should (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Karen Cushman simply believes in the value of writing for young people. She notes that she isn’t a children’s author until she “gets good enough or old enough to write for adults.” She’s committed to writing for adolescents because “young people are not only what they eat and hear and experience; they are also what they read. Books inform and shape our adolescents.” Books expand their horizons, give a sense of life’s possibilities, and help determine what kind of people they will become. Cushman cites Herbert Kohl who said that what is read “can help young people get beyond family troubles, neighborhood violence, stereotyping and prejudice . . . and set their imaginations free.” And Cushman says to this, “What could be more important than that?” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

Marilyn Reynolds points out that realistic representations of the teen years are not often available in mainstream books. Teens need books that reflect their lives and that offer insight into the lives of others. Jerry Spinelli’s simple comment affirms Reynolds’s viewpoint. Spinelli sees the importance of writing for young adults because “young adults become old adults” (e-mail to Mary Warner). And Don Gallo echoes a similar message: “Kids need (and want) literature that deals with people and issues important to them, written

by authors who understand their needs and interests and respect how they think and feel. Kids want to know that someone understands them” (e-mail to Mary Warner). This is precisely why Gallo works on short stories that, in contrast to many typically anthologized ones like “To Build a Fire,” “The Most Dangerous Game,” “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky,” “The Gift of the Magi,” “The Window,” or “The Necklace”—all of which have adult protagonists and are written for adults—feature teens like the readers themselves, with teen problems.

“I believe strongly in giving young adults voices, especially related to reading literary novels and discussing them,” says Shelley Fraser Mickle (e-mail to Mary Warner). Mickle has a weekly newspaper column, “Novel Conversations,” with an open invitation to readers of all ages to respond in the format of a newspaper-based book club. Communication is done through “snail mail” and e-mail. The blend of young readers’ voices with older ones is enlightening and valuable. A link to the column is located at Mickle’s web site ([www.shelleymickle.com](http://www.shelleymickle.com)).

Several authors spoke directly to the importance of reading and writing for any human being. Karen Hesse maintains that “reading gives us the opportunity to sample life, to experiment, to survive and transcend difficulties in a sort of dress rehearsal fashion, so that when we are called upon to confront the complexities of life in reality, we have models upon which to draw for support, comfort, and example.” Rod Philbrick sees that writing for young adults is important because it gives the author a chance to help instill a lifelong “need to read.” All human beings, he asserts, use stories and legends to help shape a sense of who they are in the world, but with so many other story sources available—TV, film, video games—young people do not necessarily turn to books for stories that give them meaning or purpose. That’s why Philbrick believes “it’s so important to make a story compelling, to *keep them reading*. I happen to believe that of all the story sources, the written word is best because it requires the most complete act of imagination from the reader. A book forces you to think, to use, if you will, the muscles of your brain” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

For Chris Crutcher, all storytelling is important. It provides something to relate to, other perspectives, and stimulation to the imagination. “I think [writing for young adults] is no different from any other writing” (e-mail to Mary Warner).

#### **Response to Question 4: “What Books Would You Suggest to Young Adult Readers?”**

What books do the authors encourage young adult readers to read and what influenced the authors themselves? Some of the responses can be neatly

“charted”; others include comments that add insight to their selections (see table 3.1).

Don Gallo’s answer to the books he’d suggest to young adult readers and the books that have influenced him is more descriptive and more conveniently cited in paragraph format than in a table. Gallo asserts that because everyone has different needs and different interests, it’s foolish to recommend only a handful of titles that are good reads for teens. On the other hand, “hundreds of first-rate books have been published for teens during the last 35 years, and the quality is getting better and better, especially for high school students” (e-mail to Mary Warner). He could list 50 YA titles published just in 2003 that are excellent reads for teenagers—including fantasy, historical fiction, poetry, short stories, mysteries, and realistic fiction. Some of the writings are better for seventh graders, while he’d recommend others for eleventh- and twelfth-graders; some are just for girls and others just for guys; a few are better for fantasy lovers and others would work best for high school reluctant readers. “Variety is the rule, and readers need to be allowed to choose.”

As a teenager, Gallo was not a reader, and “absolutely nothing I was required to read for school had any effect on me. The only book I valued was the *Boy Scout Handbook* because I was an outdoors kind of kid and wanted to know all about trees, birds, outdoor cooking, surviving in the woods, etc.” Halfway through college, he realized books did have an impact on him, and since then everything he has read has influenced his life in some way—“as in I am a part of all that I have met.” He doesn’t have a favorite book or author, though at the top of his favorites list are Robert Cormier, Chris Crutcher, and Laurie Halse Anderson.

Han Nolan’s responses are also more discursive. She suggests that young adults read books that entertain them, delight them, make them think, make them laugh and cry and feel every other emotion, but most importantly she suggests that they read books that turn on the lights for them. She always believed that she’d let her children read any book they wanted to read, but then she had one child who started reading books that just “brought such darkness to her world.” This child started the whole routine of dressing in black clothes, keeping her shades drawn, and writing poems about death and dying. Nolan knew that these behaviors were connected to what her daughter’s new friends were recommending that she read. “I didn’t discourage her from those books, but we went to the book store and I helped her pick out some other books that I wanted her to have especially, because they had meant so much to me and I thought they would mean a lot to her as well.”

**Table 3.1. Author Suggestions and Influences**

Name of Author	Books They Suggest to Teen Readers	Books That Influenced Them
Laurie Halse Anderson	"Some of my personal favorites include the works of Francesa Lia Block and Chris Crutcher."	"James Joyce has had a profound influence on me . . . his use of language leaves me stunned. He takes language to another level, no, to several other levels."
Ann Angel	" <i>The Shadowboxer</i> , <i>Slot Machine</i> , and <i>Freewill</i> by Chris Lynch; <i>After the Rain</i> and <i>When She Was Good</i> by Norma Fox Mazer; <i>When You Come Softly</i> , <i>I Hadn't Meant to Tell You</i> , and <i>Locomotion</i> by Jackie Woodson; <i>Speak</i> by Laurie Halse Anderson; <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> by Harper Lee; <i>Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack</i> by M. E. Kerr; <i>A Step from Heaven</i> by An Na; <i>The Buffalo Tree</i> by Adam Rapp; and so many others I can't recall the names right now."	His list starts with the Bible and includes many plays of Shakespeare; the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita; Tolkien's Ring trilogy; many books by C. S. Lewis; a somewhat unknown book called <i>The Way of the Pilgrim</i> ; <i>The Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous</i> ; Goethe's <i>Faust</i> and Dante's <i>Inferno</i> ; the works of Ernest Hemingway, Samuel Beckett, Jean Paul Sartre, and St. Augustine; biographies of John Adams, George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Winston Churchill, and Carl Jung; <i>A Study in History</i> and <i>An Historian's Approach to Religion</i> by Arnold Toynbee. He also recommends the poetry of
Jan Cheripko	These are the types of books Cheripko suggests teens <i>don't read</i> : those that are violent for violence's sake; those that pander to cheap sensuality; those that are nihilistic in tone and meaning; those that offer no hope or offer misguided hope; those that offer easy answers; those that are deceptive; those in which the authors have not discovered any real answers themselves.	

Chris Crutcher	Other than suggesting his own books for "narcissistic reasons," Crutcher says, "find the books you want to read. Check them out. Read the flap . . . look at the first chapter. If I were to mention titles, I would leave out as many good ones as I named."	e.e. cummings; William Wordsworth; Francis Thompson; Wilfred Owen; Dame Edith Sitwell; the Rosettis; Alfred, Lord Tennyson; and a host of others.  Works of Kurt Vonnegut, Pat Conroy, and Alice Walker; <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> , <i>The Things They Carried</i> . . . "Again, I leave out scores more than I name."
Karen Cushman	" <i>Slave Dancer</i> , <i>A Chance Child</i> , <i>The Diary of Anne Frank</i> , <i>The Great Gilly Hopkins</i> , <i>Joey Pigza Swallowed the Key</i> , <i>Night</i> by Elie Wiesel; anything by Rosemary Sutcliffe or Mary Renault; early Kurt Vonnegut; <i>Mad</i> magazine; the graphic novel <i>Maus</i> ; Russell Hoban's <i>How Tom Beat Captain Najork and His Hired Sportsmen</i> . Katherine Paterson said it better than I can when she wrote, 'It is not enough to simply teach children to read; we have to give them something worth reading, something that will stretch their imaginations—something that will help them make sense of their own lives and encourage them to reach out to people whose lives are quite different from their own.'"	These are books Cushman read in her adolescent years: <i>Forever Amber</i> , <i>Strawberry Girl</i> , <i>Cotton in My Sack</i> —these were the first works of historical fiction she read, and they resulted in the passion that remains to this day. She also recommends <i>Microbe Hunters</i> and <i>Triumph over Pain</i> (about medical matters—some of which appear in her books today); <i>Missing May</i> ; and <i>Sarah, Plain and Tall</i> .
Karen Hesse	"I would not suggest individual titles. What I would suggest is a well-read mentor, for example, a dedicated librarian who is familiar with a wide range of literature who can hand pick a bibliography of must-reads, tailored for individual readers."	"The book that most profoundly influenced my young adult years is <i>Hiroshima</i> by John Hersey."

(continues)

**Table 3.1. Continued**

Name of Author	Books They Suggest to Teen Readers	Books That Influenced Them
Norma Fox Mazer	"Some of the most wonderful novels for young adults are being written today. Recent favorites include <i>Many Stones</i> by Carolyn Coman; <i>One Step to Heaven</i> by An Na; <i>Feed</i> by Tobin Anderson; <i>Miracle's Boys</i> by Jackie Woodson; <i>Kissing Kate</i> by Lauren Myracle; and <i>French Kiss</i> by Adam Bagdasarian."	"No particular book, but reading itself has influenced me deeply. Reading remains one of my greatest pleasures. I cannot pass a day without reading. And I am eternally grateful that I can do for readers what other writers have done for me for so many years—provide me with stories, with insight, with entrée to worlds and people and lives I would otherwise never know."
Shelley F. Mickle	"James Agee's <i>A Death in the Family</i> is one of the most beautiful classics written in America; <i>Jim the Boy</i> by Tony Earley is suitable for anyone age 11 to 97."	"I am particularly fond of <i>An American Childhood</i> by Annie Dillard; books that influenced me while I was growing up were some of the childhood standards, mainly <i>Little Women</i> ; <i>A Member of the Wedding</i> and <i>The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter</i> by Carson McCullers are as true and magnificent today as in the years when they were published."
Katherine Paterson	"There are so many good books; there have to be. Readers are very different and the same book will not fit every reader. I suggest readers ask their librarians as well as their friends for titles. Someone who knows you is much more likely to know what book would be great for you. I am a product of all I have read and I have read a lot."	"Two books I read as a young adult continue to matter to me: <i>The Yearling</i> and <i>Cry the Beloved Country</i> ; I love Endo's <i>Silence</i> ; I also love Dickens—what a great storyteller; Tolstoy, Undset, Jane Austen, and George Eliot among the classics. Robertson Davies, Anita Desai, Ann Patchett are contemporary novelists I especially like. As for poets, my favorite is Gerard Manley Hopkins. I also love Emily Dickinson and modern poets David Whyte, Mary Oliver, and A. R. Ammons. I was raised on and still get my sustenance from the Bible."

Gary Paulsen	"I always tell kids to read like a wolf eats. Read anything, read everything, read all the time. Read what they tell you to read, read what they tell you not to read. Just read. Comic books and graphic novels, newspapers and magazines, nonfiction and fiction, cereal boxes and sweepstakes entry forms—everything, anything. I read every night before I go to sleep. I'm always reading new things and I'll reread old books, too."	"I think I've read some of Dickens' books 12 times and I learn something new each time."
Rod Philbrick		"The book that probably has made the most lasting impression on me is <i>Huckleberry Finn</i> . By the time I was 15, I'd read everything Twain had written—at least what was readily available, including some of his posthumously published stuff."
Marilyn Reynolds	"I suggest books that hold their interest, that connect in one way or another, the book they can barely put down because that book will reach them on a deep level."	"It's impossible to choose a few books that have influenced me; there are so many. I love the work of Robertson Davies, Anne Tyler, William Styron, Alice Walker, Margaret Atwood, early Rita Mae Brown (forget the cat detectives!), Kazuo Ishiguro, Jane Hamilton, Gail Godwin, Virginia Woolf, Charles Dickens, etc., etc. In YA, I particularly admire Chris Crutcher, M. E. Kerr, Judy Blume (early), Gloria Miklowitz, Richard Peck, etc."
Jerry Spinelli	"I am a believer in reading the best of contemporary literature as opposed to stilted 'classics.' In place of <i>Silas Marner</i> , which I had to read, I would suggest to any kid to read <i>The Chocolate</i>	

(continues)



**Table 3.1. Continued**

Name of Author	Books They Suggest to Teen Readers	Books That Influenced Them
Ruth White	<p data-bbox="233 236 548 379"><i>War or A Wrinkle in Time</i> or <i>A Summer to Die</i> or <i>The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever</i> or <i>The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle</i>."</p> <p data-bbox="233 395 548 715">"I recommend <i>Up the Road Slowly</i> by Irene Hunt, <i>The Giver</i> by Lois Lowry, and <i>Jacob Have I Loved</i> by Katherine Paterson. There are many, of course, but those stand out. For older teens I recommend <i>To Kill a Mockingbird</i> by Harper Lee, and a lesser known but remarkable book called <i>The Education of Little Tree</i> by Forrest Carter."</p>	<p data-bbox="615 395 940 826">"At this late stage in my life I am discovering and devouring the Jane Austen novels. I can't believe I missed out on them all these years simply because I didn't understand <i>Pride and Prejudice</i> in high school. The books that have had the greatest influence on me in my life are definitely the <i>Little House</i> books. First, my mother read them to me, and later I read them for myself. I believe they are the reason I decided to be a writer."</p>
Jane Yolen	<p data-bbox="233 850 548 1018">"It depends on the individual reader. The books my three kids read as teens differed enormously. The books I read as a teen were not the ones my brother read."</p>	<p data-bbox="615 850 940 1129">"The King Arthur stories, which spoke about honor and truth and loyalty and working to better the world for all humans. The fairy tales, which led me to believe that there was a structure for the universe encoded deep in the bones of earth and sun and stars, and in the human bones as well."</p>

Nolan and her daughter also discussed the types of books she thought she might like that were outside the darker category she had been reading.

Nolan realized that her daughter, like so many young people, had outgrown her young childhood books and didn't really know where to turn next. She had no direction and didn't know what she would really like. So "we got a variety of books and eventually, she found new genres that appealed to her. Soon, the shades were up in her room and she began to wear more than black

and her writing was more upbeat." Books can have such a great influence on young people.

"The books that have influenced me most in my life could fill a library," Nolan commented. Naming a few though, she began with the Nancy Drew mysteries because they got her excited about reading. Then there was *Harriet the Spy*; Nolan thought she would become a spy, too, so she dressed like Harriet, had a spy route, and carried a notebook. When she got caught spying, she quickly gave up her spying but not her notebook. Then she read *A Wrinkle in Time*, which got her excited about traveling through time and the tesseract. Next she read *David Copperfield*, and "loved living in this strange world of his, day after day." She tried writing just like Dickens after she'd read *David Copperfield*, and she "went through [her] days for a while talking, in [her] head, like the characters in that book" (e-mail to Mary Warner).

The description of Nolan's investment in her daughter's reading exemplifies the commitment of these authors and many other adults who believe in the world of reading and story and the ways this world can be a source of meaning, particularly for young adults. Since not all young people have such adults in their immediate situation, the ideas and the commitment of authors, librarians, and teachers is particularly crucial for young adults.

Many writers hesitate to suggest specific titles since they realize there is such a wide variety of writing to appeal to a wide variety of teen tastes and interests. Ann Angel cautions that many of her suggestions contain controversial subject matter, but all of the books she recommends tell stories of young adults who have overcome adversity in order to see the world in a redeemable light. Among the websites the authors suggest is that of the American Library Association ([www.ala.org](http://www.ala.org)), which has great booklists. There is a commonly quoted adage that "it takes a village to raise a child." This adage could be aptly adapted for the many teenagers of our world, "it takes a library and caring adult readers and writers to mentor a young adult."

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### Resources for YA Authors and Readers

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- [www.eduplace.com/rdg/author/index.html](http://www.eduplace.com/rdg/author/index.html).
- [www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/bibs/paterson.html](http://www.indiana.edu/~reading/ieo/bibs/paterson.html). (Fill in the author name right before "html.")
- [ca.dir.yahoo.com/arts/humanities/literature/authors/Young\\_Adult/](http://ca.dir.yahoo.com/arts/humanities/literature/authors/Young_Adult/).
- [www.lajuene.com/ginny/yaauthors.html](http://www.lajuene.com/ginny/yaauthors.html).
- [www.millnthps.sa.edu.au/websites/english/authors\\_and\\_books.htm](http://www.millnthps.sa.edu.au/websites/english/authors_and_books.htm).
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- Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature series. This series continues the body of critical writing established in Twayne's Young Adult Author's Series and expands beyond single-author studies to exploration of genres, multicultural writing, and controversial issues in YA reading. Patty Campbell is the series editor.