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Thanks!

## ***Updated & Expanded – Red Hair's Not as Uncommon as You Think***

*by*

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**“Simple fact: If I don't read, I don't write.” – Chris Crutcher, *The King of the Mild Frontier*.**

Three years ago, after reading this quote, I embarked on a self-designed reading program because my writing was stagnant. At the time, I couldn't have imagined what I would learn. Over the next thirty-six months, I read approximately four hundred young adult novels, with some middle grade and adult fiction thrown in for good measure.

My plan was simple. I primarily stuck to YA because that's what I write, I looked for books published in the last two to three years so that I could learn where to market my manuscripts, and I kept a record of everything I read.

Before I was very far into the program I began to notice similarities in many YA and MG novels. At first it just made me laugh, but after a while I began to take notes. There may not be any original stories, and nothing may be new, but some things are way overused and here are the ones I've run across in my reading.

### **A countdown of 25 things that show up repeatedly in young adult fiction.**

#25 – Vegetarian teens with unsympathetic meat-eating parents

#24 – Shy or withdrawn characters that take refuge in the school's art room/ compassionate art teachers

#23 – A token black friend among a group of white friends – usually it's a girl, and she's always gorgeous

#22 – A tiny scar through the eyebrow, sometimes accompanied by an embarrassing story

# 21 – Using the word '*rents*' for parents, but not using any other slang

# 20 – A beautiful best friend who gets all the guys but doesn't want them

#19 – The wicked stepmother who turns out to be simply misunderstood and it’s all cleared up in the climax

#18 – Authors showing **their** age by naming characters names **they** grew up with (i.e. Debbie, Lisa, Kimberly, Alice, Linda, etc.)

#17 – Parents who are professional writers or book illustrators

#16 – Using *coffee*, *cappuccino*, and *café latte* to describe black people’s skin

#15 – Main characters named Hannah and making a note of it being a palindrome

#14 – Younger siblings who are geniuses, adored by everyone, and usually run away during the book’s climax, causing dramatic tension

#13 – The mean-spirited cheerleader (and her gang) as the story’s antagonist

# 12 – A dead mother

# 11 – Heroines who can’t carry a tune, even if it were in a bucket

# 10 – Guys with extraordinarily long eyelashes

# 9 – The popular boy dating the dorky heroine to make his former girlfriend jealous, and then breaking the heroine’s heart

# 8 – The diary, either as the entire format, or the occasional entry

# 7 – Fingernail biting

# 6 – Characters who chew on their lip or tongue in times of stress – usually until they taste blood

# 5 – Raising one eyebrow

# 4 – Main characters who want to be writers

# 3 – Calling parents by their first names

# 2 – Best friends with red hair\*

And the number one thing found in YA novels...

#1 – Lists

This was not a scientific study by any means, but if you have used any of these things in your manuscripts, think long and hard about how important they are to the story because you may want to cut or change them now. Stretch your imagination, make your characters' career choices different than what you "know", find new ways to show emotion, and read, read, read. Besides being fun, the best part of all that reading is it will make your writing stronger.

\*While lists rule in teen fiction, red-haired best friends are amazingly predominant in both MG and YA, and certainly gave "lists" a run for its money. It might be an easy way to quickly identify a secondary character, but it's a lot more common in books than red hair actually is!

**October 28, 2009 – I have added a bit of an update [here](#).**

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Originally published in the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators Bulletin, July/Aug. 2007