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The following study sought to determine which journals provide the best reviews of young adult books by investigating the research question "Of the journals librarians most commonly consult for young adult book reviews, which utilize the criteria that experts consider essential in a quality book review?" The research sample included fiction titles from YALSA's (Young Adult Library Services Association) Best Books for Young Adults 2007 that had reviews in four specific journals, *Booklist*, *Kliatt*, *School Library Journal*, and *Voice of Youth Advocates*. Content analysis was used to code 140 reviews using a set of criteria developed by Margo Wilson and Kay Bishop in 1999. The results show that all of the journals addressed most of the criteria in their reviews, but each journal had strengths and weaknesses. This information potentially will help young adult librarians in both school and public libraries decide which review sources to consult when making collection development decisions.

Headings:

Book Reviews and Reviewing--Evaluation

Young Adults' Literature--Selection

Young Adults' Literature--Evaluation

School Libraries--Collection Development

Public Libraries--Collection development

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FINDING QUALITY REVIEWS FOR YOUNG ADULT BOOKS

by
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Introduction

Book reviews are important tools for librarians making collection development decisions. Librarians must have reliable sources to help them discover pertinent information so they can purchase the books that best meet the needs of their users. Francine Fialkoff, former editor of *Library Journal (LJ)*, supports that idea: she stated that reviews are important because they provide evaluation, place a book's usefulness in context, and help librarians choose which books to purchase from the thousands of books published each year (127). Not only are reviews important in theory, but they are also heavily used in practice. In a survey of public libraries in 1998, 96% of respondents reported that reviews in trade journals were what they consulted most often when making purchasing decisions for books (Hoffert 108).

Because reviews are so important to the library profession, it is no surprise that researchers have analyzed various aspects of review journals, especially the reviews of books for children and young adults. For example, Sutherland in 1967, and Eaglen and Weber, both in 1979, focused on review sources' coverage of books for children and young adults. Sager in 1993 and Wilson and Bishop in 1999 studied the quality of reviews. In 1980, Witucke examined coverage in terms of criteria for quality, and in 1986, Crow examined the treatment of controversial issues in reviews for children's books. The researchers reached different conclusions about each specific journal they examined, but they all came to the consensus that consulting more than one journal is necessary to gain a clear overview of available books. While many libraries have limited

budgets, this is often more pronounced in school libraries. Not only, then, must school librarians make wise choices with their funds as they purchase books, but many are also forced to limit the number of review journals to which they subscribe (Wilson and Bishop 3) and therefore must make wise decisions with funds for journal subscriptions as well. Therefore, it is crucial for school librarians in particular to be knowledgeable of the best review sources.

Purpose of the Study

The current study replicated Margo Wilson and Kay Bishop's 1999 study, which looked at the criteria used in writing reviews for children's books, and then went on to examine review sources to determine which journals provided the most complete coverage of these criteria. Wilson and Bishop's research questions were "What are the criteria that experts consider essential in a quality children's book review?" and "Which of the most commonly used journals for reviewing children's books contain the criteria that experts consider essential in a quality children's book review?" They defined experts as "persons whose opinions about the reviewing of children's books had appeared in professional periodical literature and in books solely devoted to the book reviewing of children's books" (7). Criteria identified by three or more experts were included in their final list, for a total of ten criteria. The list of criteria, in rank order, follows:

1. Description of content
2. Definition of audience
3. Information regarding scope, tone, style, point of view
4. Comparison with author's other works or similar works
5. Appropriateness of the art to the text
6. Reviewer's personal opinion
7. Strengths and weaknesses
8. Uses of the work

9. Brevity
10. Judgment of literary quality

Wilson and Bishop chose four journals for their study: *Booklist*, *The Bulletin of the Center for Children's Books (Bulletin)*, *The Horn Book Magazine (Horn Book)*, and *School Library Journal (SLJ)*. Book reviews of the 1996 Notable Books for Children that appeared in all four journals were used for the study, which comprised a total of thirty-eight books from the original list of seventy-four titles. The reviews were written soon after the books were published, and before they had been named as Notable Books. Wilson and Bishop were unable to identify one journal that was far and above the others in its inclusion of the identified criteria. *SLJ*, *Booklist*, and *Bulletin* were very close in the total number of criteria met, and although *Horn Book* met fewer criteria, it met almost as many as the other journals.

The current study used eight of the ten criteria defined by Wilson and Bishop to examine review sources for books written for young adults. In the library field, "young adults" are defined as people ages 12-18 (Jones xxviii). The research question this study addressed is "Of the journals librarians most commonly consult for young adult book reviews, which use the criteria that experts consider essential in a quality book review?" The purpose of the study was to determine which journals provide the most comprehensive reviews of young adult books. This, in turn, will inform librarians as they decide which review sources to consult when making collection development decisions.

Literature Review

An examination of the previous research of both the coverage of books for children and young adults in review journals and the quality of the reviews in them better informs the research question.

Coverage of Reviews

Zena Sutherland's 1967 study and Audrey B. Eaglen's and Rosemary Weber's studies, both in 1979, focused primarily on review sources' coverage of books for children and young adults. Sutherland discussed the contemporary review practices of the 1950's and 1960's in her article "Current Reviewing of Children's Books." She referred first to two unpublished studies, Evelyn Anderson's master's thesis and Louise Galloway's doctoral thesis, which both analyzed a year of reviews of children's books, in 1955 and 1959, respectively. Anderson concluded that based on her list of fifteen criteria, *Booklist* and *Bulletin* were basic tools that should be used for the selection of children's books, while *Horn Book* and *SLJ* were supplemental (111). Galloway used a list of nineteen criteria, and in her review of eight publications (*Booklist*, *Bulletin*, *Elementary English*, *Horn Book*, *The New York Herald Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *Saturday Review*, and *SLJ*), she determined that *SLJ* and *Booklist* gave the greatest coverage of books for children (113). She also stated that more critical reviews were needed, an assertion that researchers have continued to make since that time. Finally Sutherland discussed her own study of reviews found in *Booklist*, *Bulletin*, *Horn*

Book, and *SLJ* in 1965. She examined the number of books reviewed compared to the number of books published that year; the number of fiction versus nonfiction reviews; the inclusion of discussion of a book's reading level; and the number of publishers represented in the reviews. Sutherland came to the conclusion that "no journal gives complete coverage and no one of the four so intensively scrutinized is without some flaws" (116). She argued that ideally anyone selecting books should use all of the available review sources, and ideally selectors would know the policies and practices of each publication (117). However, not all librarians have access to all the available review sources, making it important that they have enough information to choose the best sources.

Audrey B. Eaglen also focused primarily on coverage of review sources, looking specifically at reviews of young adult books in her 1979 article. She examined *The ALAN Review*, *Booklist*, *Bulletin*, *English Journal*, *Horn Book*, *Kirkus Reviews*, *Kliatt Paperback Book Guide (Kliatt)*, *SLJ*, *Voice of Youth Advocates (VOYA)*, and *Wilson Library Bulletin*. She determined that *Kliatt* and *VOYA* were the best review sources for young adult books and recommended them as particularly essential for small public libraries and school libraries that may have limited budgets for subscriptions to review journals. She found that *Kliatt's* reviews were "incisive and complete" and that reviewers mentioned books' controversial and potentially controversial aspects (143). She lauded *VOYA* for its inclusion of genres such as mystery, science fiction, adult fiction appropriate for young adults, and nonfiction in its reviews. Because this research is almost thirty years old, it is appropriate to reexamine these review sources to determine if

Kliatt and *VOYA* are still the best review sources for young adult books. These two journals were among those examined in the current study.

Rosemary Weber also focused primarily on coverage in her article “The Reviewing of Children’s and Young Adult Books in 1977.” She studied the following periodicals: *Bulletin*, *Booklist*, *Horn Book*, *The New York Times Book Review (NYTBR)*, *Publishers Weekly*, *SLJ*, and *Kirkus Reviews*. After giving an overview of each publication and of who wrote the reviews, she discussed her data. She examined the percentage of reviews in each journal out of the total number of reviews published in all seven. She looked at the number and percentage of titles that were reviewed in all seven journals, in six journals, in five, etc., and at the percentage of each journal’s coverage of reviews (what percentage of each journal wrote the only review of a title, what percentage wrote one of two total reviews of a title, etc.). She also determined the percentage of reviews of books specifically for children and the percentage of reviews of books specifically for young adults. She concluded that “totals are not enough by themselves” and “more than one journal must be consulted” (136).

Quality of Reviews

As Weber stated, totals are not enough. Librarians must also consider the quality of reviews. The definition of quality has distinct connotations for different people. One way to define a quality book review is through the use of specific guidelines reviewers use as they write their reviews. The use of such guidelines is encouraged not only by researchers who analyze reviews, but also by reviewers and editors themselves. Some review sources, such as *Horn Book*, have a rating system that reviewers use and that is

clearly stated so readers know why books receive their ratings. But not all publications define their guidelines so specifically. In the 1979 article “What Makes a Good Review?” the article title’s question was answered by ten editors, authors, and children’s librarians. As the editor of the article stated, “there were as many different answers as there were people asked” (146). While each expert focused on different criteria, everything they cited became criteria for Wilson and Bishop’s study, with the exception of two items: a review should tell who else should know about the book, people such as guidance counselors and youth workers (148-149), and each review should give a clear recommendation or non-recommendation (149).

Other writers have sought to define guidelines for good reviews. Donald Sager, contributing editor of *Public Libraries* in 1993, asked four professionals for their opinion of the effectiveness of the available library reviewing media at that time. Practical discussion of the problem of reviews and suggestions for ways to improve them were mentioned by all respondents. Jack Hicks, director of Deerfield Public Library in Illinois, mentioned concerns with the time lag between a book’s publication and reviews written about the book; lack of comprehensiveness within reviews, particularly in subject-specific nonfiction books; bias on the part of the reviewer; and the need for more critical evaluation (12). Art Plotnik, associate publisher for American Library Association (ALA) and an author, mentioned the lack of comprehensiveness in the range of review media and the presence of occasional bias (14). Regan Robinson, a librarian and the editor of *Librarians Collection Letter*, stated the lack of timeliness in the appearance of reviews, insufficient coverage, and lack of practical useful information (16). Finally, Francine Fialkoff, then-executive editor of *LJ*, listed the review’s coverage of a book’s

content; its place in the context of its field and within the library's collection; the author's credentials; comparisons to other books; and candor about the book's quality as aspects that should be included in reviews (17). She encouraged librarians to let journal editors know what they want in reviews so that editors can ensure reviewers know what their readers would like to see discussed. Sager concluded that though the overall attitude toward reviews was positive, flaws existed. He said the greatest weakness was "there are too few reviews and insufficient critical commentary" but "a sound collection of reviewing sources reflecting a variety of viewpoints is probably the best investment a library can make" (17).

Researchers have focused on specific aspects of many of the aforementioned suggestions for what makes a quality review, often within the context of a journal's coverage of available books for a specific audience, including those for children and young adults. Virginia Witucke was one such researcher. In 1980, Witucke wrote "A Comparative Analysis of Juvenile Book Review Media." Her research question was "How well served by the major review sources are those libraries for which children's books are purchased?" She examined *Booklist*, *Bulletin*, *Horn Book*, *NYTBR*, and *SLJ*. She chose a random sample of thirty books from the Notable Children's Books Lists of 1972, 1973, and 1974. She looked at coverage (what percentage of the titles were reviewed in each journal); promptness (how soon after publication were the books reviewed); characteristics of the reviews themselves, such as length, authorship, and critical themes (defined as "evaluative, subjective comments" (157)); and consistency (did titles receive similar treatment in all the journals that reviewed them). Witucke found that *Booklist*, *SLJ*, and *Bulletin* reviewed the most titles from the sample list, but

SLJ covered 95% of all titles published for children during 1972-1974. All journals had a lag time between a book's publication and any reviews written about it. In terms of a review's length, *NYTBR* had the longest reviews, while *Booklist* had the shortest. For critical themes, *Booklist* had the lowest mention of such themes and *NYTBR* had the highest. Witucke came to the conclusion that increased numbers of reviews for children and young adult books were needed, and that publishers should issue their policy statements not only to guide those who write reviews but also to guide journal users who read reviews. Additionally, she determined that "no single review tool [is] adequate to the selector's needs," and therefore "the selector...must learn which review tools best serve him/her in a given situation and determine how to use each to maximum advantage" (160).

In 1982, Witucke replicated her study by using books from the Notable Children's Books Lists of 1978, 1979, and 1980, using a random sample of ten books from each year rather than a random sample of books from all three years combined. In addition to applying the same criteria used in her original study, she made comparisons between the results of the two studies. In terms of coverage, *Booklist* and *NYTBR* went down slightly in their percentage of the total number of sample titles reviewed, *Booklist* and *Horn Book* went up slightly, and *Bulletin* decreased significantly, by 30%. Reviews were published sooner after the book's publication date for all publications except *NYTBR*. The mean number of words per review increased slightly for *Bulletin* (with a mean of five more words), increased more so for *Booklist* and *SLJ* (with means of 35 and 38 more words, respectively), decreased slightly for *Horn Book* (with a mean of six fewer words) and decreased significantly for *NYTBR* (with a mean of 72 fewer words). One of the

significant findings of the comparative study was that there was an increase in the number of critical themes in all publications, except *Horn Book*, which remained the same. Overall, the comparison of the two reviews showed “more similarity than improvement” (54). Despite the significant increase of critical themes, the concern for “the lack of clearly stated, frequently published policy statements that help the user interpret what he/she is getting” in a review was as prominent in the later study as it was in the earlier one (54). Witucke concluded her second study by reiterating the idea that librarians must use multiple review sources as selection tools to gain a more comprehensive view of which books are available as well as to learn about their content and quality. Witucke’s results support the need for the current study in the same way Sager’s conclusions do: librarians must be informed about review sources to choose the best ones.

Another important aspect that helps determine a quality review is the review’s discussion of controversial issues. This is particularly important for children’s and young adult librarians, both in school and public libraries, so these librarians can better prepare their readers (and readers’ parents) for such issues. In 1986, Sherry Crow studied the treatment of children’s books considered controversial from 1973-1982. The books selected for the study were those appearing more than once in the *Newsletter on Intellectual Freedom* during the specified time frame, which came to a total of twenty books. Crow studied reviews in *Booklist*, *Bulletin*, *Horn Book*, and *SLJ* that were published within the year prior to the book’s publication, during the same year, or within a year after publication. She determined the number of books reviewed in each source, each journal’s promptness in including a review, and the extent of the discussion of a

book's controversial features within its review. Her results found that *SLJ* reviewed more of the controversial books than the other journals, most promptly reviewed them, and included the most words per review devoted to the controversial issue. *Booklist* and *Bulletin* ranked fairly evenly in all three areas, behind *SLJ*, while *Horn Book* reviewed the lowest number of controversial books and devoted an average of less than 1% of a review's words to discussion of the controversial issue. Therefore, Crow determined *SLJ* would be the best source for broad coverage, prompt reviews, and thorough discussion of controversial issues in children's books. While the current study did not explicitly examine controversial issues in young adult books, it examined them implicitly with the application of the criterion "description of content," which included discussion of controversial issues.

As can be seen from the above discussion, book reviews are important for librarians as they make collection development decisions. It is imperative for any librarian, but particularly for those who work with children and young adults, to have access to the best review sources: namely, sources that provide both adequate coverage of books written for children and young adults, and quality reviews of those books. While librarians may choose to subscribe to different review journals based on their readers' needs, in the same way that they purchase different books based on their readers' needs, they must become familiar with the available sources before they make that decision, a decision that can be better informed by the results of the current study.

Methodology

The current study used content analysis to examine four journals that include reviews of young adult books. As defined by author and researcher Earl Babbie, content analysis is “the study of recorded human communications” (314). It is one type of unobtrusive research, which studies social behavior without affecting it (313). This was the most appropriate research method for this study because the reviews had already been published and the researcher did not affect the data in any way by studying them. The four review journals were the units of analysis, while the book reviews were the units of observation.

As with any research method, content analysis has both advantages and disadvantages. One advantage of using content analysis for this study was the systematic application of the same criteria to all the reviews that were read. This ensured reliability because each review was held to the same standard (Babbie 324). However, only one researcher coded the reviews, which lowers the validity because other researchers might have interpreted the content of the reviews differently. Having more than one person coding is something that could be expanded in future studies. Another disadvantage of content analysis is that by nature the study is confined to the written reviews (324) and does not include any study of the opinions of others who have read the books, including young adults themselves. This is another aspect that could be expanded in future studies. For example, librarians and teachers could be surveyed on their opinions of review journals, or they could be asked to rank review sources with similar criteria. Also, only

four review journals were examined. This obviously limits the discussion of the criteria to these four journals, and does not include any information about the many other sources that are available for librarians to consult for reviews. Studying additional sources would be a benefit of further research.

Study Sample

The sample used in this study was taken from YALSA's (Young Adult Library Services Association) Best Books for Young Adults 2007. Because of the differences in fiction and nonfiction books, and thus in the additional unique criteria needed to review nonfiction books adequately, only the reviews of fiction books from the Best Books list were examined. Determining appropriate criteria for and reviewing the nonfiction books is an area for further research.

The first step of the process was to select the sample from the Best Books list of sixty-eight fiction books. Only books reviewed in all four of the journals chosen for the study, *Booklist*, *Kliatt*, *SLJ*, and *VOYA*, were included. These four journals were chosen as the unit of analysis because they are considered to be the top review sources used by librarians who serve young adults (Jones 149). If more than one review of a book appeared in a particular journal, the review published first was used in the study, and only book reviews, not audio book reviews, were used. This process narrowed the original list to thirty-five books (see Appendix A).

Procedure

Once the sample was selected, the next step in the process was to read and code the content of the book reviews. Eight of the original ten expert-determined criteria, as cited in Wilson and Bishop and listed above in the literature review, were used for coding. The criterion “appropriateness of art to the text” was not used because the majority of young adult books do not have pictures, as do most children’s books. The criterion “brevity” was also dropped because most reviews are about the same length, and this criterion does not relate to the book itself. The criteria actually used for the study are as follows:

- Description of content—This included both a summary of the plot and any controversial or potentially controversial issues in the book.
- Definition of audience—This indicated the age or grade range of the readers for whom the book is most appropriate.
- Information regarding scope, tone, style, point of view—Scope included information about how broadly or narrowly the book focused on its subject. Tone addressed the author’s attitude toward the subject, humorous or serious, for example. Style included both an author’s individual writing style and the book’s format (prose, poetry, or graphic novel). Point of view was indicated by stating the narrative point of view, either first person or omniscient, or switching viewpoints among the characters in successive chapters.¹
- Comparison with author’s other works or similar works—This gives the review reader a better sense of how a book fits into the gamut of the author’s work as well as into the genre as a whole.

- Reviewer's personal opinion—This was directly stated or implied by the discussion within the review.
- Strengths and weaknesses—Though generally discussion of one of these was followed by the other, if either was present in the review, this criterion was coded as being present.
- Uses of the work—This indicated how a book can be used to support or enrich a school curriculum.
- Judgment of literary quality—A book's popularity does not necessarily indicate its literary value. This criterion addressed discussion of stylistic literary devices or the lasting impression of the work.

Each of the reviews in the sample was coded by systematically applying the criteria. Four Excel spreadsheets were used, one for each of the journals. A 1 was placed in the appropriate column if the criterion appeared in the review, a 0 if it did not. Totals were summed for each criterion per journal (see Table 1 below for results). The average number of criteria in each review was also determined (see Table 2 below for results).

Notes

¹ Though each of these could be divided into four separate criteria, because they were all used together in Wilson and Bishop's study, the researcher for the current study kept them together as well, and coded this criterion as being present in a review if at least one of the four was mentioned.

Results

As explained in the methodology section, the thirty-five reviews were read and coded for the presence of each criterion. The following tables show the results of this coding.

Table 1: Criteria Totals by Journal

	Criterion	<i>Booklist</i> (n=35)	<i>Kliatt</i> (n=35)	<i>SLJ</i> (n=35)	<i>VOYA</i> (n=35)
1	Description of Content	35	35	35	35
2	Definition of Audience	35	35	35	35
3	Scope, Tone, Style, Point of View	35	35	35	35
4	Comparison with Author's Works or Similar Works	26	23	15	18
5	Reviewer's Personal Opinion	33	28	32	31
6	Strengths and Weaknesses	32	10	21	25
7	Uses of the Work	2	2	1	4
8	Judgment of Literary Quality	30	25	21	19
	Total (n=280)	228	193	195	202

Table 2: Totals and Averages of Criteria by Journal

	Total Number of Criteria (n=280)	Average Number of Criteria per Review (n=8)
<i>Booklist</i>	228	6.51
<i>Kliatt</i>	193	5.51
<i>SLJ</i>	195	5.57
<i>VOYA</i>	202	5.77

As Table 1 shows, the first three criteria (description of content, definition of audience, and information regarding scope, tone, style, and point of view) were included in each review in each journal studied. Description of content essentially covered the

plot of the book, though in some reviews this also addressed such potentially controversial issues as language (“there’s also lots of use of the n-word, though the term is employed in the colloquial sense, not as an insult”) and sex (“the intimations of incest, the details of mutilated corpses, a bizarre sex scene, and the story’s creepy plotline may raise plenty of eyebrows and limit the book’s audience”).

All the journals also have a system to alert the reader to the audience for which the book was written. *Booklist* uses grade ranges: 7-10, 10-12, or whatever grade range is most appropriate. *Kliatt* uses J (recommended for junior high school students), S (recommended for senior high students), and A (recommended for advanced students and adults), and when appropriate, books can have two or three letters as designators. *Kliatt* also uses an asterisk to designate exceptional books. *SLJ* uses a grade level system similar to *Booklist*, and like *Kliatt*, stars reviews of outstanding titles. *VOYA* rates each review in three categories: quality, popularity, and grade level interest. Both quality and popularity are rated 5 to 1 with 5 being the highest, and the grade level interest codes are as follows: M (middle school, grades 6-8), J (junior high, grades 7-9), S (senior high, grades 10-12), and A/YA (adult books recommended for YAs). *VOYA* also has a designation for graphic novels and for highlighted reviews, its name for reviews of exceptional books.

Scope, tone, style, and point of view make up the final criterion that was included in each review in each journal. The most obvious examples indicated point of view: many reviews say things like “in this first person narrative” or “prose...that remains true to the child’s viewpoint.” Several of the books are written as poetry, and two are graphic novels, so these styles are discussed in the reviews. A book’s scope is mentioned in such

phrases as “[*Street Love* tells] a story of anger, loss, and love across social-class lines.” Tone, which was mentioned least often of these four items, was best conveyed when reviewers included quotes from the books themselves. For example, in the *Booklist* review of *What Happened to Cass McBride?* the reviewer quotes the character David’s suicide note: “Words are teeth. And they eat me alive. Feed on my corpse instead.”

The next criterion, comparison with the author’s other works or with similar works, was in the majority of *Booklist*’s and *Kliatt*’s reviews (at 26 and 23, respectively), but only in about half of *SLJ*’s and *VOYA*’s (at 15 and 18, respectively). This criterion generally appeared with phrases like “As in his previous novels...” or “her previous novels are popular with YAs.” Some reviews alluded to well-known canonical authors or poets, like Shakespeare or Longfellow, and some reviews alluded to current, popular young adult novelists. Often these comparisons were very helpful in giving insight into the reviewed book; however, the reader must be familiar with those to whom the reviewer alludes, or this information is neither meaningful nor helpful.

The reviewer’s opinion appeared in the majority of the reviews, with *Booklist* having the most examples, at 33, and *Kliatt* the fewest, at 28. The reviewer’s opinion was often clearly stated with phrases such as “this is one of the best graphic novels I’ve read this year.” In other reviews, the high praise, or lengthy discussion of weaknesses, made the reviewer’s opinion clear, even if it was not explicitly stated (“[readers] will respond to the emotional vibrancy of this powerful work”). Some reviewers, however, gave objective descriptions of the book’s content without conveying their personal opinions. For example, in *Kliatt*’s review of Helen Frost’s *The Braid*, the reviewer discusses the plot, mentions the poetry form in which the book is written, and says that

the work is reminiscent of Longfellow, but gives no indication of whether or not she enjoyed the book.

The discussion of strengths and weaknesses varied widely across the journals, with *Booklist* including it in all but three of its reviews, while *Kliatt* only discussed it in ten reviews. Strengths and weaknesses were generally explicitly stated if the reviewer included them, and while the two were generally mentioned in the same sentence (“the structure makes for a choppy beginning, but the grisly subject matter compels”), sometimes they stood alone (“her prose is not as rich in detail as in her other books” or “wry narration and brisk sports scenes bolster the pacing”).

Use of the work was the criterion that appeared least often in all the journals, for a total of 9 times in all 140 reviews. Some examples of reviewers’ use of this criterion include “her book is filled with material for a good classroom discussion on history and ethics,” “the depth of the storyline is sure to ignite classroom discussions on a myriad of moral issues, including the death penalty,” and “the switching viewpoints make this great for readers’ theater.”

Finally, the criterion judgment of literary quality ranged from 30 examples in *Booklist* to 19 examples in *VOYA*. Reviewers wrote about this criterion in different ways. For example, some reviewers implied quality as something that would make readers think (“this novel is filled with challenging ideas and potent language that will pull readers in new directions”) or that would make them remember the book (“it’s a powerful and provocative tale...[that] will haunt readers long after they finish it”). Others explicitly state things like “the writing is excellent” or “[the author] provides the definitive tale of the modern African American youth.” Other reviewers discuss the author’s style or use

of literary devices: “characterization and dialogue are expertly done” or “Hoffman crafts a lyrical, short-sentenced text that reads like poetry.”

Discussion of Results

In the current study, *Booklist* used the most criteria identified as being essential for a quality book review, with a total of 228 criteria. *VOYA*, at 202 criteria, was 16 points lower. While *SLJ*, at 195, and *Kliatt* at 193, were still lower, the range of 35 points difference is not drastic. This supports the findings of Wilson and Bishop's study as well as the studies of Sutherland, Weber, and Witucke mentioned in the literature review: one single journal cannot be identified as containing the best quality reviews of young adult books. However, this finding also emphasizes the importance of knowing the strengths and weaknesses of individual journals in view of the criteria discussed. Because *Booklist* and *VOYA* contain the most criteria, these would be the most useful review sources if a librarian had to choose only two. They rank high in all the categories except use of the work, which was a weakness in all the journals. *SLJ* is a strong review source for providing the reviewer's personal opinion, but ranks the lowest in terms of comparing books with other works. *Kliatt* is a strong review source for the reviewer's opinion and for comparison of other works, but ranks lowest in its discussion of strengths and weaknesses. By knowing which journals focus on which criteria, librarians can use the journals that provide the information that is most important to them.

Booklist, with 26 examples of comparing a reviewed work with another work, is far stronger in this area than *SLJ*, with 15 examples. Similarly, *Booklist*, with 30 examples, is far better at judgment of literary quality than *VOYA*, with 19 examples. The vastest difference in individual criteria is in reviews' discussions of strengths and

weaknesses. *Booklist*, again the highest with 32 examples, meaning all but 3 reviews included this, is 22 points higher than *Kliatt*, which only included this criterion in 10 of its reviews.

It should also be noted that the reviews in *Booklist* focused more on literary analysis than the reviews in the other journals. This was also true in a 1984 study conducted by Phyllis K. Kennemer (419). The reviews in *Kliatt*, in particular, and in *SLJ*, to some extent, were heavy on plot summary; the majority of each review discussed the action of the book, with few words expended on the other criteria.

Kennemer determined that reviews include information in three categories: descriptive, analytical, and sociological (419). The reviewer's opinion is part of the analytical category, and, as Wilson and Bishop state, one of the aspects most readers want to know about a book is whether or not someone else liked it (10). As discussed above in the results section, many reviewers stated their opinion explicitly, while others implied it by the praise or criticism they included in their review. *Booklist* only includes reviews of books it recommends (Booklist), so it is possible that some reviewers for this journal did not indicate their personal opinion because inclusion in the publication implies approval.

The researcher found the extremely low number of the seventh criterion, uses of the work, to be particularly surprising. *VOYA*'s website states that it is "a bimonthly journal addressing librarians, educators, and other professionals who work with young adults" (About VOYA). *Booklist*'s selection policy states the journal's "primary purpose is to provide a guide to current library materials in many formats appropriate for use in public libraries and school library media centers" (Booklist Selection Policy). Since all

of the examples of uses of the work in the reviews were curricular, it is understandable that this might not be included in reviews in *Booklist* and *VOYA* because their audience is not limited to school libraries. Still, only four reviews in *VOYA* and only two in *Booklist* included this criterion, and those are extremely low numbers. While *Kliatt*'s audience also includes public librarians, the header of their table of contents page includes the statement "*Kliatt* is valuable to teachers and school librarians for supplementing the curriculum." Therefore, the fact that only two of thirty-five reviews included any curricular uses of a work is surprising. Most surprising of all, however, is that *School Library Journal*, whose very name states its audience, had only one review that included information on the use of the reviewed book. *SLJ*'s website states it is "the leading print magazine serving librarians who work with young people in schools and public libraries" ([About Us](#)), so as with the other journals, maybe this number was low because of the dual audience, but the fact that only one of the examined reviews included discussion of the use of the work is remarkable. This study focused only on the reviews, not on the journal as a whole, so there may be other sections of *SLJ* that include discussion of books' curricular uses.

Further Research

Finding out more about reviewers' discussion of uses of a work is a clear area for further research. Is a book's curricular use still a criterion that school librarians want to see in reviews? How do journals supplement this area through other resources they offer, both within the rest of their print journal and with their online resources?

Another possibility for future research would be to divide the third criteria, scope, tone, style, and point of view, into four separate criteria and code them each individually. Though there is some overlap between them, each is a distinct characteristic of a book, and these could easily be identified individually in a review.

Further research could be done to find out from specific audiences—school librarians, public young adult librarians, and teens themselves, for example—what they find most helpful in reviews. This information would be useful for review writers so that they could include the information their readers most want to know about books being reviewed. It would also be useful for journals to include reviews written by teens because librarians would benefit from hearing more from the audience they serve. *VOYA* is the only journal of the four studied that contains reviews written by teens. A few of the books included in this study were reviewed by teens in addition to being reviewed by adults, though for this research, only the reviews written by adults were coded.

As mentioned in the methodology section, further research on the criteria for reviews of nonfiction books would be useful. Because different criteria are needed to

address the strengths and weaknesses of nonfiction books, it would be helpful to librarians to know which journals include quality reviews of nonfiction books.

A broader scope for further research would be to survey librarians to find out what they use journals for in addition to the reviews. A comparison of journals based on these criteria would be interesting.

Implications of Research

It is imperative for librarians to have the best information possible when making collection development decisions. Because journals' reviews emphasize different criteria, consulting more than one journal is necessary. By knowing more about which journals use which criteria in their reviews, librarians can choose the best review sources for their libraries, which will help them choose the best books.

Because school librarians in particular generally have limited budgets with which to subscribe to journals, they must be creative in the ways they find the information they need. Librarians within the same district or region could subscribe to different journals and share them with each other. School and public librarians within an area could also share journals, or school librarians could use the journals provided by the public library to supplement their own subscriptions. Since *Booklist* and *SLJ* reviews are included in Titlewave, Follett's online book ordering system, librarians who use this system may decide to limit their print subscriptions to journals whose reviews cannot be found in Titlewave. Another possibility is for a school district to subscribe to Books in Print Online, thereby providing librarians and teachers with access to reviews from *Booklist*, *SLJ*, and *VOYA*, freeing up monies that could be spent on *Kliatt* or other review journals in print. If librarians have access to Books in Print Online through their local public or university libraries, this would also be a way for them to obtain online information and save their monies for other print subscriptions.

This research also has implications for those who write reviews that librarians read. By including the determined criteria in their reviews, writers can ensure they are giving their readers the best information they need to make decisions on whether to buy the books being reviewed. Similarly, this research is also important for editors of review journals. By working closely with those who write reviews in their publications, they can set more explicit guidelines of what needs to be included in each review to ensure they are providing their readers with the most comprehensive information possible.

Conclusion

While this research does not define the single best source for reviews of young adult books, it does show the strengths and weaknesses of four of the journals librarians use for reviews to inform their collection development decisions and supports the need to read more than one journal. Knowing these strengths and weaknesses can be helpful to librarians as they decide to which journals they will subscribe, and which journals do not fit their needs. It is hoped this research will also be useful to other researchers as they refine the criteria of what is needed in a quality book review and to reviewers as they write reviews that will help their readers.

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Appendix A: Study Sample

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