

Writing and publishing advice for picture books, middle-grade, and young adult storytelling.

CAROL BALDWIN

## Crossing Over

Middle-Grade and Young Adult Novels With Adult Appeal

**W**hat do *Little Women*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*, and *A Wrinkle in Time* have in common?

They were written for children but loved by adults.

If you think that middle-grade and young adult novels are meant to appeal only to kids, these and many other novels prove otherwise. After publishing my YA novel *Half-Truths*, I was surprised to find that my audience consisted primarily of adults intrigued by the premise: an unlikely friendship between two teenage girls—one white and one Black—who navigate the discovery of a centuries-old family secret in 1950 Charlotte, N.C.

Why is this? What accounts for the adult appeal of certain MG and YA books? And what does that mean for your novel?

### STORIES THAT SPEAK TO OUR OWN

In *Half-Truths*, racial tensions and half-truths threaten to tear apart the girls' fragile friendship. When I present to community groups in Charlotte, folks born and bred in the South are eager to tell their own stories of racism, while newcomers are eager to discover their hometown's history. Both groups relate personally to the racial conflicts of the '60s and '70s.

Sometimes the allure stems not from a shared southern connection but from a parallel experience. "When

I was 15," one of my readers revealed, "My family moved from Israel to America. I didn't know English, but I knew Spanish. In New York, I hung out with the Puerto Rican kids. Language connected us. *Half-Truths* reminded me of my transition from one society to another."

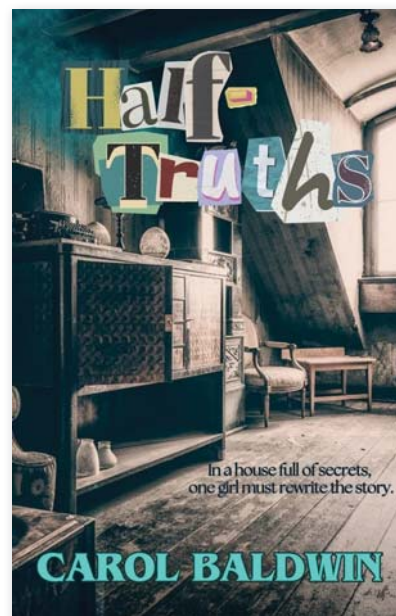
A novel may attract readers because it resonates with their own internal stories. Author Linda Phillips' two young adult books, *Crazy* and *Behind These Hands*, deal with mental health. "Many families contend with some form of mental illness, and adults are interested in situations that intersect with their own lives," she explains.

Joyce Hostetter, author of the middle-grade *Bakers Mountain Stories* series, concurs: "Readers want to take an emotional ride with a character they care about. My characters are coping with real-life dilemmas."

Whether 15 or 50 years old, readers seek stories they can relate to.

### THEMES THAT SPEAK ACROSS TIME

Readers of all ages appreciate stories that wrestle with universal themes and emotions. A theme that runs through *Half-Truths* is forgiveness. When betrayal threatens the girls' fragile friendship, grace restores it. A second theme is the danger of generational secrecy that perpetuates half-truths which often destroy relationships. Both scenarios mirror



true-life experiences of teens and adults. "Cross-generational themes tend to center on choice, consequence, and connection," observes Stephanie Cotta, author of fantasy novels for ages 13+, *The Conjurer's Curse*, *The Wraiths of Arjun*, *The Ghost's Gambit*, and *Heartsmith*. "Such dilemmas look beyond age-specific experiences and focus on emotional truths—belonging, identity, love, loss, betrayal, and hope."

Such themes emerge from characters' emotional arcs. Readers report that my relatable characters and authentic portrayal of core emotions contribute to the appeal of *Half-Truths*. During my long revision process, Joyce Hostetter reminded me of advice she received at the beginning of her career: "The more personally

you write, the more universal your story will be.” Cate Touryan, author of the YA/adult crossover novel, *Turning Toward Eden*, reflects that “great literature explores universal topics such as moral awakening.” Cotta adds, “Generational trauma and the cost of ambition appeal to readers of all ages.”

## GENRES THAT SPEAK TO EVERY GENERATION

According to market statistics, topping the list of favorite genres across all ages are mystery, coming-of-age, and fantasy—sometimes with romance thrown into the mix.

### Coming-of-Age

Chatting with readers at book fairs and in book clubs, I’m amazed by how many adults tell me they enjoy the coming-of-age theme in *Half-Truths*. Women of all ages—even those in the 70+ range—identify with the protagonist, who struggles to find her own voice as she works toward her dream.

Likewise, Touryan noted the appeal of her coming-of-age novel. “With *Turning Toward Eden*’s retro vibes and layered narrative threads, the novel stirs nostalgia in adult readers. The story takes them back to their youth, giving them a lens by which to reflect on times past.”

### Mystery

It doesn’t matter if the protagonist is an adult or teen, mysteries hold a power few other genres match. The shadowy attic on the cover of *Half-Truths* lures readers in with its hint of mystery, the tagline closing the deal: “In a house full of secrets, one girl must rewrite the story.” Similarly, Touryan’s book, a California coming-of-age mystery set in the shadow

of the Cold War, depicts a colossal, mythic bird above a serene coastline.

Part of a novel’s mystery is often the journey to explain a secret. In *Half-Truths*, the girls are driven to discover what binds them together. In Cotta’s *Heartsmith*, the characters must find out who is performing gruesome experiments on helpless victims. In *Turning Toward Eden*, the protagonist is obsessed with uncovering the identity of a strange girl haunting her beach town.

### Fantasy

From *The Hobbit* in 1937 to Percy Jackson in 2005, fantasy has been one of the genres most likely to captivate both children and adults. Cotta’s action-packed YA books are frequently purchased by adults who grew up on *The Lord of the Rings*. She believes they appreciate that she doesn’t write down to her readers. “I trust teens with emotional complexity. They may come for adventure and first love; adult readers stay for moral ambiguity, legacy, sacrifice, and the long shadow of past choices.”

## INTRODUCE YOUR MG AND YA NOVELS TO ADULTS

Writing a compelling book is one thing; helping readers *find* it is another—and sometimes harder—thing. With pressing competition in the marketplace, we do well if our books are recommended by word of mouth. But we can’t rely on that.

Our books must connect emotionally with our readers, but we must also connect with them. Hostetter enjoys lively conversations with her readers, both on social media platforms and in person. I find that discovering a common interest, such as civil rights, American history, or women breaking employment

barriers, builds a bridge between me and a prospective reader.

Cotta approaches women differently than she does men. “When speaking with women, I emphasize emotional arcs and lean into the sweet romance in my books. When speaking with men, I highlight the banter, duels, political intrigue, action, and adventure,” she says. “The more conversations I have, the clearer my target audience becomes.”

## WRITE THE BEST STORY YOU CAN

In the end, Touryan says, “Crafting stories with cross-generational appeal means writing a story that speaks of the human condition so powerfully and honestly that it transcends categories. History suggests that authors who set out simply to write an excellent book for young readers often discover that adults come along as well.”

Louisa May Alcott, C. S. Lewis, and Madeleine L’Engle probably did not think about “crossover” literature while writing. “Their wide appeal is a by-product of a good story well told,” Touryan concludes.

Reread your favorite children’s book. I bet you’ll find themes that touched your heart and characters who stayed with you long afterward.

Now, excuse me while I follow Meg and Charles Wallace on their adventure crossing over time. **WD**

**Carol Baldwin’s** ([CarolBaldwinBooks.com](http://CarolBaldwinBooks.com)) debut YA novel, *Half-Truths*, a story of generational secrets in 1950 North Carolina, released in April 2025. For its authentic portrayal of racism and gender struggles, the book has received multiple awards: the 2025 North Carolina American Association of University Women Award in Young Adult Literature, the North Carolina Society of Historians Award of Excellence, and the 2025 Hindi Females in Fiction Award.