

Transforming Young Adult Services

By Anthony Bernier (Chicago : ALA Neal-Schuman, 2013). ISBN 978-1-55570-907-5

Reviewed by Jude Morrissey

Public and school libraries have become increasingly and effectively active in serving young adults, primarily teens between the ages of 12 and 18, in important ways. Libraries serve as safe havens and self-education centers for teens, helping them acquire the skills and knowledge needed to grow into adults and contributing members of society. Although libraries must find ways to prevent or counter hormone-fueled outbursts of rambunctiousness or even violent tendencies, YA librarians have been extraordinarily successful in designing programs and providing services that meet the needs of teens and help young at-risk patrons reach their full potential.

Right?

Maybe not.

In *Transforming Young Adult Services*, Bernier and a concerned group of knowledgeable contributors question the underlying assumptions we make about young adults. Additionally, they provide thoughtful insights to start a much-needed conversation about who these patrons are, what they need and want, and what they can contribute to their libraries and greater communities. Bernier's introduction to the book is thorough and informative, clearly presenting the story of how we arrived at our current outlook on young adults and YA services in libraries – based on borrowed, century-old theories from the field of developmental psychology – and why this outlook is problematic at best or, worse, an actual disservice to our patrons.

The core of the book is divided into three sections, each dealing with an important aspect of YA services. The first asks “What’s in an Age?” and questions the age-related assumptions we make about young adults. Young

■ Jude Morrissey is the Circulation Supervisor for Jefferson Parish’s East Bank Regional Library. She has a particular interest in the practical ethics of librarianship, intellectual freedom, and information access.

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people create their own meanings, deriving self-identity and defining their own cultures, and are involved in dialogues with teen and adult culture. They produce an amazing array of creative expressions during these processes, which libraries are in an excellent position to support and showcase. With the extension of young adulthood past the teens and into the 30's, YA librarians need to look for new ways to serve an expanding audience, differentiating the needs of various groups and incorporating diverse materials and collection development tools and methods. Most importantly, librarians and others concerned with YA library service need to seriously consider how to define "young adult," rather than simply accepting a dated and uncomplimentary definition borrowed from external disciplinary fields.

The second section moves on to discuss the transition "From White and Marginal to Civic Partners." In this section, we are challenged to reevaluate the presumptions we make about how libraries can best serve teens, particularly by considering a multi-ethnic conceptualization, by abandoning preconceived notions of what type of person uses what types of materials, and by working with teens in meaningful ways that allow full participation in library culture. Increasingly, young people are an ethnically diverse population, with different ideas of how knowledge is acquired and used; libraries should adapt to meet their needs, rather than trying to enforce our own ideas of the proper way to use the resources available. The same holds true for types of materials used. Too often, particular materials, especially graphic novels and comics, are denigrated as less valuable than "real books," and their readers are labeled in negative ways. It is a destructive and simply false perspective that needs to end. Teens have unique ways of seeing and interacting with the world around them that can be of benefit to the greater community, if they are allowed to share them.

The third section, "Beyond Youth Development and Questions of Intellectual Freedom," looks at issues of young adult agency and the ethical implications of taking teens' rights and responsibilities seriously. Adults, librarians included, often feel the need to limit young adults' access to information – a failure to serve these patrons that can be detrimental to the community as a whole. Libraries can and should act to support teens' intellectual freedom and provide information access as much as possible within the occasionally draconian limits of the law. Bernier's conclusion highlights not only the need to continue the conversation begun in this book, but to integrate the theories derived into a formational praxis, leading to practical changes implemented in public and school libraries in order to truly serve our young adult patrons.

Transforming Young Adult Services makes no claim to provide definitive answers. The purpose of the book is not to produce program outlines or a unified theory of teen services, but to counter pervasive and counterproductive assumptions at the heart of current library approaches to YA services, beginning a discussion about better ways to structure a framework for serving young adult

patrons. The content and layout of the book are excellent for those who want to read it straight through or for those who are interested in one particular chapter or section, although the sections are not as clearly defined as they could be. The book is academic in tone, written by scholars from LIS and related fields. As such, professors of library science, particularly those focusing on teen/YA services and/or programming, may seriously want to consider including one or more chapters of the book in their curriculum. LIS students intending to work with young adults will definitely want to read this book and join the conversation as they begin to create their own visions for service. Current practicing public and school librarians serving young adults should consider reading the book to reflect on how a more teen-centered structure – focusing on the people teens are now, rather than the adults they might become – could strengthen their programs and services, making them more relevant for their young patrons and for their communities as a whole.