

Introduction: Genre and Young Adult Fantasy

In the United States, the world's biggest book market, young adult fantasy (YAF) has performed consistently well for a number of consecutive years. In 2014, juvenile fantasy fiction increased its market share by 38 per cent, levelled out in 2015, then rose a further 17 per cent in 2016 to become the biggest-selling juvenile category. While adult fantasy and science fiction combined sold 11,856,000 units in 2016, the same combined category in juvenile fiction sold 52,255,000 units, or more than four times as many (Milliot, 2015, 2016, 2017).¹ This success extends beyond the US market. For example, according to Sarah J. Maas's website, her YAF series *Throne of Glass* has now been translated into thirty-five different languages, and Cassandra Clare's publisher Simon & Schuster boasts that she has 50 million copies of her books in print worldwide. These figures indicate a global dissemination and robust market power across the world. Young adult fantasy texts also serve as originating texts for transmedia adaptations, both official and non-official: from high-budget screen adaptations and licensed tie-in products to peer-to-peer merchandising and fan fiction. High-profile adaptations can lead to stardom for actors who take iconic roles (e.g., Emma Watson, Robert Pattinson), securely tying YAF to broader celebrity culture and mainstream media interest (Steveker, 2015: 148). In many ways, YAF's operations are emblematic of developments and disruptions in the publishing industry and reading practices of the twenty-first century, and yet our scholarly understanding of the genre's commercial, social, and creative operations is not rigorous or nuanced.

The new publishing paradigm's tendency towards franchising, convergence, reproducibility, and fan culture has been well served by a series of megaselling young adult fiction (YA) texts in the twenty-first century, such as the Harry Potter, Twilight, and *The Hunger Games* series. These

¹ Nielsen BookScan counts adult science fiction and fantasy separately, while juvenile science fiction/fantasy/magic is one category. I have combined the adult categories to make the comparison more accurate, but see later in this Element for definitions of how this Element understands fantasy. Note that the juvenile category also includes children's fiction, but the scale of comparison is still dramatic.

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successes and others like them inspire acquisition of books that might function similarly in the marketplace, to both satisfy and stimulate audience need. Publishers and booksellers often frame new acquisitions in relation to existing texts. When HarperTeen acquired Victoria Aveyard's debut YAF series *Red Queen* in a 'major' deal ('major' being a trade euphemism for a deal worth more than US\$500,000), the book was described in *Publishers Marketplace* as '*Graceling* meets *The Selection*' (2013). Kiera Cass's *The Selection* itself was initially pitched as '*The Hunger Games* meets *The Bachelor*' (2010), while Kristin Cashore's influential YAF *Graceling* has 'met' many other sources over the past ten years (including *Swan Lake*, *Pride and Prejudice*, and *The Mists of Avalon*). In 2016–17, Aveyard's *Red Queen* was a common reference text on *Publishers Marketplace*, 'meeting' *Girl on the Train* (Astrid Scholte's *Four Dead Queens*), *Downton Abbey* (Sara Holland's *The Everless Girl*), and *East of Eden* (Joelle Charbonneay's *Dividing Eden*), all in 'significant' six-figure deals. This so-called X-meets-Y formulation for describing texts is common enough to warrant an entry on fandom wiki *tvtropes*, complete with a 'pitch generator' that throws up random pairings such as 'Maze Runner meets The Divine Comedy' (tvtropes 'Just for Fun'). Its almost risible commonness, however, underscores how crucial it remains for the industry to triangulate the location of texts among similar texts, or to support the production of what Corbett calls 'read-alikes' (2014: np). The size of the advances in the cases noted earlier points to a high level of confidence in the read-alike's potential for success.

These X-meets-Y constructions describe texts, that is, they suggest their textual features: Cassandra Clare's *The Mortal Instruments* series is sometimes pitched as *Harry Potter* meets *Twilight*, because the story is about a young woman who discovers she has magical abilities *and* deals with a complicated paranormal romance. But the industry does not simply use X meets Y to describe the texts; it also clearly uses the construction to predict what the text *will do* among readers and in the publishing industry, including how it might circulate and sell, and which existing routes to market it might exploit. When we talk about fiction publishing, it has become 'second nature' to understand the market in terms of genre (Berberich, 2015: 30), and the X-meets-Y formulation is strongly evocative of the reproducibility and comparability with which conceptualisations of

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genre are so often associated. How, then, might genre provide a useful insight into the twenty-first-century publishing phenomenon of YAF?

Genre encompasses so much more than the content of texts, and a genre perspective may shift arguments away from description and definition, and towards an understanding of the processes that constitute relationships between authors, readers, and the institutions that bring them together (Wilkins, 2005: np). Genres are not static and unchanging categories that can be defined checklist style (the notorious ‘formula’ by which the popular press often judges genre fiction). Rather, they are dynamic formations that respond and circulate socially and industrially, forming and reforming over time. Approaching the study of any genre would imply an analysis of not only the texts, but also potentially its audience, its marketing, its book design, its paratexts, and so on, because these are all part of the complex process by which the genre is formed. This Element frames the discussion of YAF in terms of this broader definition of genre to achieve two aims. The first aim is to produce a short but multifaceted study of a largely untheorised field of literature that has great cultural reach. This Element shows the way that YAF brings together two established genres with devoted readerships – young adult fiction and fantasy fiction – and in so doing amplifies and energises some of the most recognisable aspects of these two genres: that is, it seeks to unpack some of the specific processes of the X-meets-Y formulation. The second aim is to demonstrate how an examination of a popular genre might look, if it paid attention to the multiple dimensionality of genre – its textual, social, and industrial operations – and the links between them. This Element is intended as a model of a sophisticated and productive reading of one of the most popular of the popular genres, making room for understanding YAF’s textual conventions alongside the way it is circulated and enjoyed.

Defining Young Adult Fantasy

The definition of ‘fantasy fiction’ is now a creaking superstructure on top of the genre, and does not seem to be able to move far from taxonomy. In part, this concern with pinning down a definition arises from the necessity for key concepts to analyse. Attebery gets around this cul-de-sac with his

emphasis on ‘fuzzy sets’ that are defined ‘not by boundaries but by a centre’ (1992: 12), and this is perhaps the most useful way of approaching taxonomy. But what is at the centre of fantasy’s ‘fuzzy set’? Clute emphasises ‘perceived impossibility’, but then becomes a little more prescriptive about structure: ‘A fantasy text may be described as the story of an earned passage from Bondage – via a central Recognition of what has been revealed and of what is about to happen, and which may involve a profound Metamorphosis of protagonist or world (or both) – into the Eucatastrophe, where marriages may occur, just governance fertilises the barren Land, and there is a Healing’ (1997: np). Mendlesohn eschews conventions and structures, and places her emphasis on rhetoric. She sees fantasy as a ‘fiction of consensual construction of belief’, which relies on ‘literary techniques . . . most appropriate to the reader expectations’ gesturing to the reader’s role in constructing the genre (2008: xi), and distinguishes five subcategories of fantasy that have specific ‘stylistic needs’ (xv). These field-defining works have performed important literary analysis and have opened up influential perspectives from which the academy can talk about fantasy, and in doing so have legitimated discussion of a genre often dismissed as trivial or even childish. But framing fantasy fiction from a purely literary perspective may play into the constrained definitions that see genre as reducible solely to what is observable *within* the texts. Such definitions, because they describe static content, are often used to underscore the genre’s alleged formulaic nature and to suggest its limits, rather than recognising the wider social and industrial processes that traverse and shape genre texts.

Rather than striving for a more complicated or precise definition of the fantasy genre that adds key terms to the field of study, I adhere to a ‘we know it when we see it’ approach to fantasy fiction, using the collective pronoun ‘we’ to reference all of those who have a view on the genre. Those who are invested – writers, readers, publishers, and even academics – can recognise fantasy without a checklist: it is written like fantasy, it is packaged like fantasy, it circulates like fantasy, and it reads like fantasy from the perspective of those writing it, packaging it, circulating it, and reading it. As an example, Kazuo Ishiguro’s novel *The Buried Giant* inspired a vigorous debate in literary pages, which included opinions from Neil Gaiman and Ursula K. Le Guin, about whether or not it was a fantasy novel. The text

featured many of the common conventions of fantasy, including dragons, medievalism, a quest narrative, and so on. But the text did not substantially operate as fantasy on a social or industrial level. The flurry of opinions that this text aroused about genre saw genre too narrowly defined by textual features only. The texts that are the focus of this Element are written by writers who are also readers of fantasy, are supported by paratexts such as jacket design and internal map illustrations that actively mark them as fantasy, are stocked in specialist fantasy bookstores, and are discussed on *Goodreads* as fantasy by readers. There is no mistaking what they are.

I have deliberately chosen not to use the term ‘speculative fiction’ in this Element, as it is not a meaningful term in an industry sense. In the United States, the Book Industry Studies Group’s BISAC Subject Codes do not include speculative fiction, offering instead fifteen subcategories of fantasy. Nielsen BookScan also has no speculative fiction category. Thema, the international book trade’s categorisation scheme, does list speculative fiction, but it is an unelaborated category, unlike the nine different fantasy categories. Importantly, science fiction does not fall within this Element’s scope; the fantastic powers in all the texts under discussion are attributable to magic or the supernatural, not to science or technology. This Element is interested in a variety of subcategories of fantasy: first, the highly recognisable ‘high’ or ‘epic’ fantasy, set in secondary worlds where magic exists, for example, Sarah J. Maas’s *Throne of Glass* series or Kristin Cashore’s *Graceling* and its companion texts; second, the horror-adjacent ‘low’ or ‘urban’ fantasy, where mythological creatures interact with the real world, for example, Cassandra Clare’s *The Mortal Instruments* series or Maggie Stiefvater’s *Raven Cycle*; and third, the post-*The Hunger Games* dystopic fantasy, where cinematic-style superpowers are put into play in crushingly oppressive worlds, such as Victoria Aveyard’s *Red Queen* series, or Marie Lu’s *Young Elites* series.

The definition of ‘young adult fiction’ (YA) seems as though it should be more straightforward; the term itself suggests that the expected audience guides the definition and that these are books written for teenagers. To a certain extent this is true. However, YA is a ‘mixed market’ (Spencer, 2017: 433). Many adults read it (though estimations of the size of that proportion of readers differ), and most texts are ‘written by adults, published

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by adults, reviewed by adults as well as marketed by and, in fact, for adults as they are usually the ones who make books available to children both educationally and economically' (Steveker, 2015: 150). While YA is often classed as a subset of children's literature, it also has a liminal character, disrupting 'the binary opposition between adult and child' (Phillips, 2015: 45). Young adult fiction certainly features central adolescent characters and situations adolescents might be concerned with – interacting with adult characters and institutions, understanding and solidifying their identities, forming relationships, both cooperative and adversarial, with other young adults – but it hails an audience much wider than adolescents, offering pleasure to much younger readers (who may, perhaps, enjoy it aspirationally) and to much older readers (who may, perhaps, enjoy it nostalgically).

Again, I apply the 'we know it when we see it' principle to defining YA. Young adult fiction texts are clearly designed and circulated as different from adult books in a range of ways. First, the page extent of the books is generally, though by no means always, shorter than that of most adult books excluding literary fiction and category romance, and the font is sometimes larger. These aspects of the text indicate the word length is shorter and, by extension, the plot less likely to be complicated by subplots and proliferating viewpoint characters. Second, young adult books also regularly sell at a different price point from adult books. For example, the Australian recommended retail price (RRP) for Robin Hobb's May 2017 trade paperback of her adult fantasy *Assassin's Fate* is AU\$32.99, compared to Cassandra Clare's YAF *Lord of Shadows* at AU\$27.99 for the same format and publication month (www.booktopia.com). Third, distribution methods differ. While YA is sold in trade in high volume, these books also form a large portion of standing orders for libraries and educational institutions. It is perhaps for this reason that much scholarship about YA fiction frames it in terms of its community or educational value. For example, Kaplan's review of research into the genre is concerned almost solely with literacy education and the perennial question of whether or not 'kids are reading' (2011: 72). But as Richards points out, the educational imperative of YA fiction is not the whole story at all; rather, YA has the potential to meet a wide, commercial audience (2007: 153). Richards's point, considered more than ten years after publication, almost bears the character of understatement.

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Perhaps most significantly, though, YA is recognisable as YA because its narratives are focalised overwhelmingly through teenage protagonists.

Following from these definitions, then, the texts I have chosen to make central to this study feature young adult characters engaged in stories where magic or the supernatural is a significant part of the plot logic. This Element focusses on the twenty-first century, a period of pervasive change in the way books are acquired, published, and circulated. Notwithstanding the popularity of books by J. R. R. Tolkien and George R. R. Martin, which have been given a sizeable boost by recent televisual adaptations, YAF is the dominant expression of fantasy fiction in this century. At the time of writing, a ten-year anniversary edition of Cassandra Clare's *City of Bones* was in press. This seems an ideal point from which to examine the cultural phenomenon of YAF.

Applying the logic that the cultural reach of this genre is one of the most interesting things about it, I selected texts based on their popularity. I canvassed readers on forums and social media; I combed through *Goodreads* entries to find the most reviewed YAF books; but most importantly, I decided by the level of 'ambient noise' about the books and their authors. For example, I noted anecdotes about huge crowd-drawing potential at writers' festivals and conventions, deal news in trade publications, books teenagers were reading on the train, window displays in bookstores, attention paid to certain authors on reading and writing forums. In some sense, the three case studies found me – a bookish fantasy reader open to YA – and I have allowed that natural market penetration to guide my choices. Applying these controls, it soon became clear that the study would be dominated by white, female authors from North America. Rather than add a token author from the United Kingdom or my home publishing environment of Australia, I have decided to let my selections stand: this is what YAF looked like at the time of writing. I read through a wide selection of texts and narrowed it down to those that would yield the most compelling evidence for my arguments, sticking largely with single texts to suit the scope of this short monograph, although all chosen texts are published in series. The texts I consider are Sarah J. Maas's *Throne of Glass*, Cassandra Clare's *City of Bones*, and Victoria Aveyard's *Red Queen*. This Element describes and analyses the very recent history of YAF, not only by reading

the texts, but also by situating those texts within their contexts. Textual analysis is valuable scholarship, but on its own will not deepen understanding of a genre. Genre is formed in the complex interrelations between text, audience, and industry; this Element seeks to understand that process by paying due attention across all three.

Conceptualising Genre

The word ‘genre’ comes to us, via French, from the Latin *genus*, which means family or kind. Family resemblances among popular genres continue to arouse disdain from some sectors, because resemblance is not valued in a still highly Romanticised literary sphere: indeed, resemblance is equated with the derivative and unoriginal. While John Frow’s 2007 text on genre does not directly focus on popular genres of fiction, his conceptualisations are nonetheless applicable. He suggests that useful contemporary theory on genre is lacking because of the ‘the continuing of a neoclassical understanding of genre as prescriptive taxonomy and as a constraint on textual energy’ and so accounts of genre are subject to ‘Romantic reaction’ (2007: 1627).

While a more widespread understanding and acceptance of genre fiction has developed since the turn of the twenty-first century, it is still far from uncommon to find scholars who see popular genres of fiction as ‘written to a strict formula that unintentionally stifles the writer’s creativity and leads to dry, unreadable prose’ (Faktorovich, 2014: 2). Faktorovich goes on to use the word ‘hack’ as her key term to describe writers of popular fiction (6), and opines that they write to a ‘set of established formulas that have been designed by marketers, publishers, and profit-minded authors’ (1). Fred Botting agrees, suggesting the ‘formulaic and mechanical set of conventions’ (2012: 159) are part of the ‘straightforwardly commercial’ aims of popular fiction (163). He goes one step further though, associating these commercial aims with the ideological goal (whose, he does not say) of ‘reinforcing prevailing attitudes and assumptions, reassuring existing norms and values to the point of indoctrination’ (163). This (alarmingly) recent scholarship tells us there is still a great deal of misunderstanding about how genres operate in the field of popular fiction and in the wider fields of creativity and publishing studies. It is clear that a more lucid and nuanced

conceptualisation of genre is needed, one that can respond to the inter-related complexities of textual, social, and industrial processes of genre formation and yield new insights into book culture.

Despite Faktorovich's and Botting's assumption that narrow sets of textual conventions are the chief markers of genre, the idea that genres are more fluid and more negotiated than that has a solid history. Tzvetan Todorov, one of the earliest theorists of the fantastic mode, rejects the idea that genres are fixed, ahistorical categories. Any text can be seen as a 'product' of an existing 'combinatorial system' but importantly it is also 'a transformation of that system' (1973: 7). Each genre is structured by its own regimes of verisimilitude, which are consistent with what is commonly believed to belong to that genre at that time. Verisimilitude as a concept only makes sense when we decentre the text as the sole determiner of genre. Genre, for Todorov, exists in a relationship between the text and the reader. Likewise, Hans Robert Jauss is interested in interactions between texts and readers in the formation of genres. In particular, his concept of a 'horizon of expectations' is useful for describing the way that genres operate. For Jauss, expectations guide readings. The image of the 'horizon' suggests those expectations surround readers but are not fixed. As readers move, so do horizons. This implied movement means that a new text can evoke 'the horizon of expectations and "rules of the game" extended, corrected, but also transformed, crossed out, or simply reproduced' (1982: 88). Jauss recognises here not only that genres change over time, but also that audiences are involved in shaping those changes. For Jonathan Culler, just as we all approach communication armed with a competence formed of 'implicit knowledge' and 'internalised grammar,' so do we also approach literary works with a literary competence. Literary works, he writes, 'have structure and meaning because [they] are read in a particular way' (1975: 113). Literary competence describes the reader's ability to comprehend a text in particular contexts that have been learned through reading. We might say genre competence is the reader's ability to comprehend (and appreciate) a genre text through a lifetime of interaction with that genre.

The idea that genres are negotiated between texts and readers has been elaborated in more recent scholarship. Brian McHale references the idea, writing of 'shared conventions' and genre fiction's proclivity to 'cater more

openly to the expectations of readers familiar with these conventions' (2010: np), while Peter Dixon and Marisa Bortolussi write that 'genre can be understood as an implicit contract between readers and the producers of commercial narratives and that this contract is mediated by readers' knowledge', which is shaped by 'reading experience' (2009: 542–3). They also point out that genre distinctions are caught up 'in many aspects of marketing and publishing' (2009: 542), thus gesturing to the industrial aspects of genre formation. This third aspect of genre formation, the industrial, adds an extra dimension for study. Jauss, with his interest in the material specificity of genre formation, has already made room for structures other than the social to be implicated. Frow also argues for a 'poetics in which the structural components of genre are taken to be historically specific' (2007: 1628), and historical specificity might include understanding conditions of production and circulation. Frow rightly points to film theory as a 'potential source of [genre theory's] renewal' (1629). The fields of film and television studies have always been more comfortable with genre than has literary studies. Differences in production and circulation notwithstanding, there is much we might borrow in understanding popular genres of fiction from theory about popular genres of film and television, especially at a time when book culture is so caught up in transmedia convergence. Film theorist Steve Neale, for example, argues that the relationship between text and audience is highly mediated through industry and other institutions (1995: 162–3). Studying genres across creative, audience, and institutional perspectives, as Jason Mittell argues about television genres, allows for a shift in focus to 'a circuit of cultural practice operative in multiple sites, instead of a singular realm of textual criticism or institutional analysis' (2004: ix). A wider perspective of genre opens up the possibility of showing the various interrelated sites of cultural agency that are activated by YAF texts.

Dixon and Bortolussi grasp this conceptualisation of genre in one sense: they write that 'readers have certain expectations concerning the nature of works in a given genre, and authors and publishers contrive to fulfil those expectations' by 'adapt[ing] their products accordingly' (2009: 544–5). But in another sense, they miss something crucial about the negotiations between writers, readers, and industry, in that those negotiations are invested, sometimes passionate, often pleasurable. The model