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Additional material can be found on the book’s companion website at www.ala.org/editions/extras/holley35774.
INTRODUCTION
YALSA, Teens, and Reading
Paula Brehm-Heeger and Stacy Creel

The mission of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) is to advocate, promote, and strengthen service to young adults as part of the continuum of total library service and to support those who provide service to this population. YALSA has identified several activities and concerns as essential in fulfilling this vital mission. Among this list of compelling concerns, none ranks higher than evaluating and promoting materials of interest to adolescents through special services, programs, and publications. The annual Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers (QP) and Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults (PPYA) lists clearly fall under the “evaluating and promoting materials of interest to adolescents” umbrella. But why is the selection of titles for these lists, put together by dedicated and knowledgeable library professionals, such an essential activity for YALSA? Why should all librarians, educators, and adults concerned with the health and well-being of teenagers spend their valuable and increasingly limited time, resources, and energy learning about and utilizing the QP and PPYA lists for the benefit of the teenagers with whom they work? A brief examination of reading habits among teenagers ages 12–18, both past and present, provides insight into just why these lists are vital for strengthening service to all young adults in the nation’s libraries.

Today’s librarians face many challenges, including getting teens not only into their libraries but also into reading. This concern is widely acknowledged,

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but opinions differ on why these challenges exist and also on the state of teens and reading in America. Are teens reading or not? Which teens are reading more, and which teens are reading less? Are they reading what they say they are reading? And what counts as reading (Aronson 2006; Gardner and Dillon 2005; National Endowment for the Arts 2007)? The pendulum of public opinion swings between the idea that young adults are not reading at all and what Aronson calls “hand-wringing over what a concerned parent fears they might be reading too avidly” (Aronson 2005). So what is the reality behind these seemingly contradictory ideas regarding teens and reading?

A good place to start unraveling the mystery about teens and their reading habits is with a look at the origins of the concept of reluctant readers. A common, long-standing perception about why teens are not reading or are reluctant to read is associated with reading skill. When reading is difficult for them, they do not like to do it. This belief about why teens are reluctant readers is not a new concept. In 1952, the Executive Committee of Capital Area School Development Association recognized the needs of low-level teen readers and produced Fare for the Reluctant Reader—an annotated listed of teen-tested titles divided by grade level and category (Bush and Dunn 1952). The idea that teens do not read because they lack the skills to do so has remained popular over the years and has led to such ideas as connecting teens to reading through hi/lo books—books deemed to have high interest but requiring low reading skills (LiBretto 1985; Williams 1987).

As the concept was developed more fully, the reasons some teens fall into this category became more complex. The thought that teens are not reading simply because they lack the skill gave way to more nuanced discussions. By 1969, the term reluctant reader had expanded to include readers “who have the ability to read without mechanical problems but have little or no inclination to read except what is required for work or normal everyday life” (Chambers 1969, 4). This view included a list of reasons that youth ages 11–17 were not reading—a list that probably sounds familiar to many of today’s librarians: the dislike of stories, the lack of time, the fact that teens like group activities, and the influx of technology replacing reading as a leisure time activity. In her 1996 School Library Journal article “No Time, No Interest, No Way: The 3 Voices of Aliteracy,” Kylene Beers demonstrates the further evolution of the reluctant teen reader concept, with reluctant readers now classified into three categories: dormant, uncommitted, and unmotivated. The dormant reader has a positive view of reading but does not commit the time to read or lacks the free time for pleasure reading. The uncommitted reader views reading as a skill but does not have necessarily negative feelings about the skill. The unmotivated reader has a negative view of reading and readers. Stacy Creel, who worked with youth for ten years in a public library setting and spent three years on the QP committee, formulated the following categories:

The A+ Student. This group of teens reads frequently for school assignments but not for pleasure. If it is not important for their college application,
they may not have time, or see the need, to read. They have so much academic reading that even pleasure reading can seem like a chore or an assignment.

The Athlete. These teens may struggle with academics or reading, but not necessarily. Often their lack of recreational reading comes from their hectic schedule; practices, pep rallies, games, and studying to keep their grades up may not leave much time for recreational reading. Additionally, the stereotypical image of the athlete puts pressure on this group to look and act a certain way, an image that may not include being a reader.

The Average Joe/Jane. These teens can take reading or leave it. They may be enticed to read when presented with the “right” book but do not seek out reading on their own. They may come in for assigned open-choice reading, get a book, read it and enjoy it, but not check out another book until the next semester.

The English as Second Language. This group of teens may or may not participate in recreational reading in their native language if materials are available. Reading in English may be a struggle, and finding high-interest recreational books at the appropriate level can be a challenge that keeps them from reading. Additionally, they may perceive that there is a stigma to carrying around a “baby” book or books below level.

The “I Only Read . . .” This is a controversial category. If teens read only one type of book, are they “reluctant”? Some librarians may say, “No, they’re reading on their own for pleasure,” and others may say, “Yes, if they have read all the vampire fiction in the library and won’t read anything else, then they aren’t reading.”

The Incarcerated. This group of teens may be most closely related to the historical version of the reluctant reader. They often have diagnosed learning or emotional disabilities (34 percent) and have a poor academic record including low achievement, low literacy skills, truancies, being held back, and suspensions (Harris et al. 2006).

The Low Skill Level. This group of teens fits the historical view of reluctant readers who are “poor readers or those teenagers unable to read materials written for their grade level” (Nelson 1998).

The Popular. These teens may be leaders in their schools; they are on the prom committee, in clubs, and have large social groups of friends. Socially accepted, they have many outside interests. Recreational reading may not be an accepted part of their image and may not fit into their schedule of activities.

The Outsiders. This group includes goths, skateboarders, and many other teens who consider themselves alternative. These teens may frequent
the library to use technology but may not be aware that libraries have books that would interest them, or they may feel that reading does not fit their image.

The Turned Off. These teens most likely had a negative reading experience somewhere along their educational journey. They may have struggled with reading in class or found an assigned reading to be painful or boring; they then associate that negative experience with reading in general.

What about those teens who really do (or would) like to read but are in desperate need of help in discovering books and literature they actually would enjoy—yes, enjoy—reading? Recent reports such as the NEA’s “Reading at Risk” and the 2006 Yankelovich Scholastic survey certainly paint a picture of declining leisure reading among teenagers, with the Scholastic survey stating that only 16 percent of 15–17-year-olds read for pleasure every day (Cart 2007). Many teens do not seem to have the slightest idea where to find “fun” books or, more likely, do not know that such books even exist. This lack of awareness of enticing books designed specifically for teens, the very audience to which these books are targeted, has not been helped by the fact that “years of bad marketing have made it difficult to convince teens that there are young adult titles worth reading” (Morris and Eaton 1999).

But convince them we must. If teens are to develop a lifelong reading habit, the importance of pleasure reading during the teen years cannot be underestimated. These days there is a “growing recognition that reading skills need to be nurtured well into adolescence” (McGrath 2005). Combine this with a new perspective from the publishing world on marketing and publishing for teenagers indicating that “YA publishing [has never] been healthier” (McGrath 2005), and it is clear that this is the perfect moment for librarians, teachers, and parents to grab the reins and lead teens straight to the entertaining, popular fare that can help them appreciate the enjoyment that comes from reading. There has never been a better time to convince teens that reading for pleasure is more than okay—it can actually be a heck of a good time!

This brings us to the two reading lists created by committees of YALSA that are the focus of this book. These lists are essential tools for successfully meeting the challenge of encouraging all teens to read for pleasure. These are not only especially appropriate lists for use with reluctant readers but also valuable for leading any teen to a book he or she might like. Before now, these two helpful resources had not been available in one book.

The first is the Quick Picks for Reluctant Young Adult Readers. The list was inaugurated by a committed that started in 1982, the High Interest/Low Literacy Level Materials Evaluation Committee. The committee produced an annual list titled High-Interest Low Reading Level Booklist. In 1988, the list came to be known as Recommended Books for the Reluctant Young Adult Reader, and in 1995 the committee and its list became Quick Picks for Reluctant Young
Adult Readers (QP). The QP charge is “to prepare an annual annotated list of recommended books appropriate for reluctant young adult readers” with the purpose of reaching “young adults (ages 12–18) who, for whatever reasons, do not like to read. The purpose of this list is to identify titles for recreational reading, not for curricular or remedial use” (www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/quickpicks/).

The second is the Popular Paperbacks for Young Adults (PPYA), born out of collaboration with YALSA and Baker and Taylor in the late 1980s. Originally, the list focused on five genres, with corresponding paperback dumps sold to fit the books and the theme. When Baker and Taylor stopped supporting the project in 1995, a new committee formed to “annually prepare one to five annotated list(s) of at least ten and no more than twenty-five recommended paperback titles, selected from popular genres, topics or themes.” The purpose of the PPYA list is “to encourage young adults to read for pleasure by presenting to them lists of popular or topical titles that are widely available in paperback and represent a broad variety of accessible themes and genres” (www.ala.org/yalsa/booklists/poppaper/).

This book highlights a decade’s worth of these two annual lists’ recommendations, books that can be used with young adults who are not avid readers. Although the lists are not new, librarians and other practitioners may not remember them as first options when doing readers’ advisory or looking for themes. This book is most appropriate for young adult librarians, library media specialists working in middle and high schools, English teachers, and students and faculty in graduate schools of library and information science, but teens, non-youth librarians, parents, and others who work with young adults may also find it useful.

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