

**'Ghosts, Murder And Mutation: Pandemic in Young Adult Literature.'**  
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- Why the focus on YA literature? - Texts chosen for the GCSE in the Modern Prose section do have some YA texts, however 'A' level tends to focus on the canon.
- Brief history of Young Adult Fiction
- How authors have responded to pandemics



YA fiction began in the US post WW2. Due to economic security families in the US could support children for longer with a leaving age of 16-18. In the UK the school leaving age was 15. There was therefore time and finance to support a counter- culture and time for exploration of the self.

James Dean (1931-1955) – teenage rebel icon



Culture was turning to a focus on youth both in the US and...



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## 1960s - UK



Mods and Rockers

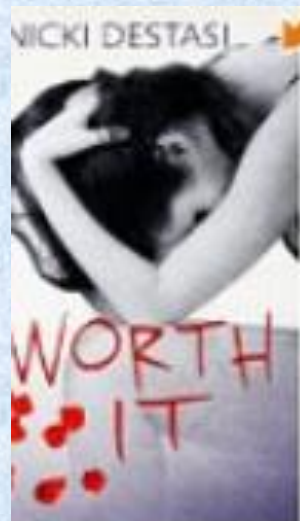
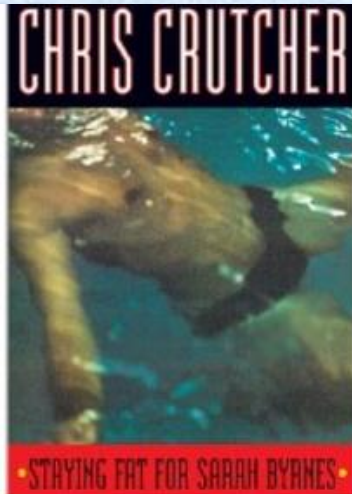
Critical views agree (McCallum 1999, Watson 2001, Trites 2000 et al) that YA fiction is concerned with:

- Real life
- Social issues
- School
- Romance
- Relationships
- Difficulties in family life
- Turbulence and complexity
- Gender
- Identity
- Sexuality
- Feelings of alienation
- About growth and development
- Conflict

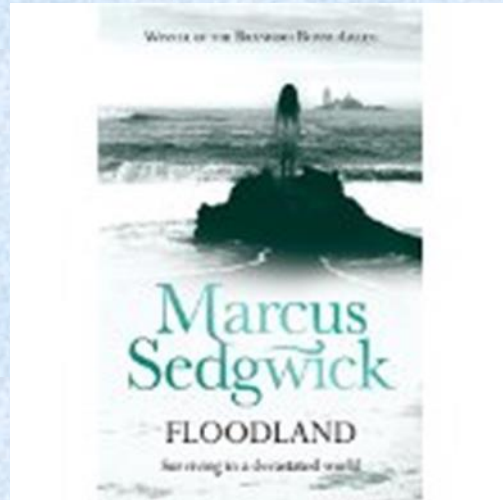
YA/teenage fiction authors have not shirked difficult subjects – within the bounds of censorship controls. For example, in the UK Berlie Doherty's *Dear Nobody* (1991) takes teenage pregnancy as the subject. Melvin Burgess *Doing It* (2003) caused controversy with explicit focus on female sexuality.

Anne Fine has addressed subjects such as parenting and race in *Flour Babies* (1993) and *Blood Families* (2013) which takes child abuse as the subject.

Since the 1990s there have been a considerable number of YA/Teenage books dealing with self harm, obesity, drugs, alcoholism and anorexia.



Over the past twenty years science fiction, the environment and climate change has become another area of focus internationally.



This reflects real world concerns such as the notion of a pandemic which we are very disturbingly currently experiencing.

Tragically this pandemic is not the only such event in history. 'The Black Death' swept across Europe from 1347 to 1351, followed by 'The Great Plague', 1665-1666, and 'The Spanish Flu pandemic', 1918-1920. These life-changing events have stimulated historical fiction for older children, teenage readers and adults; writers have also employed memoirs, ghost stories, murder mysteries and dystopian science fiction to explore the effects of pandemics on individuals and societies.

## Texts used for this study.

### YA texts

#### 1348 Black Death

Paton Walsh, Jill *A Parcel of Patterns*. Penguin, 1983.

Nichols, Sally. *All Fall Down*. Andersen Press, 2019.

Walters, Minette. *The Last Hours*. Allen & Unwin, 2018.

#### 1666 Great Plague

Doherty, Berlie. *Children of Winter*. Catnip, 2019.

#### 1918 Flu Epidemic

James, Reina. *This Time of Dying*. Portobello Books, 2007.

LaFane, A. *The Keening*.

Milkweed Editions, 2010.

Todd, Charles. *An Unmarked Grave*. William Morrow, 2012

Winters, Juliette *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*, Abrams, 2013

Lucier, Makiia *A Death-Struck Year*. Houghton Mifflin

Harcourt, 2014.

Rada, James *October Mourning* Legacy Publishing 2016

#### 1954 Polio

Roth, Philip *Nemesis*

### Science fiction

Pausewang, Gudrun. *The Last Children*. Walker Books, 1989.

Pausewang, Gudrun. *Fall-Out*. Viking, 1994.

Macdonald, M.P. *Infection: Sympatico Syndrome*:

Macdonald, 2016

Grant, Michael. *Plague*. Dean, 2019.

### Adult texts

#### 1348 Black Death

Brooks, Geraldine *Year of Wonders*. Harper Perennial, 2008.

#### 1918 Flu Epidemic

McCarthy, Mary. *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*. Penguin Books, 1965.

Maxwell, William. *They Came Like Swallows*. Vintage Books, 2008.

*So Long, See You Tomorrow*. Vintage Books, 2012.

Porter, Katherine Anne. *Pale Horse, Pale Rider: Selected Short Stories*. Penguin Classics, 2011.

O'Hara, John. *'The Doctor's Son' in Selected Stories* Vintage Classics, 2018.

### **Historical fiction**

Minette Walters. *The Last Hours*. Allen & Unwin, 2018.

### **Ghosts and murder ....**

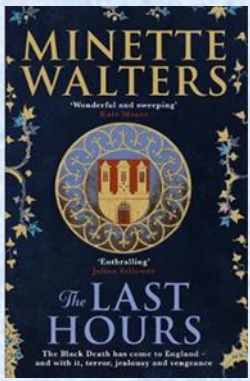
Juliette Winters. *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*. Abrams, 2013

Charles Todd. *An Unmarked Grave*. William Morrow, 2012

### **Science fiction**

Michael Grant. *Plague*. Dean, 2011.

M.P. Macdonald *Infection: Sympatico Syndrome*. Macdonald, 2008



## Historical fiction Minette Walters. *The Last Hours*

Set in 1348, Lady Anne of Develish is shaping her a feudal manor into one of the most productive and harmonious in the county, employing unusually progressive ideas about healthcare and literacy among her serfs, and despite resistance from her uncouth and cruel Norman husband Sir Richard and petulant teenage daughter Eleanor. While visiting a neighbouring manor to secure Eleanor's marriage, Sir Richard succumbs to an unknown illness: his captain notices mass graves and deserted villages along the way. When a messenger arrives in Develish forewarning that "a Black Death has fallen upon our land", Lady Anne – who from her convent upbringing has learned the importance of segregating the sick – orders her people inside the boundary walls of her moated manor house. The gates are barred to all comers including her sick husband and his attendants, who are left to die without confessing their sins.

This self-imposed isolation quickly breeds tensions in the small community as supplies run short and the class hierarchies of the feudal system begin to crumble. Class-consciousness afflicts every character here with a modern awareness, as the devastation outside causes some to question the old certainties about divine punishment, favour the positioning of women and freedom.

In addition to this feminist and humanitarian re-working of the period, the story circulates around the young adults who have to work out how to deal with this radically changing world.

## Ghosts and murder ....

### Juliette Winters *In the Shadow of Blackbirds*

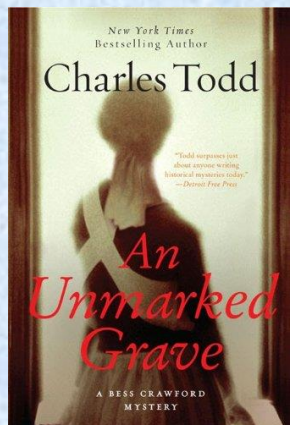
In 1918 in San Diego, the population lives in fear of the deadly Spanish influenza, and fear of the brutal First World War that is raging overseas. Mary Shelley Black is staying with her Aunt who makes her eat lots of onions, carry garlic, wear a mask and avoid contamination. As loved ones die from the flu or are killed in the war people turn to spirit photographers and séances in search of solace. Mary's first love Stephen has enlisted and is thought to have been killed on the battlefield at sixteen. She is very sceptical of the spirit photographs and séances, BUT, Stephen haunts her .....

The story depicts how this teenager copes with the stress of the flu epidemic, grief, the inexplicable and the mystery which lies at the heart of these appearances – has he died or is there a cover up of some family shame? Has there been a murder?



### Charles Todd. *An Unmarked Grave*. William Morrow, 2012

In 1918 young Bess Crawford has volunteered as a nurse on the battlefields of France where the those who have died from influenza are as numerous as those wounded and killed in battle. She sees a murdered soldier amid the piles of the dead who have succumbed to influenza at the front. Before she can alert anyone, she falls ill herself, and while recovering, questions what she saw, believing it to be a nightmare when she suffered from a high fever. She returns to France to follow up on her suspicions. Further suspicious deaths follow of those who have tried to help her and who could have identified the murdered man. This is a text which emphasizes the courage, sense of duty, intelligence, determination and the need for justice in this young woman in a world which is male-dominated.



## Science fiction

### **Michael Grant. *Plague*. Dean, 2019. (Book four of *The Gone series*)**

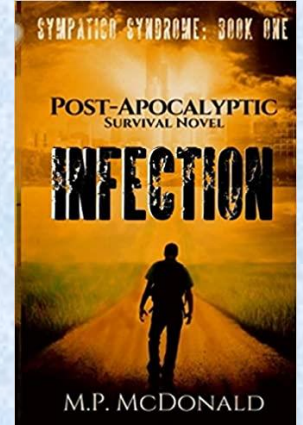
Set in America in a dystopian future all of the teenagers and children under fifteen have been trapped in a dome and the adults have disappeared following a mysterious accident. Some of the children and teenagers have individual super-powers: e.g. speed, strength, mind-reading. They have to learn how to survive and to make a new society which becomes divided by power struggles. They use their individual talents and organise themselves against the threat of unseen evil forces and the need to find ways of feeding and caring for themselves. They are managing relatively well until a flu-like virus spreads amongst them in the dome. One girl has the special power of healing. She is able to get limbs to re-grow and to heal wounds, however, her powers are insufficient to cure the devastating effects of this killer flu. They set up isolation units and eventually the virus dies out. Even in this world of science fiction a virus which causes an epidemic cannot be overcome by any feat of science or the superhuman.



### **M.P. Macdonald *Infection: Sympatico Syndrome*. Macdonald, 2008**

The world has never seen a virus like this. Not only is it deadly, but it changes victims' behaviour in order to spread the disease before they die. Cole Evans first heard about the flu outbreak at a military base on a remote island. He had worked at that base as an epidemiologist while serving in the Navy and knew the kind of diseases they studied there. The entire world could be facing a global pandemic like nothing it had seen before. Cole must find a way to protect his family from a disease that could wipe out the human race. He decides to take his family to a remote island where they can be isolated. However, his son is at college and must find his way across the hundreds of miles to the sanctuary of the island at a time when society has broken down. This is a journey fraught with danger as the disease takes away any inhibitions or sense of danger: those behaviours which protect us and maintain a controlled society. This world is out of control and becoming increasingly violent.

This is a disturbing piece of writing written twelve years ago, for it eerily the measures they have to take to protect themselves are those which we are all engaged in at present: masks, handwashing, keeping a social-distance, being aware of contamination, social isolation and faith in there being a vaccine.



## Summary

These YA texts are set in 'real' life and deal with the social issues and problems which confront the young protagonists as they are torn from their normality by disease. They are still having to negotiate developing social relationships, romances, questions about identity and in some cases gender. They must cope with feeling alienated and experience the turbulence and complexity of having to re-shape their societies in some cases without adult help or advice. They are the makers of the new world from that which survives. They are the makers of the 'new normal'. In way these challenging texts raise questions such as:

**' and what would you do? What do you believe in? How would you re-make this world....?'**