

YA

today

Agents and editors in the young adult genre tell you what's hot, what's not, and what you need to know to break in.

COMPILED BY
JESSICA STRAWSER

HARRY POTTER CAST A SPELL: The wizardry of J.K. Rowling descended on the literary landscape like magic. Kids couldn't get enough. Teens decided reading was cool again. Adults were lining up to buy YA—one copy for the kids, and one for themselves. And what's more, they weren't embarrassed to say so.

At the end of the day, if there was any lingering doubt that YA was hot, it vanished at *Twilight*.

It's official: Today's YA has the power to transcend the boundaries of genre, perhaps more than any other. Today's YA has the potential to set trends—not just for books, but for movies, TV, even fashion—for all

ages. And today's YA doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon.

If you aspire to write books for young readers, your timing couldn't be better. But with so many writers flocking to the genre, how can you stand out from the rest? As with all trends, even expert opinions vary—so we decided to present a range of perspectives so you can make the best decisions for you and your work.

Here, influential agents and editors weigh in on what you can do to break in, how you can keep pace with a genre that's still evolving, and much, much more about YA today.

THE ROUND TABLE



STEPHEN FRASER (jdlit.com) has been an agent with the Jennifer DeChiara Literary Agency since 2005. He previously worked as an editor with HarperCollins, Scholastic, Simon & Schuster and *Highlights for Children*, and has edited the work of such talents as Gregory Maguire and Brent Hartinger. He represents children's, YA and adult books in a wide range of genres.

AIMEE FRIEDMAN (aimeefriedmanbooks.com) is a senior editor at Scholastic and *The New York Times* bestselling author of several YA books, the most recent of which is *Sea Change*.

WENDY LOGGIA is an executive editor at Delacorte Press. Recent novels she's edited include *Fallen* by Lauren Kate and *The Ever Breath* by Julianna Baggott. She responds to strong voices, as well as exciting premises and writers interested in the collaborative process. Romance, girl thriller, paranormal and humor are all genres she'd like to see more of in her YA submissions.

GEORGE NICHOLSON (sll.com) has been an agent with Sterling Lord Literistic since 1995. Prior to joining SLL, he founded Delacorte Press Books for Young Readers and Yearling Books. He

also served as publisher of Books for Children and Young People at The Viking Press, as well as publisher of Bantam Doubleday Dell Books for Children. He is particularly interested in developing new writers in fiction and nonfiction for both YA and children.

ANICA MROSE RISSI is a senior editor at Simon Pulse. Rissi acquires commercial, high-concept and literary fiction for teen readers. She looks for quirky humor, smart writing, compelling storytelling and characters that she can't get out of her head. Rissi especially enjoys nurturing and building the careers of debut novelists.

How can a writer assessing the market determine what topics might be reaching a saturation point (how many vampires is too many?), and which ones will stay hot?

STEPHEN FRASER: Vampires have already reached a saturation point. ... I don't think a single additional book needs to be added to the vampire/werewolf canon.

Books about disenfranchised teens will always be around, though. Books about a struggle with the world will always be around. A book with a fresh voice will always sell.

AIMEE FRIEDMAN: This is a question—or, perhaps, as of late, *the* question—that very often preoccupies

publishers. But I generally encourage aspiring authors to avoid getting too deep into these types of guessing games. This is not to say an author needs to remain wholly removed from the ups and downs of the marketplace (and, increasingly, that's becoming less and less realistic). But I do encourage writers to stay focused on what excites them—what ignites their passion and keeps them inspired—rather than on the needs of the market.

ANICA MROSE RISSI: It's smart to know your market, but please don't write for current trends—those trends will probably be over by the time your book is ready for submission or publication. Editors aren't look-

ing to acquire current trends; we're looking for the *next* hot thing. Sometimes the next hot thing builds off the success of what's currently hot, but remember: By the time your book is written, revised, acquired, edited and published, *at least* a year will have passed, and the trend you're trying to tap into is likely to be tapering, morphing or long gone. Write the story that only *you* can tell, and let the agents and publishers worry about how to pitch and package your manuscript to fit the market.

That said, an aspiring writer *should* do her research (i.e., read, read, read) and take note of the basic characteristics that most YA novels share. YA plots are teen-focused. Adults tend to play only minor roles, and friends and love interests are central. The majority of YA is written in first person (this helps it feel relatable and immediate), and that voice/viewpoint is strictly teen. Even literary, voice-driven YA novels are also driven by plot.

What sorts of submissions are you seeing too many of?

WENDY LOGGIA: Poorly written paranormal fiction.

GEORGE NICHOLSON: Because fantasy and paranormal are the currency of today's successes, there are far too many poorly thought-out proposals for series, particularly trilogies. It's not that the ideas for the books are not powerful, just inexperience and inadequate knowledge on the part of the writer.

FRIEDMAN: I'm definitely seeing a whole slew of paranormal submissions right now, particularly of the angel variety. Because of the success of titles like *Hush, Hush* and *Fallen*, I always pay these titles a little extra attention, but on the whole, fallen angels haven't grabbed me in the way other paranormal topics—such as vampires/werewolves and ghosts—have. I'm also seeing a wave of Percy Jackson–esque novels about young boys with latent powers and magical ancestors, which I think have a perennial appeal, but right now run the risk of feeling a bit too derivative.

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—WENDY LOGGIA

FRASER: I'm a bit tired of the dystopian view. ...

If human beings experience just what they hold in thought, why are we perpetuating those images? Let's be more creative and see something more positive. How about humor? How about surprising kindness? And let's give human beings more credit than to think everyone is basically greedy and hateful.

What would you like to see more of in your inbox—and which YA subgenres do you see as up-and-coming?

LOGGIA: Well-written paranormal fiction! Gripping stories—something different that's exciting. When I read the galley of [Suzanne Collins'] *The Hunger Games*, I couldn't stop thinking about it, wishing it had come my way. Manuscripts I've bought lately are a combination of great voice and compelling plot. Stories that are compulsively readable, stories that teens will gobble up.

FRASER: I've seen a couple of books about the music industry, which is interesting, given the huge success of TV shows like “American Idol” and “America's Got Talent,” YouTube videos, etc.—but they have to be good.

I'd like to see a good gay novel, but one in which sexuality isn't an “issue” but part of the fabric of the story.

Religion or faith is rarely dealt with in YA novels, and again, if it isn't the “issue” but an integral part of the story, that would be good to see.

RISSI: I'm always looking for dark, edgy fiction. I like books about characters who make bad choices, then have to work through the consequences of those decisions. Whether dark novels are verse, realistic fiction or paranormal, they tackle tough, emotional issues and feature relatable characters who find themselves in challenging—or even life-threatening—situations. Teen readers perennially connect with these types of stories, and what better place for them to explore darkness and push boundaries than on the page and in the imagination?

FRIEDMAN: I love historical fiction, in particular historical romance (with or without paranormal elements), and it's pretty rare to find that done well for the YA audience. I'm a big fan of Libba Bray's *Gemma Doyle* trilogy, as well as *The Luxe* books, which I think both very successfully remain authentic to their time period while still feeling fresh and contemporary and fun. I'd love to see more such submissions coming down the pike.

For now, I think paranormal romance in all its forms has some staying power, but I do wonder if there will eventually be a backlash, and then more of a return to the straightforward coming-of-age, chick-lit-y romances that

were all the rage about five years back. Then again, it's so hard to be able to prognosticate these sort of trends.

NICHOLSON: This sounds hopelessly old-fashioned, but what I look for in new work is pacing and emotional resonance in characterization and plot. The best praise I can give a client is that "tears came to my eyes." I'd like to see fiction in which moral and ethical concerns are at the core of the novel's complexities. I do think that most young people are honestly and honorably trying to think about who they are and who they wish to become.

How would you describe the styles and voices that YA readers seem to be responding to today?

LOGGIA: Fresh and frank writing—the hallmark of what teen fiction has been and continues to be. Honesty and realness. And there's a real variety in what readers can find; there really is a book for everyone.

NICHOLSON: I do think that young people respond to integrity of voice and style and that emotional resonance I mentioned. Whatever the changes in diction and current slang, I still think it should be used sparingly. When I first came to the business, slang of any sort was strictly forbidden, yet there was still richness in language. I may be wrong, but I think slang dates good fiction more easily than any other single thing.

FRIEDMAN: I think teen readers are—and have always been—a lot smarter and savvier than many give them credit for. Today's teens in particular tend to be remarkably mature, articulate and pop-culturally aware. And I find that teens have an amazing radar for inauthenticity—for "phonies," as our dear Holden Caulfield would put it. So with all that in mind, I think YA readers really respond to an authentic voice—one that doesn't feel pandering or dumbed down in any way. And if that voice is authentic—if it rings true and doesn't try too hard—I think YA readers are really open to wherever those voices can range: from ones that are earnest and heartbroken, to wry, witty, hilarious takes on life and love.

How is today's YA market different from that of 10 years ago? How is good YA writing the same?

RISSE: We've seen changes in format and trim size (more hardcovers, more trade paperbacks, fewer mass-market paperbacks), and a shift away from open-ended series toward closed series arcs and single-title fiction. Cover trends have changed (currently, photographic and iconic covers are more popular than illustrated covers), and we've cycled through different trends in topic and voice.

BEFORE YOU SUBMIT



Here's YA editor Anica Mrose Rissi's list of what you can do to increase your book's chances of making it out of the slush pile and into the spotlight.

1. **Revise, revise, revise!** I don't want to read your first draft, ever. (Tip: Your novel isn't ready to send to me until you can describe it in one sentence.)
2. **Start with conflict and tension** to raise questions, arouse curiosity and (like musical dissonance) create the need for resolution.
3. **Start with the story you're telling, not with the backstory.** Throw the reader directly into a conflict and let her get to know your characters through their actions. (Yes, this is another way of saying, "Show, don't tell.")
4. **Give the reader something to wonder about** and a sense of where the story is going—of what's at stake.
5. **Avoid explaining too much too soon.** And, don't be obvious. Trust your readers. Trust your characters. Trust your writing. If you find that chunks of your story need to include long explanations, go back in and write those chunks better, until the story explains itself.
6. **Make sure your story has both a plot arc and an emotional arc.** Cross internal conflict with external conflict. Give your characters moral dilemmas, and force them to deal with the consequences of their choices.
7. **Read your dialogue out loud.** When revising, ask yourself, "What is the point of this dialogue?" (Just as you should be asking, "What is the point of this sentence? What is the point of this scene?")
8. **Use adjectives, adverbs and dialogue tags only sparingly.** (See "trust your readers," above.)
9. **Make sure your details matter.**

Publishing is a cyclical business, and Simon Pulse has had incredible success with backlist gems such as L.J. Smith's bestselling *Night World* series and Christopher Pike's bestselling *Thirst* series, both of which we've introduced to a new generation of readers through new packaging.

Good YA writing is still immediate and relatable, with an unwavering teen perspective and emotional truth.

FRASER: It's harder to shock these days. Judy Blume really knocked people's socks off in the '70s, [as have] books like Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* in more recent times. To me, one of the most important YA writers of the 20th century (maybe beyond) is Francesca Lia Block. I think her fresh-voice, quirky writing really changed the landscape. I'm looking for a new voice like that. An Adam Lambert of words!

LOGGIA: It's more of a hot commodity: In general, everyone has shifted focus to the tween/teen market as a profitable area. It seems that there are more and more wonderful writers turning their talents toward YA, with writers like Meg Cabot, Ann Brashares, Scott Westerfeld, Rick Riordan and Sarah Dessen, to name a few, paving the way and showing how it should and can be done.

NICHOLSON: Today's ... publishing machine is commodity driven. The most careless writing fills that

maw only. The best writing remains the product of a thoughtful mind.

FRIEDMAN: The YA of the last 10 years is varied and sophisticated, and sometimes takes bigger risks than adult fiction. I don't think it's an accident that one of the biggest book phenoms of the past decade, *Twilight*, was a YA novel.

Of course, the classics will always endure—with J.D. Salinger's recent death, *The Catcher in the Rye* has been on everyone's mind now as this example of a novel that was "YA before YA." Judy Blume will endure. And I think what these classics have in common with the best YA of today is that same authenticity and richness of voice—the characters who come alive and speak to the reader in a meaningful way. That's timeless.

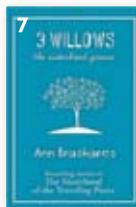
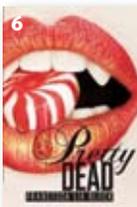
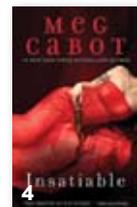
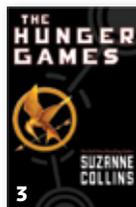
It's been said that in the wake of series like *Harry Potter* and the *Twilight* saga, more adults are reading YA. How (if at all) should YA authors take that into account?

RISSI: It's true: Thanks in part to *Twilight* and the CW, adults are reading teen books and watching teen shows—the stigma is gone. I think YA authors should be glad to have an ever-increasing audience, but shouldn't change a thing about the way they craft their stories. Adults, like teens, go the YA section of the bookstore

BUILD YOUR BOOKSHELF

If you want to go to the head of the class, you'll need to do your homework. Read up on works of these contemporary YA authors mentioned by our round table.

1. Libba Bray
2. Anna Godbersen
3. Suzanne Collins
4. Meg Cabot
5. Laurie Halse Anderson
6. Francesca Lia Block
7. Ann Brashares
8. Scott Westerfeld
9. Rick Riordan
10. Sarah Dessen



looking for great writing and storytelling. They're finding it in plot-driven and voice-driven novels with unforgettable characters, intense emotions and strong hooks.

LOGGIA: I'm not sure it works to try to make your book all things for all people. Write the story you want to write, and at the end of the day it might be that it's not teen. It's middle grade. Or adult. Sometimes writers are the most surprised of all to find out that the story they've written is for teens.

FRASER: The line between YA and adult is very slight. While YA authors still need to be conscious that teens don't have the life experience that adults do, the word choices, choice of topic, narrative skill, should be similar. I have always felt literature for children and teens should be evaluated on the same terms as adult literature. Good writing is good writing. There should be no cheapening or dumbing down for children, and certainly not for teens. And I suppose it's like those great Disney movies; there can be a layer for the adult, a layer of meaning, humor, depth, that the younger readers won't catch. Though the smarter ones always do.

FRIEDMAN: I would say not at all. If a book crosses over, that's fantastic. I do think more and more adults are dipping into YA, because it's such a rich and intriguing field right now. As an author myself, I get several e-mails from women in their 20s and 30s and beyond about my books, which is always a lovely surprise. But I think a YA author by definition is writing for a teen audience.

What are some of the biggest mistakes aspiring YA authors make?

FRASER: Probably the same mistake all aspiring writers make: They assume readers care about their characters the way they do. You need to *make* your readers care about your characters. Some YA authors have a great concept, but they don't have the wherewithal to carry it off. A great concept does not a great book make. You need a great concept *and* great writing. Some writers do capture the way teens speak and think, but they are simply recording and not writing. Writing creates the illusion of reality, the illusion which is great art. Banality comes into bad writing. Writers need to learn to excise all banality, anything that doesn't further the story.

NICHOLSON: The biggest mistake new YA authors make is not trusting their own voice. There's too much derivative, even copycat, writing and publishing.

FRIEDMAN: Feeling as if they *should* be jumping on a certain bandwagon or following a trend. Write what

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—STEPHEN FRASER

excites you, not what you think you should be writing. If fantasy is not your forte, if it doesn't make your heart pound, but you think that fantasy novels get all the success, I think it's a mistake to try and force yourself to write in the genre. In the end, the writing process will be all the more difficult, and not as rewarding. While I am all for book concepts with big, catchy hooks, I don't think an author *should* feel as if their manuscript needs to have that kind of commercial *gotcha!* from the get-go.

What is the best thing an aspiring YA author can do to learn what it takes to appeal to today's young readers?

RISSE: YA writers must have an authentic teen voice, which comes from tapping into the intense emotional experience of being a teen. The technology, trends and slang may change dramatically over the years, but the emotions are universal, and you will find that emotional truth and intensity at the core of every great YA novel.

FRASER: Teens can spot a fake miles away. I think this is because they're so close to their authentic, developing selves, emotionally, sexually, physically, personally. I do think *hope*—even in a fairly dark story—is a kind thing to offer teens. Otherwise, what kind of human beings are we? Wouldn't you want to offer some kind of loving gesture to a group of teens listening to you? I don't mean preachiness, because that is misuse of power. But sparking intelligent thought, challenging, inspiring, amusing, delighting, truth-telling. What a challenge for writers of YA literature!

FRIEDMAN: Stay connected. I know social networking and blogging isn't for everyone, but I encourage aspiring YA authors to get online in some way: Whether it's Facebook, Twitter, blogging or just following other blogs, these are great ways to get a feel for the teen zeitgeist.

LOGGIA: Old advice that still rings true: Read as much as you can, stay abreast of what's appealing to teens and where they live, and be a sponge of the culture we live in. **WD**