

Are young-adult books literature? If not, why are they constantly topping bestseller lists? The raging debate as to whether young-adult or Y.A. books constitute a genre in literature and even whether adults should be ashamed of themselves for reading these is likely to consume the literary world for some time to come. But what exactly is Y.A.?

S E Hinton's 1967 novel "The Outsiders" was the first book that saw a separate young-adult market. Hinton told the *New Yorker* that she came to write "The Outsiders" because she was dissatisfied "with the way teen-age life was being portrayed in the books she read." She started writing the book when she was in high school.

Another much-touted young-adult book in the US was "The Catcher in the Rye" by J D Salinger, published in 1951. The story of angst-ridden teenager Holden Caulfield, complete with frequent mentions of how "phony" the world is, profanity and sexual references, has been banned umpteen times.

This, in a crux, is what evolved to become the young adult genre. Authors writing in the vernacular of the youth for a teenage audience. Or, books targeted to adults but which appeal to young readers as well. This could mean both a 15-year-old Hinton writing "The Outsiders" with a similar aged (but male) protagonist or a twice as older Salinger writing what seemed to be straight out of the head of 16-year-old Caulfield.

Other works which can be retrospectively shelved as young adult literature is the classic "Little Women" by Louisa May Alcott, Madeleine L'Engle's "A Wrinkle in Time" and "Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret" by Judy Blume.

Authors such as Roald Dahl and Dr Seuss and books such as "Charlotte's Web" and "The Secret Garden" are quintessentially children's literature. These are targeted for readers up to age 12, and are often accompanied by illustrations. Boundaries between children's and young adult literature, however, are fluid.

Harry Potter and the Young Adult Debate

At the center of the Y.A. debate are the "Harry Potter" books, the first of which was published in 1997. J K Rowling's hugely popular series arguably saw the resurgence in young adult literature for the first time since the '70s. The story of the teenage wizarding trio of Harry, Ron and Hermione, unlike other children's literature, kept readers hooked from adolescence to adulthood.

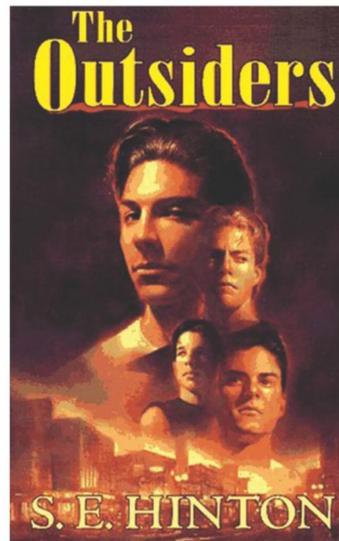
"Harry Potter" was the first time that books had so entered popular consciousness. Rowling was hardly the first to write children's fantasy. But the heights of fame and influence acquired by the books and their writer were unprecedented. That kids and their parents would read books as long as 766 pages ("Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix") astounded publishers.

"Harry Potter" followed in the giant literary footsteps of "The Chronicle of Narnia" by C S Lewis and J R R Tolkien's

WHO READS YOUNG ADULT BOOKS?

How the young adult genre evolved to gain universal readership

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were found to frequent the "teen" section of libraries and bookstores. Adults make up a large section of consumers of Y.A. fiction. They read to know what their kids are reading and can empathise, out of a sense of nostalgia, with the themes of adolescence explored.

In 2013, *New York Magazine* reported that the 18-29 (35 percent) and 30-44 (27 percent) age groups made up the largest Y.A. book purchases. The 13-17 age bracket only accounted for 16 percent of purchases.

Clearly, readers do not identify with the characters only when they're young adults themselves. Many young-adult books appeal to adults as well as teenagers because of their coming-of-age theme. In the "Harry Potter" books, for instance, the characters and storyline steadily progress to young adult themes of sexuality and conflict. Readers grew alongside the characters.

Another case in point is the classic "Anne of Green Gables". Anne-with-an-'e' Shirley's story of self-discovery helped many a young girl identify with their own struggles in the years from childhood to adulthood.

Young-adult books, and series in particular, are prominent in bestseller lists. In addition to a large teen and adult reader base, young adult fiction is prime for film adaptations which only raise the hype around the books. "The Book Thief" by Markus Zusak, "The Perks of Being a Wallflower" by Stephen Chbosky and John Green's "The Fault in Our Stars" are cases in point.

Teenagers, the intended audience, had more relatable characters and storylines

LITERATURE

in the books they studied at school and read for pleasure. Young-adult books kept teenagers reading despite a decline previously when screens took over. Teenagers could relate to the characters and the experiences they were undergoing whether it was as realistic as in "The Outsiders" or as whimsical as in "Narnia".

But Y.A. books have always been under attack. Chris Crowe writes in a 2001 article, "The Lure of Young Adult Literature" in *The English Journal*, that Y.A. literature is primarily attacked by parents, teachers and librarians because they are not classics and "corrupt the young." Young-adult books are perceived to be weak in terms of writing style and content. Adults reading Y.A. are shamed. Young-adult books, in short, are not "literary" enough.

A major concern has been the subjects Y.A. literature deals with. Among others, drug addiction in "Go Ask Alice" by Beatrice Sparks and suicide in "The Perks of Being a Wallflower". Adult figures are uninspiring. In Hinton's books, parents are alcoholics or drug addicts or at best, absent. However, this reality rings true for many teenagers.



Can Y.A. bring readers back (or attract new readers)?

With many teenagers and young adults alike preferring screens over books, can young adult fiction bridge that divide? Will reading the latest book by Jennifer Niven or Sarah J. Mass hold more sway than catching the latest Netflix series?

A cause of concern, says the godmother of the genre, Hinton, is that most books are targeted at female readers. This will exclude boys from reading Y.A. books. Also, any more books in the vein of "Twilight" will only put off new readers of young adult fiction.

Teenage readers identify with characters their ages, living similar emotions and experiences. Adults identify with the adolescent struggles depicted with those in their own lives. With both teenagers and adults bolstering readership, Y.A. literature too is coming of age. ■

HUMAN RIGHTS

"When I was a volunteer for UNYSAB, a bunch of us were distributing sandals to rickshaw pullers who didn't have any. A group of hijras came along and took the sandals away, but a little while later, they returned and apologised for having done so. Assuming we were NGO workers, they said: 'Rickshaw pullers

examine us because we are hijras. Yet, they spend hours consulting the rich and at least some time with the poor." For hijras, even more than income poverty, it is social exclusion that deprives them of basic services.

"We talk about multi-dimensional poverty in slums, among impoverished men and women, but you very rarely

During the launch of the photobook, Chaitya, who also moderated the ceremonial session, asked the audience, "Koi jon hijra ke chinhen apnar office e?" ("How many hijras do you know at your office?") She echoes Akhi, who lives and works in Dhaka: "Aren't women today doing men's job and vice versa? Then why can't hijras do the same?" The

and solutions that must be at the heart of the discussion. "I think the most important thing is to not just to involve hijras in the process, but make them design their own projects, do their own surveys, be agents of their own change. If a hijra cannot write a proposal, then she can certainly be taught these things, given these skills," believes Nabeera. And instead of portraying them solely as oppressed individuals, we need to focus on initiatives that are already employing and training hijras, and set an example for others, she adds.

The path ahead for the hijra community is anything but straightforward. There are conflicting views on a number of issues among the women themselves, while their gurus pose a different sort of obstacle. After

LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND "HIJRA LIVES IN BANGLADESH"

AMIYA HALDER

have parents, children, siblings, a family. We have nobody. Can't you do something for us too?" remembers Nabeera Rahman, one of the Project Designers and Managers behind "Hijra Lives in Bangladesh", a photobook based on an ethnographic research into third gender communities all over the country brought out by UNDP Bangladesh. This chance encounter, barely a couple of minutes long, became the impetus for her and her colleague Jay Tyler Malette to apply for the RBAP Innovation Fund for this project two years back. It was an issue that needed more intervention, but they did not know what the hijra communities needed in the first place, so they decided to go to them and find out.

The photobook consists of a set of 40 micro-narratives collected from hijra communities in Dhaka, Chittagong, Rajshahi and Khulna. Together they form a life cycle portrait of the third gender, beginning in the early years of gender realisation and exile from society, encompassing the extreme exclusion they experience, and ending with their hopes of an empowered future.

The lead researcher, Bokhtiar Ahmed, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Rajshahi, took a storytelling approach to the study. Unlike typical interviews, open-ended questions were asked and the women would talk uninterrupted. In the pre-consultation meeting, the hijras advised that one of them accompany the team while it collected narratives. "Otherwise, they would just say what we want to hear and would not be comfortable with us," Nabeera explains. This is how Tanisha Yeasmin Chaitya became the first third gender consultant at UNDP Bangladesh.

Although an exploratory research, the team had some expectations of what they might find going into it. What struck them the most, however, was that they were not just dealing with income poverty. For example, Jahanara, one of the women interviewed in Dhaka, shares, "It hurts us that doctors don't



PHOTO: UNDP BANGLADESH/NIBRAS UDDIN AHMED DURLOV

hear about poverty in the third gender. Their poverty encompasses access to finance, healthcare, education, job opportunities, and more," explains Nabeera. We may hear a lot about hijras in relation to work with UNAIDS or LGBTQ rights, but not so much in relation to poverty, she adds.

We often simply do not want to associate with hijras or shoo them away, and in this way, they continue to be left out of the mainstream. While the government legally recognised hijra as the third gender in late 2013, on its own, it is not sufficient. As one hijra woman Nabeera and the team were working with put it, "Apa, eita kore amar ki hobe?" ("Apa, what use is this to me?") The woman lamented that a lot of money comes into the development sector, a lot of projects are started, and a lot of consultants are hired. They see the consultants move up in the world, but nothing changes for them. They are invited to speak at human rights events or are involved in development projects more and more, but not much has changed in the average hijra's day-to-day life.

answer to her question lies in the many stories shared by several of the other women. Romana was employed at a hotel in Chittagong, but one day the owner asked her why she behaved in this manner. He wouldn't let her work unless she changed. "I couldn't explain that I don't behave like this intentionally," she says. Selina, also from Chittagong, was fired from the garments factory she worked in after they saw her woman-like behaviour.

But the women offer their own solutions in "Hijra Lives in Bangladesh", if only someone would listen. "If you accept us, then we would not have to do illegal and illicit works," states Tara from Rajshahi. Falguni from Chittagong dreams of opening a night school so that no one has to engage in derogatory work after dark. And Sonali from Dhaka thinks, "In order for us to obtain higher education, the educational institutes should be run by someone like us. Here the teacher should be from one of us. There are many educated ones among us who can do this with six months of training."

It is their voices, ideas, aspirations,

they have left their families, gurus take up both the mother and father figures in their lives. But hijras are not only emotionally bound to them, but financially too. The gurus control their incomes and employ them in what they call "dark things", i.e. sex work. One of the hijras told Nabeera that their guru does not want them to be educated in fear of losing a source of income, but they do not dare do anything without the guru's permission.

Society is yet to acknowledge the multi-dimensional effects of gender-identity discrimination experienced by hijras. Whether it is getting a health check-up, renting a flat, or just using public transport, they are denied the most basic human rights for a life of respect and dignity. "Hijra Lives in Bangladesh" sheds some much-needed light on an extremely excluded group, but more importantly, shows how this very same oppressed community presents its own solutions. The one thing they ask for is acceptance.

View "Hijra Lives in Bangladesh" at <http://bit.ly/2xPF6fl>