
YA Mysteries: Trends from the Past 10 Years

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In YA, mysteries take many different forms. Sometimes, the mystery is an unsolved crime, like a murder or theft. Other times, it is the disappearance of certain characters. Finally, the mystery can also be the truth about the characters themselves.

Over the past 10 years, some key trends have occurred in YA mysteries. This article summarizes trends of the past, present, and future, as well as a trend that is a staple of the genre.

Past Trends

Follow the Bread Crumbs

In the mid-to-late 2000s, a series of books were published where characters were given clues to follow, not knowing what they'd discover.

One of these books is *Paper Towns* by John Green (2008), which this issue contains a review of on page 14. In *Paper Towns*, the girl Quentin is infatuated with, Margo, disappears, leaving him with a series of clues to follow. This novel

contains many mysteries: the purpose of the clues, Margo's disappearance, and the truth about Margo herself.

Two other key books that were part of this trend involve the number 13: *13 Little Blue Envelopes* by Maureen Johnson (2005) and *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher (2007). In *13 Little Blue Envelopes*, Ginny receives a series of tasks to complete from her late aunt, but she doesn't know why her aunt sends her on the journey. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Clay discovers thirteen cassette tapes that explain why his friend, Hannah, committed suicide. As he tries to piece together information in the tapes, Clay travels to the places Hannah described to better understand what happened.

All of these books send characters on a physical journey, where they follow instructions and interpret clues to solve a mystery that is typically related to another character's death or disappearance.

Unreliable Narrators

In a traditional murder mystery, the reader knows what the main character knows, and is working alongside them to

solve the mystery. However, sometimes the mystery of a novel is found within information the main character is withholding from the reader. In the early 2010s, unreliable narrators were popular choices for protagonists.

Two popular YA books with unreliable narrators are *Charm and Strange* by Stephanie Keuhn (2013) and *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart (2014); the former won the Morris Award (2014), and the latter won the Goodreads Choice Award for Best YA Fiction (2014). In *Charm & Strange*, Andrew believes he is a werewolf, explaining his split personalities of Win and Drew, but readers are left to figure out if that's really the cause of his behaviour. The summary of *We Were Liars* is vague, hinting at secrets and lies, leaving readers questioning if Cadence's narrative is true from the first sentence ("We Were Liars", 2014). Both books can be described as psychological thrillers as the unreliability of the narration makes every moment suspenseful, and both novels explore why the protagonists' versions of their stories are warped.

However, arguably the most popular novel for teens with an unreliable narrator was originally marketed as an adult novel: *Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2012). *Gone Girl* had considerable crossover success, especially after its film adaptation in 2014. *Gone Girl* is a murder mystery made more complicated by the untrustworthy narration of both Amy, the victim, and Ryan, her husband (Siegel, 2014).

Many other YA novels with unreliable narrators were published within this time-frame, such as *Code Name Verity* by Elizabeth Wein (2012), *Imaginary Girls* by Nova Ren Suma (2011), and *17 & Gone*, also by Nova Ren Suma (2012) (Adler, 2013). Due to the popularity of this trend, Grace (2015) predicts it will continue into 2015, as will be explored within the Disappearing Acts section.

Current Trends

Cause of Death: Unknown

At the beginning of 2015, two high-profile YA novels were published in the vein of *Thirteen Reasons Why* by Jay Asher: *Playlist for the Dead* by Michelle Falkoff (2015) and *I Was Here* by Gayle Forman

(2015). The summary of *Playlist for the Dead* is almost shockingly similar to that of *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the main difference being current technology: Sam tries to understand why his best friend, Hayden, committed suicide, through listening to a playlist Hayden left for him. Similarly, in *I Was Here*, Cody tries to understand her best friend Meg's suicide through information she discovers during a trip to Meg's college town, including information stored in an encrypted computer file (Parkin, 2014).

As in *Thirteen Reasons Why*, the mystery in both of these books is why characters close to the protagonists decided to end their lives. Unlike a murder mystery, these mysteries can't necessarily be resolved, but the characters still work towards a resolution to find closure.

Disappearing Acts

Riding off the popularity of *Gone Girl*, many current YA mysteries involve missing girls (Ryland, 2015).

In YA, mysteries about missing persons are often either contemporary or magical realism stories. In terms of magical

realism, *Bone Gap* by Laura Ruby (2015) is a title receiving considerable attention from book bloggers (Ana, 2015; Kim, 2015); it tells the story of Roza who went missing in Bone Gap, a place infamous for its disappearances, and Finn's quest to find her and prove she was kidnapped. The reviews note that it's a difficult book to describe due to its dream-like quality; as Kim (2015) stated, it made her question not only the book's reality, but also her own reality. Thus, continuing the trend of unreliable narration, its mystery is not only in Roza's disappearance, but also in the story itself.

As for contemporary, the popular YA author Lauren Oliver recently released *Vanishing Girls* (2015), in which Nick's sister, Dara disappears, and she must find her. Wheat (2015) compared the book to *We Were Liars* by E. Lockhart, stating that while it was clear the book contained unreliable narration, it was difficult to discern if Nick or Dara was lying. Therefore, as with *Bone Gap*, the story itself is as much of a mystery as Dara's disappearance is.

Some upcoming YA titles also feature disappearing girls. *Vanished* by E.E.

Cooper (May 2015), for example, is described as “*Gone Girls* meets *Pretty Little Liars*” (“Vanished”, 2015), supporting the theory that this trend is a result of *Gone Girl*'s popularity. *Finding Paris* by Joy Preble (April 2015) is an upcoming contemporary novel similar to *Vanishing Girls*, as it is a story of sisters where one disappears, and the other must search for her (Ryland, 2015).

Future Trend

Lives of Crime

While not all books that fit within this trend can be considered mysteries, the latter half of 2015 will see the publication of YA books that feature protagonists caught up in complicated crime operations (Parkin, 2014). Typically, the mystery in these novels is in the inner-workings of the operations the characters are unaware of.

Pretending to be Erica by Michelle Painchaud (July 2015) fits into this category well, as it is the story of 17-year-old Violet who must pretend to be Erica Silverman to fulfill her father's, an infamous con man, plan. Violet is unaware of the extent of her father's plan and the

purpose of everything he asks from her, and that is the story's mystery. *Con Academy* by Joe Schreiber (August 2015) is similar in that it's a story about cons, though in this case, the crimes are performed by amateur teen con-artists, not a professional con-artist. In *Con Academy*, Will and Andrea are battling to see who can con the richest kid in school in their prep school, but as the cons get more complicated, the story turns into a mystery of who is telling the truth. Finally, *Hold Me Like a Breath* by Tiffany Schmidt (May 2015) is another story about trust: Penelope is part of a crime family that is involved with the black market for organ transplants, but as her family fights with others for control of the market, she must determine who can be trusted (Parkin, 2014).

Ongoing Trend

Teen Detectives

From Nancy Drew to Anne Dowling, teen detectives are a staple of YA mysteries. These detectives often solve murder mysteries, though they also work on solving crimes such as thefts and disappearances. While many novels have fallen within this trend over the past ten

years, a few notable ones will be explored here.

Perhaps best known for the controversy surrounding its accidental nomination for a National Book Award (the book was mistaken for Franny Billingsley's *Chime*), *Shine* by Lauren Myracle (2011) has become a well-known novel featuring a teen detective (Sarnak, 2011). It is the story of Cat, who seeks to solve the mystery of who committed a hate crime against her friend.

Teen detectives are often found in series that have them solving multiple cases, and the *Prep School Confidential* series by Kara Taylor (2013-2014) is an example of that. In the series, Anne Dowling solves mysteries including the murder of her roommate, the disappearance of a former student, and the disappearance of her favourite teacher.

Finally, an upcoming title about a teen detective to watch out for is *Scarlett Uncover* by Jennifer Latham (May 2015), which is marketed towards fans of *Veronica Mars* ("Scarlett Undercover", 2015). Scarlett is a Muslim American private eye working on solving crimes in

Las Almas, and one crime leads her to discovering secrets about her heritage that may lead to information about her father's murder.

In YA, teens often become detectives due to the inadequacy of the professional detectives in their towns. Often, this inadequacy is a result of biases against certain groups of people, and thus these novels explore those themes as well. *Prep School Confidential*, for example, explores how gender and class influences how crimes are treated, while *Shine* considers the same in regards to sexual orientation.

Conclusion

While certain trends in YA mysteries can be identified from the past 10 years, they also all bleed into each other. For example, stories about disappearances tend to be told by unreliable narrators, and every mystery involves detective work to some degree. However, the trends show there is enough variety within the genre for it to appeal to all readers.

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