

WHAT ARE THOSE ADULTS DOING IN THE YA SECTION?

BY GINNY MYERS SAIN



Take a trip to your favorite indie bookstore this weekend, and you'll likely notice adults who seem to be browsing in the wrong section. Instead of wandering the aisles of literary fiction or self-help, you'll find them among the young adult (YA) novels. Are they lost? Probably not. Are they shopping for their teen offspring or a young niece or nephew? Maybe. But they just might be looking for their next great read.

A 2012 study in *Publisher's Weekly* revealed the startling fact that 55% of young adult books are purchased and read by adults.¹ Of course, that was the peak of the *Hunger Games* rage, but according to 2023 *WordsRated* statistics, 51% of YA books are purchased by people between the ages of 30 and 44, and 78% of those buyers said that they intended to read the books themselves.² That means that, even today, adult readers make up close to half of the readership of young adult books.

As an author of young adult novels, the question I get asked fairly often is, why do so many adults love YA books? Shouldn't fully grown readers gravitate toward more mature content? What could they possibly get from books written for and about teens?

The truth is, there are many factors that make YA books appealing to an older crowd.

For one thing, they have much faster pacing and the reader tends to be dropped immediately into the action of the story. For busy grown-ups without the time or focus to sit down and wade through a hundred pages of exposition, this can be very appealing!

Also, in recent years, YA books have made huge strides in embracing diversity. From different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities to LGBTQ+ representation, these books offer a wide range of perspectives. For adults, this can be a refreshing and enlightening experience, broadening their understanding and empathy. Additionally, it allows them to see their younger selves reflected on the page in a manner that was harder to come by in their youth. Furthermore, YA storylines are captivating and imaginative with startling emotional depth and character relationships that are complex and richly drawn. For an adult, reading a really beautifully written young adult book can be like taking a trip back in time. It's transportive, but not all adult YA readers are looking for a simple trip down memory lane.

1. "New Study: 55% of Ya Books Bought by Adults." *PublishersWeekly.com*, September 13, 2012. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/53937-new-study-55-of-ya-books-bought-by-adults.html>
2. O'Sullivan, Joanne. "Who Is YA For?" *PublishersWeekly.com*, October 13, 2023. <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/93417-who-is-ya-for.html>

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Young adult books tend to be about characters who are trying to figure out who they are and how they fit into a wider world. These are what we call “coming of age” stories, because the teen years are a time of discovery and growth. There is a long and beautiful history of “coming of age” stories in young adult literature that explore questions that teenagers face: who am I? What do I want? What do I owe my family? What do I owe my community and the world? How do I fit in with my friends? Where do I belong? What do I want to do with my life?

I believe that the reason so many adults gravitate toward young adult books is because we’ve been tricked into thinking that as adults, we should have the answers to those questions. We should have it all figured out by now. And we don’t. Or at least very, very few of us do. Adults keep being drawn to young adult books because, as it turns out, the questions teen characters are grappling with aren’t really teen questions after all. They’re *human* questions. And we’re all human, a fact that’s been driven home to all of us, especially over the last few intense years we’ve had as a species.

My third book, *One Last Breath*, was released by Penguin Teen March of 2024. It’s a uniquely Florida story, through and through. As the main character, Trulee, says in the first chapter, “My home state is famous for four things: Alligators. Beaches. Theme Parks. And serial killers.”

Tru is an adventure-seeker who lives to freedive in the gorgeous freshwater springs found in the central part of our state. But she’s looking for more than fish and pretty rocks in the depths of the mysterious springs she explores. She’s looking for hope. She’s looking for direction. And she’s looking for answers.

Tru is a deeply flawed, but loveable, eighteen-year-old who is heading off to college in the fall, and like most real teens that age, she has a lot going on in her life, both above and below the surface. When she meets a strange girl named Rio, Tru’s past and present collide in a way she never could have expected. Soon, she finds herself pulled into a tangled web of lies that goes back more than twenty years in her small Florida town, to the night a violent double murder shook Mount Orange to its very core.



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Like my first two books, *Dark and Shallow Lies* and *Secrets So Deep*, *One Last Breath* is part murder mystery, part twisty thriller, part breathless romance, part travelogue for a lushly atmospheric setting, and part coming of age story...with just a thread of the paranormal running through it. And, like my two books before it, it features primarily older teen characters.

I write books about teens for teens because I spent many important years of my life working very closely with high school students in an intensive theatre program designed for young performers who were seriously interested in pursuing a professional career in the theatre. Over all those years of working as a director and acting teacher with students that age, I really got to know teens and what makes them tick. I grew to understand their hearts and their minds. I was continuously blown away by their level of dedication to their craft, the intensity of their passion, their bravery, their love and loyalty for their friends, and how smart and creative they were. So I knew when I started to write, that was the age group I wanted to write for and about. Those were the voices I heard in my head.

I meet many wonderful teen readers at bookstores and book festivals, but I meet just as many adults, a fact that seems to support the statistics I shared earlier. I'm thrilled that adults enjoy my books, and in fact, I fit right in with those grown-ups browsing the YA library and bookstore shelves. I was reading young adult literature long before I was writing it. I became a dedicated YA fan in my thirties, when one of my teen theatre students begged me to read her favorite book, *Looking for Alaska*, by John Green. And, when the world seems unfriendly, complicated, and unjust, I still reach for books on my young adult shelf to help me find the answers.

I recently had a conversation with a very close friend who's quite a bit younger than me. He had just turned thirty and was lamenting the fact that he had no idea what he was doing with his life. "I feel like I should know all this by now," he said. "I should have it figured out." I just shook my head and said, "Oh, sweetie. I've got really bad news. None of us know what we're doing." And then I recommended some of my favorite young adult books for him to read.

