

Of Course YA Books Can Be Complex

To use just one example, Stacey Donovan's *Dive* neatly dismantles the argument that fiction for teens can't also be serious, messy, thought-provoking literature.

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A detail from one cover of *Dive*. (iUniverse.com)

Young-adult fiction, Ruth Graham [argues](#) at *Slate*, is escapist, intended for "instant gratification and nostalgia." Its books lack complexity, she argues, and are merely "maudlin teen dramas." Reading them is bad for you, your brain, and your moral fiber: "Fellow grown-ups, at the risk of sounding snobbish and joyless and old, we are better than this."

There are certainly many [mediocre YA books](#), as there are mediocre books in any genre, be it sci-fi or romance or literary fiction. But there are also some works that provide everything that Graham is asking for—complexity, ambiguity, depth, and even good writing. As one example, I'd urge Graham to try reading the wonderful novel *Dive*, by Stacey Donovan.

It's not a famous book; it got positive reviews when it came out, but Donovan didn't write a follow-up, and it's been largely forgotten (except by [Nora Olsen](#), who alerted me to its existence.) But it's firmly in the YA genre. Graham's claim about books for children is a blanket dismissal, which means that counterexamples, however obscure, call her whole argument into question. If *Dive* is remarkable, then other YA books can be remarkable too.

In the book's brutal opening, Virginia Dunn's dog is hit by a car. She gets it to the vet with the help of a passing stranger. The doctor calls her mom to ask if she'll pay for an operation—and Virginia's mom says "no."

Contrary to the argument that YA is simplistic and satisfying, there are few neat ends in the ensuing tale. Virginia makes a deal with the vet to work for him in exchange for treating her dog—but her mother's decision is never explained, much less apologized for. Instead, the violent mess and the arbitrary cruelty of those first pages seep and spread across the whole book. Virginia's father develops an incurable, rare blood disease; her best friend suddenly pushes away from her, leaving her even more isolated with her own and her family's grief.

Donovan's first-person narration mirrors and intensifies the sense of instability and loss. Virginia's voice is a loose stream of consciousness, jumping off from mundane details to metaphor or allusion and then slipping back through memory:

Now that it's spring, baby rabbits wobble beneath the trees every time I look outside. They somersault in midair and end up facing the direction they were hopping from, all shocked, like they don't know how they landed there. I guess they don't. How much can any living thing know that's been around only for a few short weeks? It makes me wonder how much I knew when I was a tiny, wobbling baby. I admit I feel pretty confused now. I have hazel eyes. They go green when I cry.

They're still green today. Can my eyes have their own memories? It was yesterday I wept, the reverberations of a car crashing a hundred miles an hour, crashing into my bones.

That's a passage fairly at random from the book, but it neatly encapsulates the novel's themes: disorientation, the inseparability of past and present (is Virginia confused as a baby, or confused now?), and the way those you love are part of you (whose bones did the car crash into?).

This selection also explains, economically, why this book is YA, and why the distinction between books for kids and books for adults is largely meaningless. A grown-up like Graham might have you believe that those confused rabbits wobbling outside stand in for somebody else—grownups, with the wisdom of age,

know just how they landed where they landed, facing in the direction they're facing. But Donovan tells us it's not so easy: Whether we've lived a few short weeks or 15 short years, or 60—how much can we know? We adults see those bunnies, or those young people, as unstable, foolish, undeveloped, just so we can pretend we're the opposite of all those things. But even as we see, our eyes keep changing.

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As Virginia's father is dying, she finds herself in a passionate, intense love affair with Jane, a new girl at school. Virginia hasn't previously thought of herself as a lesbian, and the relationship with Jane seems to almost ambush her, like the car barreling into her dog, or like her father's illness. Jane is an admirer of Rimbaud, and Virginia in her internal monologue quotes him: "Nobody's serious when they're seventeen." But, Virginia thinks, "What about fifteen, I wonder. What's that supposed to be like? How serious are we now?"

The question is in part about how serious the relationship with Jane is. But it's stated at the point in the novel when Virginia's father goes to the hospital for the last time; he hemorrhaged in bed and Virginia had to change and wash the sheets. Seriousness, it seems, isn't about what age you are. Maybe nobody should have to be serious when they're 17, but ideally nobody would ever have to be serious in the way Virginia has to be serious. The vertiginous, melodramatic, overwhelming new love—with its familiar "does she? doesn't she?"—exists alongside an adult world of death and responsibility that Virginia is part of, too. There's no firm wall between childhood and adulthood, just as there isn't a wall between YA and literature—as Rimbaud, who never wrote after he turned 20, could tell you.

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Graham says YA books are for those "who prefer things to be wrapped up neatly" and she scoffs at endings with no "emotional and moral ambiguity" in which protagonists are "married or dead or happily grasping hands, looking to the future." This is a formula that seems to erase many canonical works, from Jane Austen's happy marriages to *Romeo and Juliet* and the many stage covered with dead bodies. But as it happens, *Dive* is a lot less neatly tied up than either Austen or Shakespeare. Instead, grief and hope, and love and sadness, are wound

together into a emotional epiphany that isn't connected to any particular plot point. Out of death comes at least provisional joy—exactly the sort of modernist contradiction that Graham seems to want in her fiction.

For all their claims to dislike pat solutions, though, it seems that it's critics like Graham who wants a simplified world. In the name of high-minded, conscientious reading, she has swallowed marketing copy. Good books go over here, neatly labeled “literary fiction” by salespeople, while the less good books go over there, neatly labeled for kids. The history of influential, canonical fiction written for children, from Alice to Narnia, is neatly erased, in favor of another encomium to John Updike.

There are plenty of wonderful YA books other than *Dive*, from John Christopher's dark sci-fi invasion series *The Tripods* to the playful but surprisingly sophisticated *How To Train Your Dragon* books to Nora Olsen's lesbian YA [meditation](#) on what it means to be human in *Swans and Klons*. Literature, of every sort, has more ambiguity than Graham acknowledges. Stacey Donovan is braver, willing to imagine a world in which kids, like adults, write poetry, and in which adults, like kids, are lost.