

BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN CLASSICS AND POPULAR YA FICTION

By Vanessa Black

Often teens are not interested in classic literature because to them it seems stuffy, old, or over their heads. Most of the time, they just want a popular young adult book written for them; they want a book that appeals directly to how they feel today. However, it is possible to get those anti-classics young adults to read the classics and love them—it is just a matter of finding the story with the right appeals. Usually once they get interested they will only crave more. There is no denying that this is a difficult process, but it is worth the battle to introduce teens to something different, something that may change their life whether it's from the 1900's or the 1960's. The reality is that if a young adult finds the right book, it does not need to have been written recently to speak to them—it is all

about finding something that reaches out to them.

It sounds harsh to say that you need to con them into reading classics, but in some cases that is the way to do it. Sometimes they can be resistant if you present it as “a classic,” but they may be more interested if they are presented with different appeals. It's all about finding a way to create a bridge from the things that they already know and like to the things they are usually unwilling to try. Librarians and teachers need to use the things that teens already enjoy as a way to introduce them to new things by portraying their similarities.

Read-a-likes

One of the most effective ways to get teens to read a book is to find the books they love already and present them as a link to similar material. Some of the same themes and appeals present in popular works can be found in those “old classics”. This strategy is similar to finding a read-a-like but with a

more specific set of books in mind. In this case, not any book will do; it is about finding a classic book that covers some of the same issues, or has similar themes in them. For instance, one of the most recent popular works that has been made into a film is the novel *Beastly* by Alex Flinn. This book looks at two sides of a boy and shows that there is a difference between what is on the inside and what is on the outside. A teen who likes *Beastly* may also be interested in reading *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* which addresses similar issues of division in identity. Another example involves *The Angel Experiment* by James Patterson. In this book part human creatures with wings are created in a lab. Teens who enjoy the science fiction/ fantasy side of this book may also enjoy Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*. If there is a teen who enjoyed the pirate story of L.A. Meyer's *Bloody Jack*, then they may also like the adventure that takes place in Robert Louis Stevenson's

Treasure Island. Possibilities for classic read-a-likes are endless because no matter the time in which they were written, stories can always have certain appeals in common. It is just a matter of finding that one special book that will be of interest to a certain teen. Not every teen will want to read classic fiction, but using read-a-likes gives us the chance to introduce them to the ones who may. For more read-a-like ideas see the list later in this issue.

Name Dropping of Classics



Another way to encourage young adults to read classics is to get them to read a classic that their favorite

popular book character is reading. There are many YA authors that mention classic titles that are read by their characters. A vast majority of teens have read the popular Stephanie Meyer series *Twilight*. In

Twilight, *Wuthering Heights* happens to be Bella Swan's favourite book. Teens who love Bella and want to be her may be interested in reading her favourite book; Bella's favourite may become their favourite too. It does work—I tried it on my 13-year-old sister. You could also attempt this with *Pride and Prejudice* and *Romeo and Juliet* as they are also mentioned in the *Twilight* series. The recently popular *I Am the Messenger* by Markus Zusak also mentions *Wuthering Heights* as he reads it to a lady in the book. There is even at least one instance of indirect reference to *Wuthering Heights* in a manga book, *Aoi Hana*—one of the main characters plays the role of Heathcliff in a school drama festival.

Twilight is not the only one to name drop classics; the above mentioned novel *Beastly* by Alex Flinn also contains some name dropping. In this book, *Jane Eyre*, a classic commonly read in some high schools, is Lindy's favourite book. As well,

Kyle—the beastly boy in the novel—is changed by both *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Phantom of the Opera*. One can easily find many instances of name dropping and only need to be made aware of this phenomenon in order to come up with examples that they have probably read themselves. Although mentioning classics in YA literature may seem trivial, it may actually be an easy way of getting some teens interested in reading a classic. At the end of this article you will find a sample list of instances of name dropping.

Cover Art

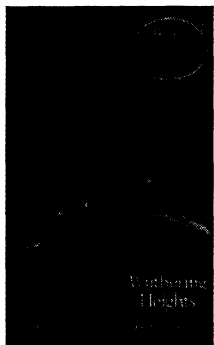
The classic saying goes “don't judge a book by its cover”, but the reality is many people do. For YA books in libraries, cover art is important for circulation. A huge indicator of this has been the recent



release of some classic novels with *Twilight*-esque covers. According to Flood (2009), when an edition of *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte was released in May of 2009, it sold approximately 10,000 copies.

Remember, this book was originally published in 1847. This is an indication that covers sell – and right now *Twilight* covers sell the best.

Publishers spend large amounts of money marketing books, and much of that



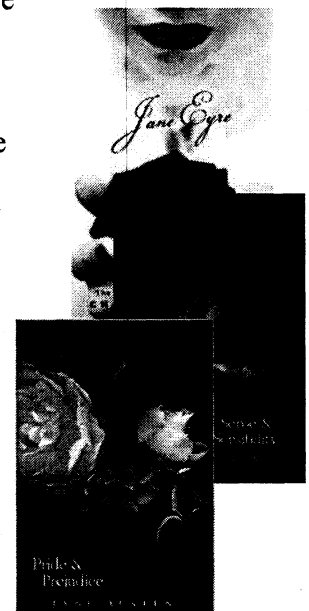
comes through their selection of cover art. So if they have spent the time and the money to make an appealing cover then we

should try and have them in libraries. So another minor way of bridging popular fiction and classics is to have up-to-date editions in your collection. Since teens so often judge by the covers it will be much easier to get them to read a classic if it has a modern cover – especially if that modern

cover just so happens to look like the most recent popular teen book. In fact, with the new covers some might not even realize that these are old classics.

Wuthering Heights has not been the only classic re-released with a *Twilight*-style cover—there are also new editions of *Jane Eyre*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Sense and Sensibility*, and even Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*. Having editions with new covers is a very easy way to get teens reading classic literature.

There are many ways to bridge popular fiction with classic literature for young adults and some strategies are easier than others. You just have to be creative, work with what you have, and make sure not to push it if they really don’t want to read it. Whether it’s through finding a similar theme, telling



them about a book that is the favourite of a YA character, or getting a new edition of the book, there are many ways to make the classics more inviting to young adults.

A List of YA Novels That Mention Classics

Twilight by Stephanie Meyer – *Wuthering Heights*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Romeo and Juliet*

I Am the Messenger by Markus Zusak – *Wuthering Heights*

Beastly by Alex Flinn - *Jane Eyre*, *Hunchback of Notre Dame*, *Phantom of the Opera*

The Sky is Everywhere by Jandy Nelson – *Wuthering Heights*

When You Reach Me by Rebecca Stead – *A Wrinkle in Time*

Half Brother by Kenneth Oppel – *I Capture the Castle*

Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky – *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Peter Pan*, *The Great Gatsby*, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Hamlet*, *A Separate Peace*

Enthusiasm by Polly Shulman – *Pride and Prejudice* and other Austen titles



PROGRAMMING WITH THE CLASSICS

A key to making any book come alive for young adults is to offer programs associated with them. Developing programming for teens is not always easy as one needs to find just the right program that will appeal to teens. Classics are not necessarily an easy thing to program around since many young adults are not aware of the classics, or they think that they do not like classic literature; however, a good program can offer the opportunity to get them interested in classics and have fun in the library.

