

Elements of Young Adult Fiction
July Write Brain
Presenters: Ronald Cree and Robert Spiller
By Brandy Vallance

Five teenagers sat behind a table at the front of the room. Ronald Cree, PPW member and successful YA author, introduced them.

“This is your panel of experts,” he said. The teenagers scanned the crowd. A few of them were shy in their gazes; others bold. As I watched their mannerisms, I was taken back to a time in my life when the stakes were high and life was lived by a completely different set of rules. These rules came to the forefront as we learned the inside ingredients of Young Adult fiction.

Ronald’s workshop co-leader, mystery author Robert Spiller handed us an outline containing a wealth of information. “If you remember nothing else, remember this: teens act! They don’t talk about doing something, they do it.”

“Teens are in transition,” he continued. “They’re trying to figure out how the world works... . Often for teens the world is black and white. They can be very rigid in their ethics, even if those ethics are nonstandard.”

After each statement he made, Robert turned to the teenagers to get confirmation that these things were true. They unanimously agreed. This was not a surprise: Robert knows teenagers, having been a teacher for nearly 30 years. There’s no doubt his current project, a YA mystery, will get their voice and perspective just right.

At one point, the floor was open, and we all had a chance to pitch our novels to the panel. It was interesting to see the teens divided on some ideas, and enthralled with others. Sometimes they raised their hands with hesitation, and at other times they didn’t even have to think. Those moments sent a clear message—the idea was worth pursuing.

During the prize giveaways, we had to guess a song that a boy had on his MP3. I think we were all reminded in that moment that looks can be deceiving. Our characters are that way too. There are so many layers to personality and we, as authors, have the pleasure of peeling away the layers to find out what’s really going on inside.

We were left with one last bit of advice. Ronald Cree gestured to a table at the side of the room. A display of YA novels was stacked, faced, and artfully arranged. “This is only a fraction of my library from home,” he said. “If you want to write YA and you’re not reading YA, you’re making a big mistake.”

Robert Spiller and Ronald Cree did us an immense service by forcing us to immerse ourselves in the teenagers’ world—see how they see, relate to the problems they face, get a glance into their culture. How can we write books for teenagers if we can’t remember what it’s like to be one?

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