Introduction

One of the first things I, like most other scholars, usually do when approaching a subject is to define specifically what I am writing about. After all, it is difficult to make any kind of substantive claims about something when what that thing is has not been clearly set out.

However, when I embarked on this project about new adult fiction, it quickly became clear that I would have to take a different approach. Since the term 'new adult' was coined by St Martin's Press in 2009, its meaning has changed so swiftly and so dramatically that to begin with a definition of the term would be to misrepresent it and to limit the usefulness of any kind of study of it.

It would also undersell what is arguably new adult's most interesting feature: its evolution as a genre. As I will go on to show in the following sections, what new adult means has shifted dramatically over the decade or so that it has existed. The term clearly has staying power, but it is also a floating signifier. In this Element, I take a snapshot approach and examine the term at three points in time. In each of them, it refers to something quite different.

The case of new adult therefore poses questions that are larger than the category itself. Indeed, it poses questions about the whole concept of literary categorisation, what it is and how it happens. In this Element, I use new adult fiction as a case study to explore the operations of genre in the contemporary literary marketplace. I push back against notions that a text's genre is something determined (at least, not solely) by the text itself and argue for the importance of paratext as a determining feature (Genette 1997). This encompasses peritext – the material within a volume that is not the text itself, such as cover, spine, blurb, frontmatter and so on – and, perhaps most importantly, epitext, which exists outside the volume. This encompasses readerly spaces such as Goodreads, which, in the case of new adult fiction, proved to be a driving force in the genre's development (see McCracken 2013 for further explication on epitext in the digital literary sphere).

I am informed in my approach to new adult fiction in this Element by the notion of the 'genre world' as theorised by Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll and

Kim Wilkins, which 'describes the collective activity that goes into the creation and circulation of genre texts, and is particularly focused on the communities, collaborations, and industrial pressures that drive and are driven by the processes of socio-artistic formations' (2018, 997). This is a modification of Howard S. Becker's notion of the 'art world', a model which positions art as the product of collective activity, rather than that of a lone artist (2008). Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins apply this to the popular fiction publishing industry in the twenty-first century and argue that a genre world is composed of three parts: it is a sector of the publishing industry, a social formation and a body of texts (2018, 997). They observe that much literary studies scholarship focuses on the third of these – the body of texts – to the detriment of the other two (2018, 997). Therefore, I adopt a more holistic approach in this Element, one that takes into account the paratextual and extratextual factors that influence how texts embody genres and how these genres develop. To understand the evolution of new adult fiction – and, more broadly, how genres shift, are shaped and develop in the contemporary literary marketplace – we must also examine the industrial and social forces in play.

The term 'new adult', as far as I have been able to determine, has been applied almost exclusively to books. As such, this is a study of a literary phenomenon, and the methods used herein derive from literary and publishing studies. However, questions of genre and categorisation are relevant well outside the literary sphere, and genres of all kinds are subject to the tripartite influences of industry, social formations and texts themselves. Because of this, it is my hope that the arguments I present in this Element will have relevance not just outside the study of new adult fiction but also outside the study of literature, in the broader study of media and communication.

Category vs Genre

A common claim that circulates about young adult (YA) fiction in popular literary discourse is that it is not a genre. 'YA is not a genre – it is a readership', writes literary agent and author Danielle Binks in an article in the Australian literary journal *Kill Your Darlings*. She argues that YA 'spans the spectrum of fiction genres from mystery to literary fiction, horror

and romance', containing within it examples of all these things. The term 'young adult', in this context, refers to the 'proposed age-bracket of the intended readership' (2014). Likewise, Tracy van Straaten, vice president at Scholastic, was quoted in an *Atlantic* article, saying that '[s]omething that people tend to forget is that YA is a category not a genre, and within it is every possible genre: fantasy, sci-fi, contemporary, non-fiction' (Doll 2012). Author Chuck Wendig wrote the following on his blog:

> Young Adult is a proposed *age range* for those who wish to read a particular book. It is a demographic rather than an agglomeration of people who like to read stories about, say, Swashbuckling Dinosaur Princesses or Space Manatee Antiheroes or whatever the cool kid genres are these days. Repeat after me: *Young Adult is not a genre designation*. (2013, emphasis in original)

Some commentators have activist reasons for making this distinction. Binks notes that 'critics and commentators would be less likely to write off an entire *readership*, than they are to criticise a single supposed genre' (2014, emphasis in original), pointing to the way that 'genre' is often seen as a marker of the lowbrow. In an article for the popular literary website Book Riot, Kelly Jensen argues that if YA is referred to 'as a genre, as opposed to category of literature', then it will be 'so easy for teens [i.e. the intended readers] to be pushed out and for adults to feel more ownership' (2019). She goes on to distinguish among 'category', 'genre' and 'mood':

> A category of books, however, is broader than a mood or a genre. A category is who the book is intended for. It's part of the marketing of a book, as well as a way for those who work with books to quickly ascertain the reader for whom the book would be most appropriate. Think of the category as an umbrella, with mood and genre falling beneath it. You have adult books as a category, and beneath it, you have mysteries, thrillers, romance, fantasy, and so forth. You can then weave mood among those genre. (2019)

I am not especially interested in proving these commentators wrong. In many ways, in fact, I would argue that they are correct. Young adult fiction (as well as the earliest incarnations of new adult fiction) is a literary category in a different way from something like romance fiction, crime fiction or fantasy fiction. Writing about children's fiction, Perry Nodelman argues that texts are 'included in this category by virtue of what the category implies, not so much about the text itself as about its intended audience' (2008, 3). These are distinctions we could also apply to more recent and specific marketing category designations, such as middle-grade fiction (targeted towards ages 8–12) and young adult fiction (targeted to teenagers). Hence, we come back to the notion that YA is not a genre, but a category, defined by its intended market rather than any particular features of the texts. Implicit in this is the assumption that 'genre' is defined by features of the text, while 'category' is defined by intended market.

While this distinction between category and genre has its uses, I differ from the previously mentioned commentators in that I do not believe that this distinction is as clear as it might seem on the surface. While YA fiction does not have a specific narrative mandate in terms of plot trajectory, it does have distinguishing textual features: for instance, it would be very unusual to find a book in the category that does not feature teenage protagonists. Similarly, in genres defined by plot trajectory, such as romance fiction, which is defined by its 'central love story' and 'emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending' (RWA, n.d.), the audience is unspoken but implied. This is also true for genres defined by more amorphous, not necessarily plot-based, textual features, such as fantasy, defined largely by the impossibility of its storyworld (Clute 1997). Unless stated otherwise, the presumption is that it is targeted to adults.

Here, I am following Nodelman, who argues, 'children's literature also implies its other: adult literature' (2008, 340). Unless a book explicitly brands itself otherwise – for example, young adult romance – then the assumption is that the intended reader demographic is adults. This does not mean that younger readers will *not* read it (indeed, 'reading up' is a noted phenomenon, as is adult readership of YA and other forms of children's literature); rather, they are not the text's implied market. Therefore, we might also contend that as the young adult romance is defined by both its

implied audience and promised plot structure, so too is the more generic romance novel. This is doubly provable when we consider that 'romance' is a genre which falls under the broader umbrella of popular fiction. This is, as Nodelman notes, another descriptor for a certain kind of text that focuses on audience rather than plot (2008, 3).

The distinction between the audience-based 'category' and the plot-based 'genre' is thus at least somewhat fuzzy: a fuzziness that can lead to substantial generic evolution, as we will see over the course of this Element's exploration of new adult fiction. Both forms imply what Frederick Jameson describes as a 'contract' between writer and reader (1975, 135), in that both make a certain kind of promise. This creates what Tzvetan Todorov and Richard M. Berrong call a 'horizon of expecta-tions' for the reader, even if those expectations might focus more heavily on who that reader is than on the nature of the plot (1976, 163).

I also want to push back against this binaristic demarcation of category vs genre by suggesting that in spaces like the physical space of the bookstore or the digital space of a platform like Goodreads, the distinction does not particularly matter. Here, every category/genre is, effectively, a marketing category, whether that category is shaped by implied audience, implied plot trajectory or some other combination of metrics. In this assertion, I am informed strongly by the work of Claire Squires, who argues that publisher taxonomies are 'a form of branding, a way of grouping and hence distinguish-ing products in the marketplace in order to capitalize on customer experience and perception of products and to maximise their visibility' (2007, 85).

While I am aware of – and agree with, at least in part – the distinctions between category and genre raised by the commentators I have quoted here, I am henceforth going to (perhaps somewhat controversially) use the words 'genre' and 'category' interchangeably in this Element, where I define the former term the way Squires does: '[g]enre, including the genre of literary fiction, is a marketing concept in publishing: a definition not for its own sake but one which has commercial implications' (2007, 5). I do not do so to be polemical but because a neat demarcation of categorisation by plot trajec-tory vs categorisation by intended audience simply does not hold up in the case of new adult fiction. As the following sections will show, new adult does not fit easily into either of these categories but has bled substantially

between the two. This has implications for how we think about categorisation more broadly, as textual features and intended readerships are not as easily distinguishable as they might initially seem.

This discussion of category vs genre is also necessary background to understand some of the vitriol with which people have reacted to new adult fiction. Notably, much of this commentary refers to the mere existence of the category rather than any particular texts that bear the genre label, something that reveals numerous assumptions about the ways we think about literary categorisation.

'"New adult" fiction is now an official literary genre because marketers want us to buy things', read the headline of a 2012 *Jezebel* article by Katie Baker. 'Let's be honest', Baker goes on to argue in the body of the article, '*marketers* need "New Adult" fiction – which really just means books about millennials, right? – to be a stand-alone genre, not readers' (2012, emphasis in original). This is indicative of an opinion that coloured much of the coverage of new adult as a literary category, especially in 2012–13, when it began to penetrate mainstream bestseller lists. Michael Stearns, former editorial director for HarperCollins Children's Books, called 'new adult' a 'breezily condescending handle' with the potential to 'ghettoize' books with twenty-something protagonists (2009). An article by Lauren Sarner in the *Huffington Post* decried it as 'a label that is condescending to readers and authors alike', not because of the quality of texts but because of the assumption that such a label was required at all (2013).

This negative commentary reveals something about how new adult fiction has been perceived: as a literary category created as a cynical marketing ploy to mobilise a particular demographic (people in their twenties). This assumption also demonstrates the assertion from Squires that I quoted at the end of the previous section: genre and marketing are deeply linked in publishing, and the logic of literary categorisation is a commercial logic (2007). Here, the term 'new adult' is assumed to denote a certain market, positioning it alongside young adult fiction, where the implied audience is the primary defining feature. The strong negative reactions expressed by these and other commentators have discrete but intertwined roots in three implied assumptions: (1) that adults in their twenties need books marketed especially to them; (2) that these books will necessarily be more infantile in quality because of the

proposed demarcation of audience, as other forms of fiction demarcated by audience are primarily for children (Nodelman 2008, 340); and (3) that this demarcation is plainly for commercial reasons, rather than serving any kind of expressed audience need.

We could also add a fourth point, commonly expressed in another form of commentary on new adult fiction: (4) it is a literary category that does not appear – initially, at least – to be defined by any kind of plot features beyond, perhaps, a protagonist belonging to a certain age bracket. Alongside the negative commentary I have noted, which decried the usefulness of the category, were many that queried – and in some cases lamented – its nebulousness, with oft-repeated titles like 'What Is New Adult Fiction?' 'What's New about New Adult?' and 'Is "New Adult" Fiction Going to Be a Thing?' (Brookover, Burns & Jensen 2013; Engberg 2014; Gold 2016; Hoffman 2010; Kieffer 2017; Smith 2012; Wetta 2013). '[T]he consensus on New Adult is that there is no consensus', one librarian wrote (Gomez 2013). Inherent in this assumption is the notion that a literary category *should* be defined by textual features, as the romance genre is shaped by its central love story and happy ending, or fantasy is defined by the presence of the fantastic, but that these features have not been identified. This leaves our other metric for defining a category – the implied reader-ship – which, as seen earlier, was not received warmly by some.

Despite this, the term 'new adult fiction' has persisted. Since its first appearance in mainstream literary discourse in 2009, the term has continued to denote a certain kind of fiction. Many attempts have been made to define it, based on features including, but not limited to, theme, narrative voice, protagonist age, readership age and the diegetic inclusion of sex (Brookover, Burns & Jensen 2013; Carmack 2012; Jae 2014; Pattinson 2014; West 2014; Wetta 2013). However, as I mentioned at the beginning of this Introduction, as I have argued briefly elsewhere (McAlister 2018a, 2018b), and as I will argue in more depth over the course of this Element, what 'new adult' denotes has evolved substantially. This means that a single, fixed definition cannot encompass the term, and to attempt to provide one would not only do a disservice to the category but also would fail to recognise the complex and changing ways that genres emerge and develop in the contemporary literary marketplace.

This is the central argument of this Element. Using new adult fiction as a case study and tracing how it has developed since its inception in 2009, my goal here is to demonstrate the fluidity and porousness of literary genres in the contemporary market. In particular, I seek to demonstrate that the boundaries between categories demarcated primarily by implied audience and those demarcated primarily by textual features are not as firm as it might initially seem by tracing how new adult fiction evolved from being a satellite category of young adult fiction to becoming a sub-genre of romance fiction. In doing so, I aim to demonstrate that paratextual features have a huge influence in shaping genre identities and understandings; that marketing plays a fundamental role in literary taxonomies; and that in the world of popular fiction, 'genre' and 'marketing category' are functionally the same thing.

About This Element

As discussed earlier, what the term 'new adult' means has changed enormously over the decade or so of its existence, and so to provide a single definition of it would be fraught. Here, I follow Kim Wilkins, who asserts that 'genres are not static, ahistorical categories. Rather, genres are processes. They are formed, negotiated and reformed, both tacitly and explicitly, by the interactions of authors, readers and (importantly) institutions' (2005). To account for this, I am taking a snapshot approach to investigating new adult fiction (McAlister 2018a), providing an overview of it at three distinct periods of time to map its generic development. The first section of this Element focuses on the beginning of new adult fiction at St Martin's Press in 2009. The second section examines the new adult boom period of 2011–13, focusing particularly on how the term 'new adult' was co-opted by readerly and writerly communities in digital fora like Goodreads. Finally, the third section interrogates the texts currently marketed and sold as new adult at the time of writing in 2020, so as to consider where this particular category has ended up, about a decade since its inception.

Taking into account Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins' assertion that the textual is often privileged at the expense of the industrial and social in studies of genre (2018), I have chosen to focus on the latter two rather than

the former. The industrial and social spheres are where much of the paratextual – especially epitextual – work of genre is done, and my goal in this Element is to show how fundamental these areas are to any interrogation of how genre operates. There is, therefore, little close reading in this Element. Indeed, to attempt close reading of any kind of representative corpus of new adult texts would be a fraught process, not least in determining what 'representative' might mean, as any kind of selection process runs the risk of imposing artificial inclusion and exclusion criteria that do not sufficiently capture how genre works in practice.

However, it is not possible – or desirable – to take the textual dimension out altogether. While I focus more on the paratextual than the textual in this Element, peritexts and epitexts cannot exist independently of texts, and it is not possible to study them and the role they play in the operations of genre without positioning them in relation to texts. Nor would it be good scholarly practice to attempt to give an account of a genre's history without being very well-read in that genre. Rather than close reading, my engagement with the textual sphere of new adult fiction in this Element draws more on distant reading as theorised by Franco Moretti (2005, 2013), which allows for patterns to be identified across a corpus by stepping back from the texts. Here, distance is 'not an obstacle, but a *specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection' (2005, 1, emphasis in original). Specifically, my reading of the texts categorised as new adult by industrial and/or social forces was to examine how well they mapped onto understandings of other genres – in particular, YA and romance, to which new adult has been akin at various points in its evolution.

1 2009 – New Adult at St Martin's Press

In his book *Genre*, John Frow contends the following:

> In thinking about genre as a process it becomes important to
> think about the conditions that sustain it: the institutional
> forces that govern the determination and distribution of
> classification and value. Genres emerge and survive because
> they meet a demand, because they can be materially sup-
> ported, because there are readers and appropriate conditions
> of reading (literacy, affordable texts), writers or producers
> with the means to generate those texts, and institutions to
> circulate and channel them. (2014, 210)

To summarise this somewhat: many of the factors that determine whether
a genre will emerge, whether it will survive and whether it will thrive are
paratextual and extratextual, not textual. The existence of the texts is not
enough. A potential readership must exist, and a body of authors must exist
capable of catering to this readership: readerly and writerly communities that
fall under the 'social formation' sector of the publishing world as theorised by
Fletcher, Driscoll & Wilkins (2018). Moreover, institutional and industrial
forces must be able to connect the readers and the writers, supporting the
growth of the genre and assisting the texts to find their market.

Frow's contentions around why genres emerge and how they survive are
a useful way to trace the origins and initial failure of new adult fiction. The
existence of texts that could be classified under the new adult label was, in
a lot of ways, somewhat irrelevant. The term was coined to mobilise
a particular *readership*. Moreover, it was not texts that stalled the progress
of the new adult category. Rather, it was institutional forces and factors that
existed outside the domain of the textual.

1.1 Post-Adolescence: St Martin's Press and the New Adult Submissions Contest

As I have written elsewhere, '[t]he origins of the genre category "new
adult" are artificial, not organic: it was made, not born' (McAlister 2018a, 4).