

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. Please check back in June and July for Parts II and III.

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

Kristin Nelson, Nelson Literary Agency- 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) 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.

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.

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