

# YA – Young Adult Stories for a New Generation – Part I

## By Dianna Love Snell

Young Adult books known as YA have really stepped into the spotlight recently. They've always been around, but just like everything else in today's market – the times are a changing and right along with that so are the stories teens want to read. For one thing, young adult is a broad category from very young teens to those more mature readers who are on the threshold of stepping out into the world alone. I'm not writing YA, but became fascinated by the diverse stories while critiquing for some talented writers. I've found the stories exceptionally well written and very entertaining. I think it says a lot that Caridad Ferrer's YA titled ADIÓS TO MY OLD LIFE (MTV Books/Pocket July) finaled in the "single title" division – the only category available to her – and ATMOL up for Best First Book.

This article turned out a lot larger than I'd anticipated so it's broken into a three-part series.

I interviewed new authors and a couple of the agents representing YA who shared insights on what a writer needs to know about YA publishing.

### AUTHORS:

**Kelly Parra**– GRAFFITI GIRL (MTV/Pocket Books) May 2007

**Jennifer Echols**– THE BOYS NEXT DOOR (Simon Pulse) June 2007

**Caridad Ferrer** - IT'S NOT ABOUT THE ACCENT (MTV Books/Pocket) August 2007

Berta Platas and Michelle Roper writing as **Gillian Summers**– THE TREE

SHEPHERD'S DAUGHTER (Flux) September, 2007

**Tina Ferraro** - TOP TEN USES FOR AN UNWORN PROM DRESS, Delacorte Press, March, 2007.

### AGENTS:

**Caren Johnson**, Caren Johnson Literary Agency - [www.cjla.squarespace.com](http://www.cjla.squarespace.com)

**Kristin Nelson**, Nelson Literary Agency- [www.nelsonagency.com](http://www.nelsonagency.com)

### Author interviews:

What is really different about today's YA book market?

**Kelly** - In my opinion, it's bigger stories--more subplots and a broader audience. YA isn't just for teenagers anymore. Stories today have also captured the interest of adult readers largely in part because YA plots vary from the simple to the more complex. As a whole, I think YA has spiraled into nearly every genre – literary, chick lit, mystery, fantasy, sci-fi, thriller – but with a teen protagonist in the starring role.

**Jennifer** – What's different? There is a YA book market! When I first started writing YA in the mid-90's, the market was very tight. It's wonderful to see so many new authors breaking in lately.

**Caridad** - I think it's the anything goes attitude. There's room and demand for everything from deep issue books, to light and fluffy, to paranormal, to horror and

everything in between. While the stories and subjects the books tackle are still very reflective of the age group they're meant to target, in many ways, I think YA echoes what's popular in the adult market more than ever before. (The vast proliferation of vampire stories, for example.)

**Berta:** I think publishers are allowing authors to make their stories more realistic, tackling difficult and sensitive subjects in a more direct way.

**Michelle:** I feel authors are tackling issues once considered off-limits for the YA market. In addition, the market is opened to a diverse group of genres under the YA umbrella from Harry Potter to the Gossip Girls.

**Tina** - The biggest change I've noticed in the market in the past twenty years is the disappearance of editorial guidelines. Mind you, I'm going back to the Sweet Valley High days, but I recall receiving guidelines and tip sheets from various publishers, and struggling to fit my plot and my voice inside those strict parameters. The result was inevitably a stilted story that would not come alive. These days you can be as out-of-the-box as you want, as long as you make it work. *Top Ten Uses for an Unworn Prom Dress* would have surely been rejected back then because of its conversational, first-person voice, scandalous rumors that plague the heroine, and its tongue-in-cheek prom dress uses. But today, "different" is a good thing.

## Agent interviews:

Caren Johnson is a NY based agent who fell into representing YA when Caridad Ferrer's editor for ADIOS TO MY OLD LIFE approached her about writing a Latina teen novel and has been actively hunting for good YA since then, recently signing Jennifer Echols whose book MAJOR CRUSH made her laugh out loud and thank God that she's not in high school any longer. Visit Caren's blog ([www.cjla.squarespace.com](http://www.cjla.squarespace.com)) to get her take on writing and publishing.

Kristin Nelson worked as a literary scout and subrights agent for Jody Rein before establishing Nelson Literary Agency (NLA) in 2002. In such a short period of time, NLA has built a solid reputation as a full-service agency by aggressively pursuing print, film/TV, foreign, and subrights sales on behalf of our clients. Our goal is to sign, nurture, and build our authors for the duration of their careers. Kelly Parra is one of her YA authors. For more information, visit [www.nelsonagency.com](http://www.nelsonagency.com).

With regard to target audience and tone of the book, what do you tell new authors wanting to sell YA books?

**Caren** - Don't copy what's already out there; do we really need another Stephenie Meyer, author of Twilight? An original take on a familiar story is the fastest ticket to getting noticed.

**Kristen** - I always suggest that new writers who want to write it should read a lot of young adult works. Also, teens can spot a fake in a New York minute so a young adult writer really needs to be immersed in that culture to get a natural feel for teen speech, rhythms, desires, etc.

What is the biggest problem (mistake) you see with the submissions you are receiving?

**Caren** - I see a lot of writers trying hard to be cute or clever and it comes across as strained. Don't try to be overly funny or dramatic or sassy because a reader can tell when the writer is taking the "used car salesman" approach to writing (overwriting).

**Kristen** - Writing that is just too simplistic—as if the writer wanted to dumb it down for the YA market. You don't have to. Writers can tackle complex plotlines and complex characterization in YA. In fact, they should.

Don't miss out on this year's all NEW Moonlight & Magnolias Conference. Go to [www.GeorgiaRomanceWriters.org](http://www.GeorgiaRomanceWriters.org) for all the scoop.

## YA – Young Adult Stories for a New Generation - Part II

By Dianna Love Snell

If you haven't read Part 1 of this series, please go to the archived Galleys and read Part 1. I've interviewed the following YA authors with recent sales and agents who actively acquire to find out more about this growing market:

### AUTHORS:

**Kelly Parra**– GRAFFITI GIRL (MTV/Pocket Books) May 2007

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### Author interviews:

What drew you to the YA market?

**Kelly** - V.C. Andrews when I was a young teen reader, but to be honest as a writer, the market drew me in. Editors are seeking young adult stories and I thought I'd be able to write one. Over the years I'd lost touch with the genre and during my research have discovered wonderful authors such as Sarah Dessen, Ann Brashares, Laurie Halse Anderson, and several new and talented new voices. I am truly addicted to the YA of today.

**Jennifer** - I finished my first novel when I was 20, and at that point I was still

**reading YA** along with the adult literature for my English degree. So I never got \*out\* of YA.

**Caridad** - My agent told me to? Seriously—she kept insisting I had a great voice for YA and after I scoffed one time too many, she finally said, "Look, there's an editor who's looking for a YA with Latina flavor—give it a shot." Not really a request, if you know what I mean. And once I started, I really enjoyed it—it's a different vibe and mindset altogether from the women's fiction I write, but at the same time, remarkably familiar. But don't mistake familiar for easy. All in all, it's been a wonderful learning experience, from a lot of different standpoints and easily one of the most frightening things I've ever taken on. Because who's a harsher critic than your average teen? If you don't get it right, they have no bones about telling you so and telling all their friends and everyone on the Internet, and then you're in some seriously hot water. There are too many fantastic books out there for them to give you a second chance if you've blown the first one.

**Berta:** I adore YA books and have never stopped reading them. Michelle and I are critique partners, two of four in our group, and when we had this cool idea about a fish out of water story, we decided it would be best written for a younger audience.

**Michelle:** Like Berta, I love YA books, especially fantasy. Young adult is that stage in life where you're bordering on the sunset of childhood and the dawn of adulthood. You're discovering who you are, the world is ripe with possibility--you can be what you dream, yet there can be a dark side to life as a young adult. If you can create a character that resonates with your readers and give them hope, lets them escape in your book, or just makes them think about their choices, then as an author you've made a difference.

**Tina** - I am a shameless optimist, and what I love most about writing YA is the feeling that my whole life is still in front of me, and anything is possible if I work hard enough! Do you write a series and, if so, how are the books connected (one character or related characters from different books)?

What is your story about and does it target a specific teen group (which one)?

**Kelly** - *Graffiti Girl* – being released May 15, 2007 – is about a high school Mexican-American artist drawn into the underground world of graffiti art, feeling this is the only method her artwork will be accepted and still allow her to stay true to her cultural identity. It's a story of finding where you belong and believing in your talent enough to be different. *Graffiti Girl* is targeted for Latino readers as well as high school artists (13+).

**Jennifer** - Working the summer at a marina near her lakeside home, a high school junior pretends to date the boy next door to catch his older brother, her childhood crush. It's a romantic comedy for ages 14 and up.

**Caridad** - Both of my MTV Books are coming of age stories but with different approaches. ADIÓS (2006 release) is set against the backdrop of an American Idol-style show with a Latin flavor and follows my protagonist as she navigates a world of new fame and all the issues that come along with that. ACCENT, on the other hand, is entirely a journey of self-discovery, set to the theme of reinvention – the type that we all go through, to a certain extent when we go off to college. Trying on a new persona, figuring out who we are or who we want to be. Both of my protagonists are older; in ADIÓS, Ali is seventeen and turns eighteen by the end of the book, in ACCENT, Caro is

an eighteen year-old college freshman. As far as targeting specific groups, superficially, one could say I'm targeting a Latina audience, but in all honesty, I wanted to make my books universally appealing with my own Cuban American/Miami-raised background giving more a flavor and distinction, as it were. The books were definitely not written with any kind of intent to alienate potential readers, but rather to hopefully give people a glimpse into a culture they might not be as familiar with. Knowing that kids like to read up, in terms of the ages of the protagonists of the stories they choose, I always say that my books are pretty much appropriate for ages 14 and up.

**Berta:** Our story is about a privileged fifteen year old girl from Los Angeles whose life is turned upside down when her mom dies and she's sent to live with her absentee father. He's an itinerant furniture craftsman on the Renaissance Faire circuit, and if that isn't world-shaking enough, she finds out the Faire is filled with magical secrets, and her father's a major part of them.

**Michelle:** We're not really targeting any specific teen market, although our book would fall under the urban fantasy category; however, our heroine, Keelie, is a girl who readers will immediately be able to identify with because of the emotional journey she takes as she overcomes the obstacles within her own self in accepting her new life with her father.

**Tina** - My book is TOP TEN USES FOR AN UNWORN PROM DRESS, and its pink cover pretty much promises a "sweet" read. My target audience is females over the age of 12, and I think of it as a "companion" to bring on trips--or maybe a way to "veg" after mid-terms or finals. In any case, it's not heavy literature, just a fun way to escape. I've been thrilled to find that guys like the book, too. In fact, one teen book clerk told me I got the guy head "just right".

Agent interviews:

Which houses are actively acquiring YA and is there a difference between what they want?

**Caren** - Almost all major publishing houses have a YA line actively acquiring.

**Kristen** - All of them that have YA imprints are acquiring. As for what they want, it's really more about the individual editors at each imprint and their likes and dislikes for what they want to see.

Do the publishers want series based on one character or series that are connected by secondary characters that become the protagonist at some point?

**Caren** - Publishers will acquire both kinds of series, ones that have direct sequels where characters are recurring (think Meg Cabot's Mediator series) and series based in the same world, though not necessarily a follow up to the previous book published. In general, I find that anything primarily focused on the romance between characters is usually series based in the same world (since the focus is on the romance, it's hard to have a sequel because the guy and girl usually end up together by the end of the book) while more literary or commercial YA have direct sequels.

**Kristen** - Both can work. I have a YA author that has just started a new series where the unique setting is the common denominator (Jenny O'Connell's new series with MTV/Pocket Books). I have another YA author whose main protagonist carries the story (Ally Carter's Gallagher Girl Academy series with Hyperion). My author Kelly Parra (who writes for MTV/Pocket) is working on a new possible series where all the characters introduced will get their own story.

## YA – Young Adult Stories for a New Generation - Part III

### By Dianna Love Snell

If you haven't read Part I & II of this series, please go to the archived Galleys and read parts one and two. Thanks to the following new YA authors and agents you'll know more about this quickly evolving market:

#### AUTHORS:

**Kelly Parra**– GRAFFITI GIRL (MTV/Pocket Books) May 2007

**Jennifer Echols**– THE BOYS NEXT DOOR (Simon Pulse) June 2007

**Caridad Ferrer** - IT'S NOT ABOUT THE ACCENT (MTV Books/Pocket) August 2007

Berta Platas and Michelle Roper writing as **Gillian Summers**– THE TREE

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**Kristin Nelson**, Nelson Literary Agency- [www.nelsonagency.com](http://www.nelsonagency.com)

#### Author interviews:

What is your approach to marketing a YA novel (what are you doing)?

**Kelly** - I believe marketing a YA novel is just like marketing fiction for adults--find your audience and let them know about your novel. I have a website – [www.KellyParra.com](http://www.KellyParra.com) – and a myspace page where I've connected with writers, readers, and reviewers. I also co-host a YA blog with YA author, Tina Ferraro (Top Ten Uses for an Unworn Prom Dress), called YA Fresh ([yafresh.blogspot.com](http://yafresh.blogspot.com)). At YA Fresh, we chat about YA books, authors, and lots of fresh stuff. :)

**Jennifer** - I have a 5-year-old, so my travel time is limited. I maintain a strong web presence with a web site ([www.jennifer-echols.com](http://www.jennifer-echols.com)) and a MySpace page. I also run the Simon Pulse Romantic Comedies blog ([www.simonpulseromanticcomedies.blogspot.com](http://www.simonpulseromanticcomedies.blogspot.com)), a joint blog for authors in the series.

**Caridad** - MTV was great about getting the line authors exposure with television commercials and placements in a few magazine giveaways. Personally, for me, the

obvious was establishing an Internet presence – [www.CaridadFerrer.com](http://www.CaridadFerrer.com). I have a MySpace page, although it's not quite as popular with teens as it was say a year ago (and that's one thing that makes marketing to teens a pain—they are the epitome of Short Attention Span Theatre, always on to the next new thing). But the MySpace page is also valuable as a networking tool between YA authors and reaching fans of books similar to your own—so it's a great cross-promotional tool that way. And thing is, with so many teens being so Internet savvy, if they want to find your presence on the web, they will. Of course, I have a web site and a blog and an amazon plog and I've created iMixes for iTunes. However, for ACCENT I want to broaden my horizons, get a little more exposure in print magazines and now that I'll have two books out, I'd like get out more and actually meet more readers. To that end, I've hired an outside publicist to help me with ACCENT; my publicist at MTV is wonderful, but she's one person with many authors' needs to see to. I want someone who will be focused on what's best for me, as an individual author, and getting me exposure in key markets.

**Berta and Michelle** - Website, MySpace page, blogging, book signings, school visits and Ren Faire appearances. Considering a book trailer, too. Websites are a necessity these days, MySpace and blogging because that's where the YA audience lives. Ditto for school visits, and for this series, the Renaissance Faires. The book trailer is just plain cool.

**Tina** - I have been lucky enough to have the Random House marketing department behind me, and that included scores of books sent out to magazines and reviewers, and an ad in Teen Vogue. On the personal front, in addition to a big book signing, I am going around to stores, introducing myself and signing their stock--what is sometimes called "Drive-By Signing". I also have a website – [www.TinaFerraro.com](http://www.TinaFerraro.com) – a blog and Myspace.

Do you write a series and, if so, how are the books connected (one character or related characters from different books)?

**Kelly** – Not yet - *Graffiti Girl* is not part of a series. But I do have an interest to write one in the future and MTV/Pocket has my next YA in hand.

**Jennifer** - Both THE BOYS NEXT DOOR and MAJOR CRUSH (2006) are part of the Simon Pulse Romantic Comedies series. Most of these books aren't connected, but they're "branded" like a Harlequin line with similar covers, and they're marketed together.

**Berta and Michelle** - THE TREE SHEPHERD'S DAUGHTER is the first in a trilogy. The next two books follow our heroine deeper into the heart of her father's world.

What piece of advice would you give new writers wanting to break into the YA market?

**Kelly** - Be true to your voice. When I began writing *Graffiti Girl*, I was unsure of my YA tone. Did I have to speak teen slang? Did I have to write in a way that was not me? No. Give teens the credit they deserve and don't write down to them. YA readers want memorable characters and good stories, and that's exactly what you want to give them in your own voice.

**Jennifer** - A new hook would be great. For instance, MAJOR CRUSH was set in a high school marching band, which hadn't been done before to my knowledge. And just like adult romance, you need to write the book you want to read.

Caridad - Same thing I was told when I first sold and was freaking out about actually

having to write the whole book—whatever you do, don't write down to your audience. Try to be as genuine and honest as you possibly can—do whatever it takes to tap into your inner seventeen or fifteen or twelve year-old to achieve a genuine voice, but if you force it, they'll see it from a mile away and your book will be a wallbanger before they've hit page five.

**Berta:** Learn your craft, surround yourself with young people, stay in touch with your goofy/earnest/inquisitive/indignant/intense kid self, and write, write, write. Be persistent, thicken your skin to criticism, learn from it, and never give up.

**Michelle:** Don't give up. Get in touch with your inner teen. Really think back to when you were a teenager and remember the issues and the obstacles you faced in school, like the glaring pimple breaking out on the end of your nose on the first day of high school, and knowing that everyone is going to be looking at you. And don't write down to teens or they'll throw the book against the wall. ☺

**Tina** - This sounds sort of funny, but what works for me is to write for my teenage self. I try to tap back into those days, to remember what I felt and what I wanted, and to try to write a book that I would have enjoyed reading.

Agent interviews:

**What types of YAs are you not seeing that you'd like to receive?**

**Caren** - I'd love to receive more literary/commercial YA a la Laura Wiess' Such a Pretty Girl, Scott Westerfeld's Uglies trilogy (this is sci fi, but I adore his writing), Caridad Ferrer's Adios to My Old Life, Kevin Brook's Kissing the Rain and Tracy Lynn's RX. The main theme here is that I'm looking for writing with a strong voice, not necessarily genre writers (though they're certainly welcome to query me too!)

**Kristen** - Anything literary. I've seen lots of chick lit submissions (and I still love them) but I wouldn't mind seeing writers tackle some meaty stuff with gorgeous writing.

**What piece of advice would you give new writers wanting to break into the YA market?**

**Caren** - Read what's out there first. That brilliantly original idea you may have had has almost certainly been done before. Then figure out how you can do it better and distinctively.

**Kristen** - Get savvy about the genre (so research current sales, what titles make it big and why, what would be an original story idea) and then write well. There's a place for you.

Thanks to all these authors and agents who took the time to share their valuable knowledge and insights!

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