

# Defining and Redefining Popular Genres: The Evolution of 'New Adult' Fiction

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'Writing about a present-day industry is always going to be like shooting at a moving target', John B. Thompson remarks in the preface to the second edition of *The Merchants of Culture*: '[N]o sooner have you finished the text than your subject matter has changed – things happen, events move on and the industry you had captured at a particular point in time now looks slightly different' (xi). The fate of '[i]mmEDIATE obsolescence' Thompson describes is especially familiar to scholars of contemporary popular fiction, a sector of the publishing industry which is in a constant state of flux: no sooner has one published material than it has gone out of date (and, indeed, given the time lag common in academic publication, work can frequently go out of date before it is published). This challenge exists in tension with the scholarly desire to define the field of study – how can we define something which is constantly changing?

Marie-Laure Ryan has noted that 'the concept of genre will only receive firm theoretical basis if the investigator confronts the questions which underlie every taxonomical enterprise: Why classify? What is to be classified? How is one to classify?' (110). The first of these questions is especially compelling when we consider the fast pace of the literary marketplace: if the publishing industry moves so quickly that scholarship is not able to keep up with generic development, what is the value of defining genres at all?

Ryan contends that genres are 'a matter of communication and signification' and that 'the object to account for is the user's knowledge' (110–11): that is, through their familiarity with a genre, users gain specific implicit knowledge, and the project of classifying genres allows the scholar to lay out what this knowledge is. Ryan's notion of 'implicit knowledge' is not dissimilar to the

notion of ‘genre competence’, as theorised by Lisa Fletcher, Beth Driscoll and Kim Wilkins, which they conceive of as the ‘ability to comprehend a text in relation to storytelling conventions that have been learned through reading . . . an experiential model where repeated encounters with genre texts inform future responses to texts’ (1007). The academic definitions of various popular genres included in works on those genres – for instance, romance (Radway; Regis, *Natural History*; Kamblé; Roach), fantasy (Jackson; Clute and Grant; Armit; Mendlesohn); and thrillers (Harper; Palmer; Glover) – rely on the identification of these storytelling conventions. However, these definitions rarely consider the constantly shifting marketplace of the publishing industry. While they account for narrative and textual features, they pay little attention to the conditions in which the texts were produced. The question of textual production is especially important in the twenty-first century, when new innovations like the rise of the e-book and the advent of self-publishing have ensured that the pace at which the publishing industry and the marketplace for fiction develop and diversify has increased exponentially (Thompson xi). As the industry and the marketplace develop, so too do the conventions of texts in a given genre. This means that academics who produce genre definitions run the risk of their work going out of date: of offering accounts of the storytelling conventions of a genre and the implicit knowledge of readers that are increasingly inaccurate and irrelevant. In this assertion I agree with Kim Wilkins who argues, following Tzvetan Todorov, that,

genres are not static, ahistorical categories. Rather, genres are processes. They are formed, negotiated and reformed, both tacitly and explicitly, by the interactions of authors, readers and (importantly) institutions. At work in any genre are regimes of verisimilitude: loose rules of plausibility and probability which mean that certain generic elements are *expected* and therefore indispensable if a genre is to be recognisable (to authors, readers, institutions) *at specific times*. (emphasis in original)

In this article, I propose that to best define genres and subgenres, and to account for the ways in which they develop, we must understand them as processes, not as static categories.

I am not the first to suggest the necessity in definitions of popular genres to take into account that these genres develop and evolve. Jayashree Kamblé’s definition of the romance novel, for instance, allows for this when she suggests that the form is a double helix, defined by the intertwined alleles of ‘romance’ and ‘novel’. The meanings of these two terms have shifted considerably over time;

therefore, what constitutes a romance novel has also changed (2–3). Kamblé’s definition is compelling – more compelling, perhaps, than a static definition which does not account for these shifts, such as, for example, the one offered by Pamela Regis, who contends that a romance novel is ‘a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines’ (*Natural History*, 19). This is, as Regis has herself noted, already out of date, as her initial emphasis on heroines elides romances with non-heterosexual protagonists, an increasingly significant category of genre romance (‘What Do Critics Owe the Romance?’).

Kamblé’s approach is, thus, an effective one when it comes to imagining genre as a process rather than a set of ahistorical categories. However, what I suggest in this article, through the use of repeated definitions at key periods, is a more precise diachronic mapping of a genre’s development. I am inspired here by the work of Fletcher, Driscoll, and Wilkins, whose theory of ‘genre worlds’ offers useful opportunities for understanding genres as mechanisms of textual production as well as collections of texts with similar narrative features. A ‘genre world’ ‘describes the collective activity that goes into the creation and circulation of genre texts, and is particularly focused on the communities, collaborations, and industrial pressures that drive and are driven by the processes of these socio-artistic formations’ (998). A genre world encompasses ‘a sector of the publishing industry, a social formation, and a body of texts’ (997).

The genre world I seek to map here is that of ‘new adult’ (NA) fiction. This category is less than ten years old; however, in its lifespan, its definition has changed markedly, showing the ways in which genre worlds evolve, and their borders change. To understand NA, we must define it not once, but repeatedly over time.

In this article, I have chosen three key points at which to define NA as a generic category: its inception in 2009, its boom in 2011–2013, and the time of writing in 2017–2018. By offering three definitions of NA, rather than one, and joining the dots between them, I seek to illustrate that genres are in continual and swift flux, and we can better understand their development by tracing the forces – industrial, social, and textual – which shape them. This approach of definition and redefinition (that is, synchronic definition), offers a fuller diachronic picture of the genre – one which charts the evolution of a popular genre with greater detail and accuracy than would be possible by attempting a singular definition.

I have chosen NA as a case study for this article, and as a model for this approach to genre definition, for several reasons. Firstly, it is a recently emergent category – the first uses of the term ‘new adult’ came in 2009 – which

makes for a case study that can be explored within the length of this article. Secondly, there are clearly identifiable points which are significant in its development, which provide ideal opportunities for synchronic definitions, making it an excellent model for my approach. Conveniently, these points map well onto the formations that influence genre processes as identified by Fletcher, Driscoll, and Wilkins – the three stages I have identified in the development of NA are, roughly, industrial, social, and textual. Finally, the diachronic picture captured by these synchronic definitions of NA is a particularly interesting one, because it highlights just how quickly and dramatically shifts in genre definition can come about. As this article will show, NA was originally conceived in relation to one literary category, but over time, became a subsidiary of a different one. It is an excellent example of the fact that genres are not stable categories, but are endlessly evolving and shifting signifiers.

This article takes a ‘snapshot’ approach, offering an account of each of the three key periods in NA’s development, illuminating some of the forces at play, and exploring how they influenced NA. In developing these snapshots, I have used a variety of different reading methods. I have constructed industrial histories via key online documents, examined the influence of social formations through examining reader websites like *Goodreads* (in particular, reader tags), and undertaken what Franco Moretti calls ‘distant reading’ of the texts: a mode of reading which enables the identification of patterns across a body of works by stepping back from the texts (*Graphs, Maps, and Trees; Distant Reading*). Distance is ‘not an obstacle, but *a specific form of knowledge*: fewer elements, hence a sharper sense of their overall interconnection’ (*Graphs, Maps, and Trees* 1, emphasis in original). At the end of each section, I offer a definition of NA at the relevant point in time, so as to illustrate the ways in which the borders of the NA genre world – like the borders of many genre worlds – are constantly in flux.

### **Snapshot #1: The St Martin’s Competition (2009)**

The origins of the genre category ‘new adult’ (NA) are artificial, not organic: it was made, not born. If we consider Fletcher, Driscoll, and Wilkins’ notion that genres are socio-artistic formations encompassing a sector of the publishing industry, a social formation, and a body of texts, here, the influences on the emergent category of NA are all industrial (1997). In 2009, St Martin’s Press (a subsidiary of Macmillan) held a contest for submissions. They were:

actively looking for great, new, cutting edge fiction with protagonists who are slightly older than YA and can appeal to an adult audience. Since twenty-somethings are devouring YA, St Martin’s Press is seeking fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult

– a sort of ‘older YA’ or ‘new adult’. (Jae-Jones, ‘St Martin’s New Adult Contest’)

There are two distinct but linked logics in this call for submissions. Firstly, there is the explicitly stated idea that since ‘twenty-somethings’ are voraciously consuming young adult fiction (YA), they are being under-served by publishers, leaving a gap which needs to be filled. Secondly, and relatedly, is the idea that YA is fulfilling a need for these readers, albeit imperfectly, and this need can be more precisely exploited by the publishing house. Thus, the genre label ‘new adult’ has an overt relationship to the category ‘young adult’: in other words, NA is a direct offshoot of YA.

The NA concept and competition was the brainchild of Dan Weiss, who was hired as a publisher-at-large by St Martin’s in 2009 to target an audience of ‘twentysomethings, Gen Yers, and older young adult readers – those emerging adults who are navigating career, love and family in a 24/7 connected world’ (McBride, ‘St Martin’s Has New Publisher’). Weiss’s background was in book packaging and branding – he was closely involved with the development of the popular Sweet Valley High and The Vampire Diaries series in the 1980s and 1990s respectively (Andriani; Rebecca Mead) – so it is perhaps unsurprising that ‘new adult’ seems to have been conceived of almost entirely in marketing terms. The competition guidelines explicitly stated that St Martin’s was ‘seeking fiction similar to YA that can be *published and marketed* as adult’, a statement that places strong emphasis on the role of packaging and marketing in a book’s genre position (Jae-Jones, ‘St Martin’s New Adult Contest,’ my emphasis).

The term ‘new adult’ preceded the books that came to be identified as part of this category: ‘We’re trying to coin the phrase “new adults,” and we’d like to see more of it’, Weiss said in a 2010 interview, ‘I think it’s an overlooked category’ (‘Now in Hardcover’). According to Weiss’s assistant, S. Jae-Jones, Weiss believed that:

the market for young adults – that is, adults who are young – is largely untapped. We are a generation that grew up reading YA, but once we grew up, we couldn’t find fiction in the adult sections applicable to our lives . . . We’re looking for books that call to us (Dan calls us ‘Gen Y’) and there is a lot in YA that is appealing: finding a place in life, discovering who we are, etc. Hence we [St Martin’s] want to find books that are like YA, but targeted to slightly older readers. (Jae-Jones, qtd. in McBride, ‘Interview’)

Weiss and St Martin’s sought to distinguish NA from YA, constructing it

as a distinct category with a (potentially) different readership, while emphasising the thematic and narrative similarities between the two. The genre term ‘new adult’ is not especially legible without reference to ‘young adult’: the publisher’s rhetoric both drew borders between the two categories and drew attention to their common ground. The emphasis the publisher placed on the links between YA and NA also functioned to separate NA from general ‘adult’ fiction, both in relation to content and branding: Jae-Jones noted that YA fiction possesses a kind of immediacy in voice that adult fiction does not (adult fiction, she contended, has ‘scope’, a stronger sense of past, present, and future), and that NA, with its young protagonists, could be expected to share this immediacy, even if it was tempered by a slightly more adult sense of perspective (‘Postadolescent or “New Adult” Fiction’). Elsewhere, she observed that financially, ‘adult fiction is flailing’, and wrote ‘[a]re publishers looking to “tap” into YA’s popularity? Of course’ (‘New Adult and Shelving’). NA represented St Martin’s market-savvy attempt to mobilise – and, potentially, re-mobilise – the YA readership by giving them a second category of books to read (and buy), as well as perhaps to retain readers who might ‘age out’ of YA. Jae-Jones commented that the eventual hope of the publisher was that there would be enough momentum behind the category that it would receive its own shelf space in bookstores, much as children’s literature was allocated picture book, middle grade, and young adult spaces (‘New Adult and Shelving’).

If we are to define NA as envisioned by St Martin’s in late 2009, then we must define it in the same way we would define YA – in relation to the intended age of the readership (and, potentially, the protagonists). As with YA, St Martin’s placed no limitations on the potential kinds of plots they wished to see in NA: rather, they emphasised the age of the targeted ‘Gen Y’ readers, and thematic concerns that would appeal to these readers. This is the kind of definition that Amy Pattee offers in her 2017 article on NA, in the sole extant scholarly definition to date, when she writes that ‘new adult fiction is a literary category dependent on a relationship between the books in this category and a particular audience that has been constructed, of late, as “emerging adults”’ (219).

However, this 2009 version of NA, as proposed by St Martin’s, existed more in theory than it did in practice. Eighteen entrants to St Martin’s competition (out of a total pool of 382) were asked to submit a synopsis and the first fifty pages of their manuscript to St Martin’s (McBride, ‘St Martin’s Press Contest’). Although Deborah Halverson claims that some of the eighteen chosen entries were published through the St Martin’s Griffin imprint (23), I can find no evidence that this occurred, a finding with which Pattee concurs (219). Some of the entries went on to be published by other houses, some others were self-published, and some appear to never have been published. Those that were

traditionally published – for example, Sharon Biggs Waller’s *A Mad Wicked Folly* (Viking) and Rae Carson’s *The Girl of Fire and Thorns* (Greenwillow) – were positioned by publishers as YA, not NA, and understood that way by readers (‘young adult’ is the second most common *Goodreads* tag on both books). Among the entries that were published, whether traditionally or independently, only one appears to have retained the NA label: Kristan Hoffman’s *Twenty-Somewhere*. In both the first line of the *Amazon* product description and the author’s note, Hoffman advertises the fact that *Twenty-Somewhere* was one of the winners of the St Martin’s NA contest. Although it sparked a considerable amount of conversation in the publishing world and on book blogs, the NA contest resulted in no actual new books from St Martin’s Press. When Weiss resigned in 2013, St Martin’s had no branded ‘new adult’ lines, imprints, or properties.

Pattee’s definition is thus appropriate for the version of NA that St Martin’s attempted (and failed) to create in 2009. NA was a genre category constructed for its ‘emerging adult’ audience, mirroring the logics inherent in YA. However, as the uses of the genre term ‘new adult’ develop in book culture, the promise of an ‘emerging adult’ audience becomes less relevant to its meaning and function. This definition is no longer adequate: a new one is required.

### **Snapshot #2: The NA Boom (2011–2013)**

The label ‘new adult’ did not entirely disappear from book culture after the St Martin’s contest. Although they did not ultimately acquire any submissions from the contest, St Martin’s continued to experiment in the NA space. In an interview with *The Atlantic* in mid-2011, Weiss made it clear that he and St Martin’s still had hope that ‘new adult’ might become a widely accepted genre term (Brown). Also in mid-2011, literary agent Vickie Motter described NA as a ‘(slowly) emerging genre’, writing that she had not ‘read many New Adult books yet (though really, there aren’t many out there)’, but that she would accept queries for NA manuscripts, which suggests that the term ‘new adult’ was still percolating in industrial conversations. Others, however, were less hopeful: ‘The whole “New Adult” “trend” that we all heard about on Twitter a year ago is the work of one imprint (St Martin’s) at one publishing house (Macmillan)’, ex-agent and freelance editor Mary Kole wrote in late 2011: ‘It has failed to take off.’

The case of NA looked very different a year later in 2012, when multiple NA-labelled titles exploded onto bestseller lists. It was not, however, through the efforts of industry players that the term caught on. Instead, the term ‘new adult’ gained new currency as a genre label because of the way it was applied to books by readers. In particular, the term was mobilised in the online reading

community *Goodreads*, where readers can create virtual bookshelves and sort and label texts on these shelves, thus ‘creating a bibliocentric as well as an egocentric network of public reading performance’ (Nakamura 240). Shelving tags on *Goodreads* function as ‘a forum for information sharing, a collocation device, a locus of inclusion and exclusion, and a reader’s advisory tool’ (Desrochers et al. 2). They thus perform an important taxonomical function: they are a space where readers can define genres.

It is hard to pinpoint exactly when readers began to use ‘new adult’ as a shelving tag on *Goodreads*; however, the term seems to have remained in the collective memory of readers in the wake of the St Martin’s contest. In 2010, the ‘new adult’ tag was applied by a few readers to traditionally published books that had been marketed as YA, such as Gayle Forman’s *Where She Went* and Richelle Mead’s *Bloodlines*. In 2011, the tag became much more prevalent: *Goodreads* founder Elizabeth Chandler noted that in this year the number of readers recommending books bearing this label exploded from ‘a negligible amount to more than 14,000’ (Kaufman, ‘Young-Adult Authors’). The texts that these tags were applied to did feature elements which resembled the definition of NA put forward by St Martin’s. However, they also clearly were part of another genre world: contemporary romance.

The most important of these texts was Jamie McGuire’s *Beautiful Disaster*, which was the first of several self-published NA breakout bestsellers. In May 2011, McGuire self-published *Beautiful Disaster* as an e-book, a romance between college freshman and ‘good girl’ Abby Abernathy and ‘Eastern University’s Walking One-Night Stand’ Travis Maddox, an MMA fighter (McGuire, ‘Beautiful Disaster: A Novel’). Almost immediately, readers on *Goodreads* began to shelve the book using the ‘new adult’ tag. McGuire seems to have at least initially intended to market it as contemporary romance (McGuire, ‘Beautiful Disaster Ranking!’), but adopted the genre tag: her website states that in 2011, *Beautiful Disaster* was a ‘new adult genre sensation’ (McGuire, ‘Beautiful Disaster: A Novel’). In October 2011, McGuire self-published a trade paperback edition. In May 2012, it made its first appearance on the *New York Times* best-seller list at number twenty-nine, and spent seventeen weeks on the list in total. In July 2012, after a rights auction, McGuire was signed by Atria Books (an imprint of Simon & Schuster) for a two-book deal, including the republication of *Beautiful Disaster* in print and digital, and a sequel called *Walking Disaster*, which was published in 2013 (Deahl, ‘Atria Inks Self Pub’d Bestseller’).

McGuire’s story is markedly like that of numerous other American NA authors in the same period. Colleen Hoover’s self-published *Slammed* and *Point of Retreat*, in which eighteen-year-old heroine Layken falls in love with her neigh-

bour Will before discovering he is her teacher, were acquired by Atria a month after McGuire's books (Atria Books). Tammara Webber's self-published *Easy*, a romance in which college-aged heroine Jacqueline falls in love again after being sexually assaulted, was acquired by the UK and US divisions of Penguin in September and October 2012 respectively (Deahl, 'Penguin Divisions Team Up'). In October 2012, HarperCollins acquired Cora Carmack's *Losing It*, a romance between college senior Bliss and her new theatre professor, after it had been self-published for only a few weeks (Kaufman, 'Self Published Author Signs a Three Book Deal'). Under the name J. Lynn, Jennifer Armentrout self-published *Wait For You*, a romance set on a college campus between traumatised heroine Avery and charming hero Cam, in February 2013, and by March, she had signed a three-book deal with Avon (Greenfield).

The examples of McGuire, Hoover, Webber, Carmack, and Lynn are by no means isolated: these were only a few of numerous NA authors who self-published their works, only for these works to be acquired in lucrative deals and reprinted and repackaged by traditional publishers. Three years after the St Martin's contest, the term 'new adult' finally gained widespread recognition. While it initially failed as a term deployed by industry, it succeeded as one deployed by readers and, later, authors. This led to the term being reappropriated and popularised to a broader demographic by the industry. In 2013, 'new adult' became an official Book Industry Standards And Communications (BISAC) category designation, giving it formal recognition (Naughton 20).

However, what 'new adult' meant in this iteration did not follow Weiss and St Martin's speculative definition. In 2009, in the lead-up to the competition, Dan Weiss's assistant S. Jae-Jones provided a list of existing titles that she asserted could have been published under the NA label. These encompassed YA titles, such as Malinda Lo's queer Cinderella retelling *Ash*, Kristin Cashore's romantic fantasy *Graceling*, and Markus Zusak's Holocaust novel *The Book Thief*, as well as adult texts belonging to a wide variety of genres, including literary texts like Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, creative non-fiction memoir such as Dave Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, crime fiction like Stieg Larsson's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, historical fiction such as Tracy Chevalier's *The Girl with a Pearl Earring*, and chick-lit, such as Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* ('New Adult & Shelving'). What is most notable about this list is its generic breadth, something which Jae-Jones identifies as a feature of YA, writing that one of the things she 'love[d] about YA is that all of the genres are shelved together: contemporary, science fiction, fantasy, romance, etc.', and stating that she hoped this would one day be the same for NA ('New Adult & Shelving'). The uniting theme of NA as envisioned by St Martin's was not genre: instead, it was imagined as a kind

of generic melting pot, with a mandate to ‘deal with this strange in-between place, with “post-adolescence”’ (Jae-Jones, ‘New Adult and Shelving’). NA was defined, like YA, in relation to its implied readership: the audience Pattee calls ‘emerging adults’.

While the popular NA novels of 2011–2013 certainly featured protagonists in this demographic – as can be seen in the brief plot descriptions above, protagonists were generally college-aged, and often the drama was set on university campuses – the identity of the target readership becomes less important. Instead, formal narrative elements began to emerge as defining features, running counter to Jae-Jones’s hope that NA, like YA, would come to encompass multiple genres. These narrative elements were setting (contemporary), protagonists (college-aged), focalisation (first person, from the heroine’s perspective), and – most importantly – a specific romantic plot structure.

NA books published during the boom of 2011–2013 fulfil the Romance Writers of America definition of romance, which states that a romance novel must include a central love story and an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending. We can modify this definition to create a definition of the new adult category during the boom. In the peak period of NA popularity and visibility, a new adult novel featured:

- 1) a central love story, set in the present day, with protagonists who belong to the ‘emerging adult’ category, narrated in first person by the heroine.
- 2) an emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending, wherein these protagonists form a serious romantic relationship, which will presumably continue for some time.

Here, we can see the way that NA still bears traces of its origins in YA: for instance, it relies heavily on first-person narration, a hallmark of YA, which is not common in romance fiction. Similarly, the emotionally satisfying and optimistic ending of NA does not have to be what is called in romance parlance a HEA – ‘happily ever after’. Instead, it is often a HFN – ‘happy for now’. Colleen Hoover’s *Slammed*, for instance, ends with romantic protagonists Layken and Will together; however, the story of these protagonists continues for another two books, so their narrative arc is not yet complete, making the ending of *Slammed* a HFN, not a HEA. The HFN is more prevalent in new adult than it is in other subgenres of romance, due to the age and position of the protagonists as emerging adults. But despite these traces of its origins in YA, in the NA boom of 2011–2013 it became clear that the borders of the NA genre world had shifted substantially: rather than being a territory bordering YA, NA had largely been annexed by romance.

### Snapshot #3: Time of Writing (2017–2018)

The close association of NA and romance has persisted as the category has developed, and it continues to follow the generic mandates of the romance novel: that is, to have a central love story, and to end happily. This may be partially because when NA became a viable and profitable category for traditional presses in 2012, it was largely romance imprints who solicited and continued to publish NA fiction. One of the earliest publishers to do so was Carina Press, a digital-first imprint of Harlequin (now a subsidiary of HarperCollins), by far the largest publisher of romance fiction in the world. In October 2012, Carina began to accept NA submissions (James). The submission guidelines explicitly sought a romantic iteration of NA:

a strong story and full developed, very definable protagonists, 18 and above, (or at an age eligible to enter college), in their early to mid-20s . . . Story elements should be targeted to an adult, not teen audience, and should contain adult contemporary themes, frank, modern language, high relationship drama and intense conflict . . . As we are seeking romances, these stories should contain a happily ever after or a happily for now. (Carina)

Similarly, a month later, Random House launched a new NA-specific digital imprint called Flirt. While this name certainly suggests romantic content, Random House did not provide a definition of NA beyond ‘college age,’ and by setting Flirt apart from Loveswept, their romance line, they seem to be suggesting that the NA category did not have to be linked directly to romance (Random House, ‘The Random House Publishing Group’). However, over the ensuing years, Flirt and Loveswept have drifted closer together in branding. The Random House website currently states that ‘Loveswept and Flirt are Random House’s digital-only imprints focused on romance and women’s fiction titles’, and promises that writing for these imprints will ‘[introduce] you to romance readers everywhere’ (‘Digital Imprints’). It is not until the FAQ section that the term ‘new adult’ is even mentioned: the genre umbrella romance, under which NA sits, has become much more important.

Carina’s NA line and Random House’s Flirt line were digital-first and digital-only respectively. Despite the fad for acquiring self-published books which had been online hits and publishing them in print in 2011–2013, it is largely in digital romance publishing that NA has continued to develop as a category. This has taken place via boutique digital presses, such as Entangled, and digital-first or digital-only imprints of major presses, such as Avon Impulse (Avon), Forever Yours (Grand Central Publishing), and Escape (Harlequin). The most impor-

tant space for NA's development, however, has been self-publishing. Although it was the republishing of key texts by traditional publishers that gave the genre term 'new adult' a level of industrial legitimacy, self-publishing has gradually been reclaiming the space. In the *Amazon* Top 100 Paid bestseller list for New Adult and College Romance available on 4 June 2018, the top ten books were all self-published. The top ten new adult bestsellers from *Kobo* on the same date were also all self-published. The prevalence of self-published titles in these lists might indicate certain priorities of the distributor: all of the top ten titles on the *Amazon* list, for instance, are part of the Kindle Unlimited subscription program, which means readers can access unlimited numbers of books for a monthly fee. However, it might also signal a move away from the term 'new adult' by traditional publishers.

The previous section briefly discusses the taxonomical role played by *Goodreads* tags, and the way that they can function as a mode of genre definition. To take my snapshot of the state of NA at the time of writing, I returned to *Goodreads*, to undertake what Moretti calls 'distant reading'. To select my corpus for distant reading, I used the 'most read this week' list (as of 4 June 2018) on *Goodreads*, and selected the top ten books tagged as 'new adult'. Table 1 below includes details of these ten books, as well as the top three *Goodreads* genre tags.

What is immediately notable is how few times the genre tag 'new adult' appears on this table – only twice is it in the top three tags, and regularly appears further down the list of tags in fourth or fifth position. Even in cases where there is room for the tag – such as *In This Life* by Cora Brent, where no third tag is listed because of low reader shelving numbers – it does not appear.<sup>1</sup> Potentially, this is indicative of the decline of the NA genre category: as time passes, the term is slowly falling out of the *Goodreads* lexicon.

The prevalence of the tags 'romance', 'contemporary', and 'romance > contemporary romance', at least two of which occur in four of the titles, indicates that new adult remains close to the broader genre of contemporary romance. The use of the 'sports and games > sports' tags in an additional two titles also indicates books which exist in this contemporary romance space: specifically, with one or more protagonists who play sport. However, while college-aged protagonists and college settings remain popular – in both books with the sports tag, the hero is a college football player – several of the books have gone well beyond this, and well beyond what we might conceivably think of as an 'emerg-

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<sup>1</sup>This does not mean that the book was not tagged 'new adult', just that too few readers tagged it as such for it to appear in the list of genres. A closer examination of the shelving tags reveals that twelve readers tagged this book 'romance', four 'contemporary', three 'romance > contemporary romance' and two 'new adult'.

Title	Author	Date	Publisher	Tag #1	Tag #2	Tag #3
<i>A Court of Frost and Starlight</i>	Sarah J. Maas	2018	Bloomsbury	Fantasy	Romance	New Adult
<i>I Dare You</i>	Ilsa Madden-Mills	2018	Self-published	Sports and Games > Sports	Romance	Academic > College
<i>Folsom</i>	Tarryn Fisher and Willow Aster	2018	Self-published	Romance	Science Fiction > Dystopia	Science Fiction
<i>The Plastic Magician</i>	Charlie N. Holmberg	2018	47North (Amazon)	Fantasy	Young Adult	Fantasy > Magic
<i>The Hardest Fall</i>	Ella Maise	2018	Self-published	Romance	Sports and Games > Sports	New Adult
<i>Hot Asset</i>	Lauren Layne	2018	Montlake (Amazon)	Romance	Contemporary	Romance > Contemporary Romance
<i>Speakeasy</i>	Sarina Bowen	2018	Self-published	Romance	Contemporary	Romance > Contemporary Romance
<i>Burn For You</i>	J. T. Geissinger	2017	Montlake (Amazon)	Romance	Romance > Contemporary Romance	Contemporary
<i>In This Life</i>	Cora Brent	2018	Self-published	Romance	Contemporary	No third tag listed
<i>A Court of Thorns and Roses</i>	Sarah J. Maas	2015	Bloomsbury	Fantasy	Young Adult	Romance

Table 1. The top ten books tagged 'new adult' listed in 'Goodreads' 'Most Read This Week' list, 4 June 2018

ing adult'. In *Hot Asset*, for instance, the hero is a Wall Street executive and the heroine a white-collar criminal, while in *Burn For You*, the hero is the heir to a bourbon fortune and the heroine is a chef. These books bear little resemblance to the NA category envisioned by St Martin's and defined by Pattee.

Similarly, there also seems to be some movement beyond the boundaries of the genre definition I offered in the previous section for NA at the time of the 2011–2013 boom. While the broader umbrella of romance appears to be a relative constant, appearing as a tag for nine of the ten books, and contemporary romance still dominates, three of these books also belong to the fantasy genre, and one to science fiction. It is tempting here to say that NA has evolved beyond the space of contemporary romance it occupied in 2011–2013, and that

it has moved closer to the version of NA originally envisioned by St Martin's in 2009, where many different genres would collide. However, it is worth noting that two of the books on this list – *A Court of Frost and Starlight* and *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, both by Sarah J. Maas – are major bestsellers marketed not as NA, but as YA. The heroine of these books, Feyre, is nineteen, which puts her in the 'emerging adult' age bracket, and it is certainly possible that many readers may have shelved the book as 'new adult' because of this (drawing on an understanding of NA coming largely from the 2009 iteration of the category). However, the presence of Maas's books on this list is probably more indicative of the series's popularity – that is, many readers overall have been reading and shelving it – than any serious recent developments in the definition of NA.

If we take this corpus as an example, it is difficult to formulate a coherent definition of NA for 2017–2018, and readers do not seem to be applying the term in necessarily consistent ways. The formal elements which were clear during the boom in 2011–2013 have now become much blurrier. Settings are often contemporary, but not always. Protagonists may fall within the 'emerging adult' category, but not necessarily. Romance seems to be a constant, appearing in the tags for most of the books on the list, but even this structure seems to be becoming murkier, especially in the books which take place outside the contemporary setting. Maas's *Court* books, for instance, due to the nature of their seriality, do not adhere to the HEA/HFN mandate of the romance, and *Folsom* features a cliffhanger.

The closest we can come to identifying a defining formal feature of NA in 2017–2018 is in focalisation. Nine of the ten books on this list feature first-person narration (all except *The Plastic Magician*), eight feature first-person narration from different perspectives (except for *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, which is solely from the heroine Feyre's perspective), and seven of these feature alternating first-person narration between hero and heroine (except for *A Court of Frost and Starlight*, which also includes third-person chapters from the perspective of other characters). If, for the reasons I outlined above, we take Maas's books out of the equation and assume they are outliers rather than models, then first-person alternating narration becomes the defining feature of NA. It is, perhaps, why a book like *Folsom*, which takes place outside NA's usually contemporary realm, has been classified as NA; and why books like *Hot Asset* and *Burn For You*, which do not feature emerging adult protagonists, are classified as new adult rather than contemporary romance (a subgenre where first person narration is not common).

In 2017–2018, while the heart of NA still seems to lie largely within contemporary romance, there seems to be a broadening in what is encompassed by the

category. If we use Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins' notion of the genre world, we can see incursions into and excursions out of the space demarcated by the definition I offered of NA as of 2011–2013, although it still firmly remains a territory within the broader realm of romance. We can also see the influence of the 2009 iteration in the inclusion of books like *The Plastic Magician* and Maas's *Court* novels. These developments come, arguably, from a survival instinct, because the term 'new adult' no longer appears to be the kind of selling point it was during the boom. The fact that 'new adult' barely appears on the table above – a table which collates the top ten books tagged 'new adult' most read in the week of writing – would seem to indicate that the term is falling out of fashion as a way of describing a specific genre. Largely, NA now seems to refer to a mode of focalisation.

## Conclusion

I have used NA as a case study here to illustrate the ways in which – and the speed at which – genres and sub-genres can appear, grow, explode, evolve and retreat. In less than a decade, NA has been conceived of as a complementary corollary to YA, targeted at an 'emerging adult' readership; has been largely colonised by contemporary romance; and now seems to refer mostly to a specific kind of focalisation. A static approach to defining a genre category like NA is not useful, as it is constantly in a process of evolution, due to the ongoing activities of industry and literary communities (Fletcher et al. 998). Instead, to understand NA, a continuous approach to genre definition is required, as the term has meant different things at different points in its history: it must be redefined continuously.

NA is not unique in this. Therefore, I suggest that taking a synchronic, rather than a static, approach to genre definition is necessary if we are to adequately take temporal concerns into account and understand genres diachronically. This is particularly important for the scholarship of popular fiction, where trying to keep pace with the speed of the publishing industry is a regular challenge. Defining genres synchronically instead of statically will assist scholars in this field to understand genre not as a constant but as a process, as a space where the rules are not static but constantly in a space of evolution.

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