

# Novels in Diary Format for Young Adults

Novels in diary form have been a popular genre of young adult fiction in recent years. They typically have a self-absorbed teenage narrator writing in a conversational, rather than a literary, style. The liveliness of the voice is easy for the YA reader to relate to. Even when serious matters are being discussed, the entries tend to insert humorous passages at frequent intervals. Some of the novels here, such as *Monster*, or the adult *The Color Purple*, deal with painful issues and don't attempt to leaven their stories with humor, but the very shortness of the individual entries makes them much easier to read than they would be as conventional narratives.

This is a bibliography specifically of novels in the form of journals, not of the more general category of epistolary novels to which they belong. My criteria for deciding whether a book qualified as diary format were somewhat arbitrary. I reluctantly eliminated *Ella Minnow Pea* from consideration, as it is entirely letters. Some books consist of combinations of journal entries, letters, and straight narrative, and these combos were deemed to qualify if the diary formed an extensive part of the book. I accepted books that were self-described as diaries, although some books that follow the format of dated entries actually read like straight first-person narrative novels and not like something anyone would write in a journal. On the other hand, *Wolf Tower* appears to be a conventional first-person novel divided into titled chapters and not a diary, but not only does the narrator tell us that she is writing in a book she stole, but she knows nothing of what will happen beyond the part she is writing, so she has only the knowledge a diarist would have.

I classified books as "adult fiction" if that is how they were originally published. In some cases publishers have subsequently issued editions specifically designated for the YA market.

## Teen Angst, Medieval and Modern

*Catherine, Called Birdy* by Karen Cushman. 1994

A high-spirited and rebellious 14-year-old daughter of a low-level knight in 13th-century England records the pranks and scrapes she gets into as she avoids the household tasks of a lady and does her best to discourage the parade of suitors to whom her father is trying to marry her off, even if

it requires setting fire to the privy when a prospective husband is in it.

*Alice, I Think* by Susan Juby, 2003

Alice has been a social outcast since the day she started first grade, where she arrived dressed in her customary hobbit outfit, complete with felt slippers with fake fur on the toes. Fiercely bullied by the other children, who don't like "kids who think they are hobbits, especially kids who break into song and dance without any warning," she is removed and home-schooled by her aging hippie parents until she is 15. Now her Life Goals include going to high school, learning to drive, and making some acquaintances outside of her immediate family.

*Lily B. on the Brink of Cool* by Elizabeth Cody Kimmel, 2003

"I'm Lily. I'm writing my memoirs so that when my biography is written, all the information will be in one easily accessible volume. Plus I get school credit." The LeBlancs, relatives she meets for the first time at a wedding, are so much cooler than Lily's boring and responsible parents, but why does every cool activity they suggest somehow leave Lily holding the bag?

*Angus, Thongs, and Full-Frontal Snogging* by Louise Rennison, 1999

Poor Georgia Nicolson . She's been ignored at a costume party which she attended dressed as a stuffed olive, not having realized that, while it was agreed the costume was funny, "boys don't think girls are for funniness." Her parents don't realize how stupid and useless they are, the 17-year-old Sex God she's in love with already has a girlfriend, and Angus the cat, half Scottish wildcat and the size of a small Labrador, keeps stalking the neighbor's poodle. As Georgia says, "Why doesn't she get a bigger dog?" A glossary in the back translates Britishisms for American readers.

*Planet Janet* by Dyan Sheldon, 2002

Janet decides, with her friend Disha, to embark upon the Dark Phase. By wearing (and painting her room) black and purple, being serious and intellectual, and nurturing her soul, she will experience the angst and passion of life and avoid living the trivial existences of all around her, especially her family. British-American glossary included.

## **Fantasy**

*The Folk Keeper* by Franny Billingsley, 1999

In this fantasy incorporating the selkie legend, a Folk Keeper's job is to protect the household by appeasing and controlling the malignant underground creatures called the Folk. When the orphan Corinna, disguised as a boy, assumes this function at a seaside manor at which she has been, for unknown reasons, invited to live, she learns the mystery of her heritage and powers. She writes of her experiences in her Folk Record.

*Wolf Tower* by Tanith Lee, 1998

This is the first of the "Claidi Journals" series. Claidi, enslaved to a cruel princess in the walled city, has always been told that nothing can survive in the Waste outside the walls. When she escapes by helping a captured balloonist to get free, she discovers that many tribes live in the Waste, which is a land of dangers but also of possibilities for a new life.

## **Realistic YA**

*Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, 1999

Sixteen-year-old Steve Harmon has been charged as an adult with felony murder. He is accused of being a lookout in a robbery in which the store owner dies when shot with his own gun. To quiet his fear during his trial, Steve, who studies film-making in his school's film club, converts the proceedings to a movie script in his mind. This script alternates in the book with pages from the journal he keeps about his terrifying nights in jail and his thoughts about who he really is. He wonders what his father and mother, and ultimately, his attorney, see when they look in his eyes. A thought-provoking book.

## **Adult Novels for Young Adults**

*Heat and Dust* by Ruth Praver Jhabvala, 1975

The English narrator goes to India to find out the truth about her grandmother Olivia. While she studies Olivia's journal and letters, she keeps a journal of her own. She reads of the scandal, fifty years earlier, caused when Olivia, wife of a British colonial civil servant, has an affair with an Indian prince, and then her own life begins to parallel her grandmother's.

*Flowers for Algernon* by Daniel Keyes, 1959

This is the journal of Charlie Gordon, a mentally retarded man who volunteers to be the first human subject for experimental brain surgery

that may increase his intelligence. He has before him the example of the mouse Algernon, a super mouse as a result of the surgery. He reports on his progress through increasingly literate journal entries, but finds that extremely high intelligence can be as isolating as extremely low, and his tragic future is foretold when Algernon begins to regress toward his original level.

*Youth in Revolt: the Journals of Nick Twisp* by C.D. Payne, 1993

At fourteen, Nick's problems include coping with his dysfunctional divorced parents, trying to lose his virginity, and dealing with the consequences of following the directions of Sheeni Saunders, the girl he is in love with. He fails to observe that Sheeni is an instigator of trouble, a delegator rather than a doer. This is the first book of a trilogy.

*I Capture the Castle* by Dodie Smith, 1948

Seventeen-year-old Cassandra captures her family in prose as she fills three notebooks with observations on her impoverished bohemian family and the crumbling ruin of a castle that they call home.

*The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 3/4* by Sue Townsend, 1982

While this is a crossover into YA fiction, it was written to amuse adults. Adrian is more aware of the world around him than most fictional teenage diarists. His observations on life in his London suburb, his father's unemployment, the National Health, and the old age pensioner he helps as a volunteer project all give his diary more of a sense of place than is usual in the teen angst genre. The may be the first book to include a glossary to help out the Yanks.

*The Color Purple* by Alice Walker, 1970

Celie's story of growth, transformation, and the power of female relationships in the face of brutal sexism and racism is told through her journal in the form of letters to God, and later in letters between herself and her sister Nettie.

*The Ginger Tree* by Oswald Wynd, 1977

This book tells, through her journals and letters, the story of Mary MacKenzie's eventful life, beginning with her voyage from Scotland to China in 1903 to marry a British military attache she barely knows. Two years later, when he learns of her affair with a Japanese count, he throws her out without resources and without letting her ever see their daughter

again. The upheavals, joys, and tragedies of the life she makes for herself in Japan fill her journal until she returns to Britain in 1942, when Japan goes to war.