

# The Literary Sweet Spot:

## Sex in US and UK YA Fiction from the 1960s to the 1980s

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### ABSTRACT

This is a transcript of the opening keynote for the *Let's Talk About Sex in YA* online conference organised by colleagues at the University of Cambridge in May 2021. It considers the suppression of sexual context in US and UK YA publishing before the 1970s in relation to attitudes to youth, virginity, and patriarchy, and looks at the effects on adolescent readers of the lack of age- and experience-appropriate reading material they could consult. Attention is also paid to the changing social context: the late 1960s and 1970s were decades when sexual liberation was widely promoted, including for young people, on the one hand but regarded as a challenge to authority on the other. Finally, it looks at how this context has continued to shape YA fiction that represents and writes about sex.

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## INTRODUCTION

Is it possible to write a sexual piece [for children] that is so objective and compassionate that the turn-on is lost in deeper emotion in the reader? [...] If it is pornographic, would it be harmful to young readers? (Westall, Correspondence n.p.)

These questions were put to Nancy Chambers by the British children's writer, Robert Westall, in 1978. At the time, Chambers, a former children's book editor, was one of the founders and editor of the journal *Signal: Approaches to Children's Literature*, and the questions are part of an exchange about an article for *Signal*. Previously, Westall had not thought it appropriate to "talk about sex" in his novels, but from this point he began to explore how it might be done. His and others' early attempts to talk about sex tell us quite a lot about where we are today and why certain aspects of sexuality are now particularly problematic.

In *Abstinence Cinema*, Casey Ryan Kelly identifies attitudes to virginity as indicators of ideological struggles active in society at any given time (5). His interest is in what can be learned from how American popular films present virginity, but YA fiction, which is addressed to an age group for which loss of virginity is particularly relevant, is even more sensitive to ideological forces that focus on this area. Kelly's study offers ways of understanding when and how YA writing began to engage with sex.

Explicit sexual content, usually centring on first love and loss of virginity, began to be included in the mid-1970s as part of the developing YA literary scene. As Kelly suggests, this was not a straightforward indicator of changing attitudes to sexual morality, for the books kept a weather eye on conservative forces even as those forces seemed to be in retreat. The history of YA fiction and sex dramatises ideological struggles around patriarchal conservatism, with its emphasis on family values, authority, and sexual liberation, which at the time was strongly associated with feminism and equal rights.<sup>1</sup> Both the original ideologies and the strategies for managing them have proved difficult to dislodge, so turning the clock back to the conditions under which YA fiction began to talk about sex offers insights into how and why it is included in texts published today.

How you understand sexual attitudes depends on context. Michel Foucault begins his *History of Sexuality* with precisely this point: what is accepted and unproblematic in one place and time may be pathologised and demonised in another, especially with regard to children (Chapters One and Two), or vice-versa. When we look at texts and images from the past, we cannot avoid bringing our current understandings, attitudes and concerns into play. But that inevitable presentism needs to take account of how innovations registered at the

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1 It is pertinent to this discussion to keep in mind that the US Equal Rights Amendment was approved by the House of Representatives and Senate in 1971 and 1972 respectively, and that in the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* case the Supreme Court ruled that the US Constitution protects a woman's right to have an abortion (see <https://supreme.justia.com/cases/federal/us/410/113/>).

time, and what they signified for young readers, children's authors, and the children's publishing world.

The last century saw two notable efforts to introduce sexual content into YA fiction. The first can be dealt with quickly.<sup>2</sup> Its significance here is that its underpinning ideas were revived in the 1970s. Drawing on the psychological theories of Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich and William James, a small group of liberal thinkers identified sexual repression as a significant cause of personal and social illness. They regarded war in general, and the rise of fascism specifically, as products of sexual repression. In an attempt to break the cycle of repression and conflict, they set out to change attitudes to sex, including in the rising generation. At that time, the principal tool for reaching out to the young was print. A few progressive educators and creators of books for children and adolescents produced information books, leaflets, articles and a handful of novels that encouraged open discussion and new ways of thinking about sex. A 1913 number of *The Young Socialist* magazine explained why:

Sex subjects, for growing people, need to be handled carefully and delicately, but they need to be handled. Until such matters are dealt with openly, in sympathetic and intelligent fashion, we may expect nothing but unhappiness to come as a result for years after [...]. Prudery and calculated ignorance are responsible for a thousand evils in our land. (220)

This first attempt to talk about sex failed. The arrival of youth culture in the 1950s ushered in moral panics about the condition of youth in Britain and America, creating a conservative backlash focused on promiscuity and a perceived lack of respect for authority.

This was also the cultural climate in which children's literature became an established and successful branch of the publishing business, meaning publishers were acutely sensitive to the opinions of their principal purchasers: parents, teachers, and librarians. In both the US and the UK, the children's book industry subscribed to an unwritten rule that there would be no sex in children's books (Reynolds, "Publishing Practices" 31). This included the growing number of titles addressed specifically to teenagers. It took YA writers and publishers more than a decade to challenge that view.

With the advantage of hindsight and through the filter of twenty-first-century sensitivities, some of the pioneering texts I discuss here may seem crude. They privilege white, heterosexual sex, and male experience is more visible and normalised than is female. In context, however, it seems clear that writers and editors were working out how to include sexual content of any kind in ways that would ring true to and be helpful for their readers

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2 Efforts to publish works that explained and fictionalised sex in the early and middle decades of the last century are discussed in detail in my book *Left Out: The Forgotten History of Radical Publishing for Children, 1910-1949*.

without alienating the children's literature establishment. Before looking at how they did this, it is worth considering the effects of excluding sex from YA fiction, and the cultural milieu in which children's literature makers were then situated.

## TOO MUCH INFORMATION... TOO LITTLE FICTION

When it comes to teenage sex, I regard myself as lucky. For my three older sisters, sex was an ever-present minefield with serious consequences. 'Nice girls' did not 'do it' (or at least so their parents and teachers wanted to think), and if you did and became pregnant, there were serious consequences, starting with the end of education. By the time I was 15, however, birth control without parental consent was freely available and abortion was legal in nearby New York state. Three years later, William H. Masters and Virginia E. Johnson's influential study, *Human Sexual Response* (1966), was a set text in many high schools and universities. The important thing about Masters and Johnson for this discussion was their insistence that sex was not the preserve of adults, but a healthy, natural activity that promoted pleasure and intimacy, including in the young.

My generation of adolescents benefitted from new attitudes to sex, but there was still no YA fiction that talked about sex. This literary silence was at odds with the increased access to information, contraceptive services and the belief in young people's right to be sexually active promoted in popular media, the arts, women's groups, and bestselling books such as Alex Comfort's *The Joy of Sex* (1972). Organisations such as Planned Parenthood, the Family Planning Association, and Brook Advisory Centres advertised their services in cinemas and magazines and sent material to schools.<sup>3</sup> There was, then, no shortage of practical, biological, and erotic information, but when it came to the emotional and social dimensions of becoming sexually active, there was a notable lack of resources, not least in YA fiction.

It was not just writers and publishers who were reticent. The 1970 report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography in the US found that most adults were unwilling or unable to talk about sex with the young. "Sanctions", it reported, "still inhibit the open discussion of sex, particularly in the relationships between young people and their parents as well as between young people and other adults" (311). The report also noted that many adults lacked reliable information about sex themselves (313). So most young people had no adult advice or guidance about managing sexual relationships, and indeed, for the most part they felt the need to be secretive when it came to sex. This was especially true for girls, since what came to be called the "Nice Girl" construct continued to hold that girls should be "chaste, gentle, gracious, ingenuous, good, clean, kind, virtuous, noncontroversial, and

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3 Dr. Caroline Rusterholz, Wellcome Trust Research Fellow, St. John's College, Cambridge, generously shared three forthcoming articles featuring Brook Advisory Centres and other information relevant to this discussion. As yet no publication details are available.

above suspicion and reproach” (Fox 805).<sup>4</sup> Significantly for this discussion, “chaste” is first and foremost. Books that might encourage sexual activity were not for “nice girls”.

## LET’S NOT TALK ABOUT SEX IN YA FICTION

Arguably, the absence of novels featuring sexual relationships specifically for an audience of adolescents was more important than the lack of adult advice. This was understood by children’s literature professionals. For instance, in her 1969 summary of the relationship between “the library and the young adult”, the US librarian, Margaret Edwards, made the case for good quality YA fiction. “[T]he best novels on the subject”, she maintained, “go beyond the facts to the emotional implications of love” and offer “a richer, more subtle message about sex for the adolescent” than other likely sources (qtd. in Gillis and Simpson 38). Unfortunately, researchers and policy makers did not consult those who observed young people’s reading needs and behaviours at first hand. In the UK and US, those who were investigating young adults’ sexual behaviour and sources of information paid no attention to fiction, and were evidently unaware of its potential to help develop such qualities as insight, empathy, and responsibility in relation to sex.

Thus, while the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography did note that a quarter of boys and a third of girls used books as a major source of information about sex (314), there is no mention of what the books were or what kind of material they contained. Similarly, a 1963 British survey, prompted by concerns about rising promiscuity in the young and designed to “obtain facts about the sexual attitudes and behaviours of young people aged fifteen to nineteen” (Schofield 19) looked at a variety of ways that young people learned about sex and contraception, but discounted books. The lead researcher, Michael Schofield, explained this was because “the many thousands of books published on this subject for adolescents” were read after there was some initial knowledge [of contraception], “if they were read at all” (82). What these “many thousands of books” were is a mystery, and since the survey contained no questions about them, it is impossible to know whether or not they existed, let alone if they were read. I could not locate any that were specifically for young people.

The lack of attention to, and provision of, novels and stories with realistic, reliable, and holistic sexual content is important. As Foucault argues in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, understanding of sex is an iterative process: while we are born into social ways of thinking about sex, these are not permanently fixed. Fiction provides a space where alternative iterations of how we understand our selves in relation to sex and sexuality can be explored vicariously. Subsequently, this understanding of fiction in relation to sex, sexualities, and the young has been studied. For instance, the Canadian educationalist, Jen

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4 This term was coined by Greer Litton Fox, in 1977, to explain social control of women. See also Charnock 2020.

Gilbert, points to the importance of narratives of sexual development that can help young people acquire “an interpretive practice that might help make sense of the upheavals of development and the tumultuousness of relationships” (59). For Gilbert as for others, reading about characters’ experiences, desires, and feelings can expand thinking about what is ‘normal’, helping them to look differently at what they are told is and is not acceptable for young people to know and do. In terms of ideological struggle, YA fiction has the potential to encourage change by examining exaggerated emphasis on virginity by powerful institutions, including families and religious organisations. It can also encourage readers to question the perception that its loss marks an irreversible threshold to maturity.

In parts of Europe, YA fiction that promoted positive, guilt-free, and responsible attitudes to sex as part of youth was available before 1975 (Brown et al. 8). This was particularly true in The Netherlands, France, Germany and Sweden. The Dutch scholar, Agnes Andeweg, shows that between 1945 and 1980 novels were a potent way of connecting people and providing a platform for ideas (349). Andeweg maps how, during these years, literature helped shape Dutch attitudes to sex, making it one of the most sexually liberal countries in the West (Álvarez et al. 9). Unsurprisingly, some of the first YA fiction to display an open and respectful attitude to sexual activity in young people appeared in The Netherlands.

Meanwhile, in the absence of similar fiction, young people in the US and UK found whatever they could to help them prepare to become sexually active. Based on information volunteered by two colleagues my age (one of whom wishes to remain anonymous so I have simply called them Girl 1 and Girl 2), published recollections (Mills), a survey conducted by Robert Carlsen, an American teacher visiting England in 1976, and a study by the British librarian, Margaret Marshall, I have created a snapshot of the kind of material that dealt openly with sex which young adults appropriated from adult shelves in the absence of a literature of their own. This is far from a scientific sample, of course. For a start, my colleagues and I were all white, heterosexual, and cisgender girls growing up in reading households, though the fact that two were raised in working-class homes, one was from a military family based in Kenya, and I come from a middle-class home in New England, gives some diversity of background and experience.

## WHAT WERE WE READING?

Girl 1 recalls that she and her best friend read:

Rosalind Erskine’s 1962 novel [...] *The Passionflower Hotel*, about girls in a boarding school losing their virginity [...] we hid it and read it secretly at night. It was fun and quite saucy [...]. When much younger we read the 'dirty bits' in the *Song of Solomon* [...]

a novel called *Angelique* with a busty heroine, and [...] snatched passages in my parents' books, especially Harold Robbins's *The Carpetbaggers* (1961) [...] *Peyton Place* (1956) [...] it was also on TV.

Girl 2 remembered that at her English boarding school the girls passed around “*Angelique* [...] the original bodice ripper, *Forever Amber* (1944) and [...] books by Harold Robbins. I remember *Stiletto* (1960) in particular.”

Girl 1, reflecting the collective experiences gathered by Helena Mills in her study of women's memories of growing up in the 1960s, also read the magazine *Jackie* (1964-1993), which styled itself as “Your Top Pop and Romance Paper.” “Romance” meant that it dealt with relationships between boys and girls and included a problems page which touched on issues such as how to know when the time was right to have sex.

Growing up in the USA, I read many of the same books, but we did not have magazines like *Jackie*. We turned to these works despite the fact that most had been around for many years, the characters were not our age – mostly not even from our century – and their relationships were fairly torrid. They featured beautiful women whose looks gained them handsome lovers, often in high places, but rarely happiness or security. Their lives had little useful to say to unconfident teenagers with awkward bodies, and the sexual thrills they experienced were not typical of most novice love-making.

None of us was aware of the *Skinhead* books of ‘Richard Allen’ (James Moffat), which began to appear in 1971, although the blog, “Nostalgia Central”, claims that “For any kid attending a British comprehensive school between 1971 and 1977, Richard Allen's *Skinhead* books were required reading” (n.p.). G. Robert Carlsen's 1976 investigation into “Books and the Teen-Age Reader in England” reported that within five years *Skinhead* had sold 250,000 copies, even though the books were not available in libraries or most mainstream book stores (the researcher found them in a pornography shop). Carlsen describes the series as “truly appalling [...]. The books alternate between agro (aggression) and sex” (16). He was particularly disgusted by a gang rape in which the girl victim finds herself enjoying the experience, and the glorification of racist violence.

The British librarian Margaret Marshall's *Libraries and Literature for Teenagers* (1975) supports all of these findings, reporting that girls enjoyed “romance, historical fiction and more lurid sex novels” (158), while boys liked books about skinheads and gangs for the uninhibited sex, sexual deviation, physical violence, anti-social attitudes, motorbikes and cars (157). Boys explained, “they liked the books because they are exciting and real” (157). Their ideas of “real” are worth noting since they not only involve violence but the “usage of both male and female characters of the opposite sex for personal gratification and exploitation at whim and at will” (157). Also popular were the sexual farces featuring and purportedly by ‘Timothy Lea’ (Christopher Hovelle Wood): *Confessions of a Window Cleaner; of a Driving Instructor; from a Holiday Camp*, etc., whose various jobs give him endless

opportunities for erotic adventures (Carlsen 16). None of the books in this sample is mentioned in any children's literature guide or companion, but young people relied on this kind of material because there was no YA fiction offering more balanced accounts of relationships between people like them.

Since there was clearly a teenage market for books with some sexual content, there had to be powerful reasons why children's publishers were slow to fill this gap, even when in many forums attitudes to sexual activity in young people had relaxed considerably. A key factor was that those responsible for setting book-buying budgets were divided about the benefits of being more open about sex with young people. With teenage pregnancy rates increasing, battles raged over whether sex education should be provided in schools, and whether teenagers should have access to contraceptive advice. In Britain, the Department of Health and Social Care supported a range of sex education programmes, but most favoured a mechanistic, biological approach (Limond, "I never imagined" 416; see also Pilcher) that ignored such things as emotions, desires, and relationships.

The idea of presenting teenage sex as natural and pleasurable was particularly contested. The arguments reached fever-pitch in 1971 around *Growing Up*, a sex education film for schools. Created by the biologist Dr. Martin Cole at his Institute for Sex Education and Research in Birmingham, it was grounded in the Masters and Johnson philosophy that sex is a natural, pleasurable and healthy activity, including for young people. Like the writers earlier in the century, Cole claimed he wanted the film to "reduce shame and anxiety about sex" and "bring home to the audience that sex is not just about sperms and smegma or the plumbing of the penis but is also about erotic feelings" (qtd. in Limond, "I hope someone" 410). The result was the most explicit sex education film ever made. Reviewing the film, the *Times Educational Supplement* described the contentious parts of the film. These, it said, were:

the close-ups of genitals in various stages of development and arousal and the scenes which show sexual reproduction and masturbation. An adolescent boy, naked except for a vest, is filmed lying on a bed [...]. As he clearly fondles himself the commentary gives an explicit description of what he is doing. 'Masturbation', states the narrator, 'is important to development and may provide a natural and healthy sexual outlet for adolescent boys for several years'. The female scene [...] is very similar except that she is completely naked and lies on her side. The commentary also adds: 'As in a boy, masturbation in the girl is quite normal and also plays an important part in her development too'. Sexual intercourse is illustrated by a side view of a naked couple lying full length on a bare set. Emotion is slightly suggested by the slow, rather ritualistic body movements. (qtd. in Limond, "I never imagined" 417)

Although very much of its time in terms of youth and popular culture, *Growing Up* was a step too far for the adult authorities. Following initial screenings it was immediately banned in some parts of the country and its release was severely limited. The 20 or so schools where it was shown gave it positive evaluations, including from teachers. These ranged from, “[e]xcellent” and “[m]ost useful”, to “[f]actual and well presented”, but there was a huge media backlash, with Cole labelled “The Sex King” and a “perverted bastard” (Limond, “I hope someone” 414). Key campaigners for sex education and contraceptive advice for the young blamed Cole for setting their work back by years. The furore it created did nothing for the cause of talking openly about sex – especially the joys of sex – in YA publishing. What children’s publisher would risk being similarly pilloried?

## TALKING IN WHISPERS

Yet quietly, things were beginning to change. In Britain, John Rowe Townsend’s *Goodnight Prof. Love* was published by Oxford University Press in 1970 and was rapidly reprinted several times, including in the Penguin Peacock series, one of the new YA imprints launched in the seventies. The ‘Prof’ of the title is a geeky teenage schoolboy named Graham Hollis who longs to get away and have romantic escapades. His waking life is plagued by erotic fantasies that are never quite completed because he is not sure what to do. When his parents go away for a week he meets Lynn, a young waitress, and it seems as if fantasy and reality are going to merge. Lynn, working class and slightly older than Graham, has considerably more experience of life – including sex – than he does. Graham is seriously smitten with her, but when he introduces her to his parents, things do not go well and he decides they should elope with his savings.

While hitchhiking to Gretna Green to get married, Lynn realises Graham is in over his head. She secretly arranges for his father to intercept them, but not before they spend a night in a hotel, when Lynn introduces him to sex in real life. The event is not described but can be deduced from the before and after conversations.

[Before:] “You’re trembling, love. That won’t do”, says Lynn. “It’s a good job you’ve got me to look after you. Easy now, don’t think about yourself, just be natural. This isn’t one of your flipping exams. Don’t worry Graham, you haven’t a care in the world. Not at this minute, you haven’t. Not a care in the world.” (103)

That constitutes the sex scene, but just in case an inexperienced reader misses the point, after a significant page break, the conversation resumes this way:

[After:] “Don’t keep apologizing, pet. There’s no call for it.”

“I wasn’t very good, Lynn.”

“Course you weren’t. What do you expect? You can’t do everything right first time.”

(103)

The whole affair lasts just nine days. Then, Graham’s life resumes its adolescent rhythm, though his daydreams are better informed.

In 1973, Alan Garner included a sexual relationship in *Red Shift*, though it is so discretely embedded in this complex, highly literary novel as to be easily missed. Significantly in terms of adult approval, the sex brings no joy. In fact, the boy, Tom, is frightened of sex and unsettled by having to listen to the sounds his parents make when they are having sex in the caravan where the three of them live. The young couple’s disappointing love-making is much less important than the accounts of rapes that happen in the two historical storylines that twine around their present. The book ends with Tom having a mental collapse.

*Red Shift* is an impressive book, and important as one of the thin ends of the wedge that opened the way for YA fiction that fully acknowledged young people as sexual beings. But it does not address the needs of readers trying to prepare themselves for becoming sexually active. If anything, it shows sex as damaging and best avoided. Then along came 1975 and what I think of as the literary ‘sweet spot’, or the ‘Goldilocks moment’, when YA fiction and the publishing industry found the climate ‘just right’ for introducing genuinely open books featuring sexually active teenagers. The way was prepared by Judy Blume’s *Forever* (1975), which has been written about so often that I will not go into a detailed close reading here. But it is a keystone text, so warrants some discussion.

## TALKING ABOUT SEX IN YA LITERATURE

It is interesting to compare Blume’s approach with ‘Sex King’ Martin Cole’s. Both were revolutionary in their affirmative and frank accounts of preliminary sexual experiences, though where Cole focused on biology and urges, Blume provides a well-developed narrative of first sex as part of first love. Its no-nonsense approach to explaining a complete cycle of attraction, preparation, intercourse, and breakup between two responsible and sensibly parented teenagers was immediately valued by young adults. The same qualities have made it one of the most banned books in the world (Goldbart “Fact File” qtd. in Baker 66), reminding us that many of the longstanding apparatuses of social management continue to see controlling young people’s sexual activity as important. Nowhere is this more evident than in the abstinence culture that has grown up in the US. Kelly sees abstinence culture as a response to precisely this kind of positive narrative of sexual liberation, so Blume can be

credited with simultaneously providing the first fully realised account of sex in YA fiction and a stimulus for the abstinence discourses that were to follow.

*Forever* gestures to the misconceptions promulgated through the kinds of books read before YA fiction began to talk about sex. When Katherine first sees “Ralph”, she is surprised because: “In books penises are always described as hot and throbbing” and “Ralph felt like ordinary skin” (60). Instead of romantic clichés about being swept away by desire, Katherine and Michael have to work together to learn how to make intercourse pleasurable for each of them. And there are some comic and unglamorous moments, as when Michael explains, “I didn’t mean to get you” as he mops semen off Katherine. Through being open with each other, taking their time, talking to their parents, and seeking contraceptive advice, Katherine and Michael have been reassuring readers that sex is a legitimate, pleasurable component of adolescent experience for nearly half a century – and counting! Indeed, it is still a rarity to find happy, well-adjusted girls like Katherine managing love and first sex free from moralising or life-changing negative consequences. Lisa Dresner makes the same point about films in this period: “between the 1970s’ rhetoric of sexual liberation and Reagan-era ‘just say no’ abstinence campaigns”, she says, “teenage films venerated and empowered the decisions girls made about sex” (12). In the same spirit, Blume also makes the experience gender-equal: Katherine is as keen to have sex as Michael, and enjoys their lovemaking thoroughly... once they get it together.

Others soon followed in Blume’s footsteps. In the UK, no one initiated more conversations about sex in YA literature than Aidan Chambers, starting with books from the Topliner imprint he edited for Macmillan Education. In *The Reluctant Reader*, Chambers explains that since “sex and relationships were at the forefront of teenage concerns”, they feature in many of the Topliner titles (qtd. in Pearson 147). For example, John Crompton’s *Up the Road and Back* (1977) recognises sexual desire and activity in both girls and boys, but like most books from this time, it centres on male experience. As in *Goodnight Prof. Love*, an unnamed teenage boy who is desirous but “too scared and too ignorant” (7) to initiate a sexual relationship with his girlfriend, sets off on a hitchhiking road trip with the aim of gaining some sexual experience. When he finally succeeds, nothing happens the way he had imagined it. The woman is married, but bored, and angry with her husband; worse, she changes her mind as soon as he has started, so he ends up using her and fleeing, ashamed and embarrassed. Importantly, what happens is not a rape – she initiated the moment and does not try to stop him – but it is desperately uncomfortable all around.

While the actual sex in the book ostensibly constitutes the boy’s rite of passage, what really changes him are the experiences he has and the people he meets on his journey. The book is presented as the boy’s retrospective account of his time on the road. He dwells more on the insights he has gained through conversations than on the sex that was meant to be the point of the trip. After typing it up for him, his sister acknowledges what he has learned: “You’ll make a good father. And a good husband. So long as you see bed isn’t what it’s all

about” (112). This is the lesson readers take away: sex needs to be part of a loving and responsible relationship. These books show the ideological struggle Kelly identifies in action: liberatory and conservative discourses are thoroughly entangled. In the British books, there is also a fairly overt class dimension; working-class youth who have left or will soon leave school feature in less literary books, which also drive home the message about being responsible about pregnancy more emphatically than does the literary fiction.

Lessons learned through travel (including vicariously through reading) are also central to another Topliner, Ingeborg Bayer and Hans-Georg Noack’s *David and Dorothea* (1979). One of Aidan Chambers’ imported and translated titles, this rather claustrophobic West German novel is paradoxically both sexually confessional and chaste. “David”, as Dorothea calls him (he reminds her of a picture of the biblical David in a children’s book), is 16 and running away from his grandmother’s house where he has been living while his parents negotiate an angry divorce. 18-year-old Dorothea is on her way to live with her parents on an air force base in the US. They meet in Frankfurt airport and spend a night there while waiting for flights.

From the moment they meet they start opening up about their fears and feelings. After a humiliating experience with a girl in school, David has created a “tough sexy” persona by reading material in sex shops, but he confesses that he actually has no experience (56). Dorothea has the opposite problem. She is pretty and popular, but dislikes herself because she has slept with many boys without caring for any of them. She knows they do not care about her, either: “Girls with figures like yours are just made for bed!” someone told me once. So we went to bed” (58). This was after making sure she had birth control however; quite a lot of information about what that involves is provided. The book makes the case that sexual liberation is not liberating at all, stressing again that loveless sex is damaging. Dorothea tells Daniel:

I kept on the pill even when I was without a boyfriend for a short time. We swallowed them as easily as you’d eat a cough sweet. We thought we were free, we never noticed we weren’t free at all. Ever ready, like the scouts. Every relationship bound to lead to bed. Sometimes I felt so disgusted with myself, I wanted out. (59)

The warning about exploitation is legitimate, but even as YA fiction is starting to talk about sex, one eye is still being kept on officially approved messaging rather than attitudes and experiences in the public at large. More than that, the foundations for what was to become abstinence culture in the US and a culture of fear in the UK (including fear of disease, fear of grooming, fear of misogynistic regimes) are apparent. Such reactionary responses were, of course, accelerated by the AIDS epidemic, though that was still in the future in 1979. The immediate pressures to avoid encouraging youthful sexual activity were present enough in

the form of disapproving correspondence from schools. Editor Aidan Chambers received plenty of angry letters since these Topliners were sold directly to schools.

Like *Forever*, both these Topliners have simple plots and are written in a straightforward way to encourage readers to identify with the characters. When Aidan Chambers began to write his own YA novels featuring sexually active teenagers, he took the same kind of literary approach used by Alan Garner. The *Dance* sequence begins with *Breaktime* (1978), an intricate, metatextual work that garnered praise from critics despite the fact that, like the sex-education film *Growing Up*, it features a teenage boy masturbating and a detailed account of the narrating character's sexual initiation.

Since *Breaktime*, Chambers has written about more kinds of teenage sexual experiences in a more liberal – more European – way than most UK or US YA authors. And yet, his work has avoided the kinds of criticism he used to have to deal with as the Topliner editor; presumably because their literary quality and the demands they make on readers prevent the sex from being remotely sexy. Or perhaps it was assumed that readers capable of enjoying this kind of text were sophisticated enough to be trusted with sexual content. Chambers' novels have attracted a great deal of critical attention, and I have written about them before, so I will not go over that ground again, although I want to reiterate that they deal intelligently and interestingly with a very wide range of sexual issues, experiences and desires (see *Radical Children's Literature* and *Children's Literature*). Instead, I want to end by returning to the exchange between Robert Westall and Nancy Chambers with which I began.

Westall was prompted to write about sex by a remark made by Nancy Chambers, but evidently his reaction was not what she had expected or intended. She replied to his questions about tone, objectivity, and pornography by saying,

The sex business: that was really intended as rather an offhand comment. I mentioned it only because you say "... you will have noticed the shifty way I got away from the topic of SEX!" (N. Chambers, Correspondence n.p.)

Nancy Chambers was interested in supporting writers (presumably including her husband, Aidan Chambers) who were attempting to break down to taboos around talking about sex in YA fiction. She continued,

I meant: lots of people in the front line need a bit of moral support from those in the public eye and in public print. They need some kind of proof that they are justified in standing up for the books that do include reference to the fact that sex is part of life. I'm not talking about sexual encounters – just the fact that sexual interest exists is enough to send some people into a passion of threats and righteousness. The objects of their anger are usually teachers.

[...] What I certainly didn't mean to say was that I felt you should be writing about sex.  
[...] you can get in enough trouble saying "fart", without dealing with the other four-letter f. (N. Chambers, Correspondence n.p.)

Although she puts no pressure on him, this exchange may have helped Westall, a former art teacher, feel he had a duty to himself and other children's writers to include sexual relationships in his work. They certainly crop up consistently thereafter, though usually when they involve teenagers alone, the relationships are more romantic than erotic, and set apart from present-day reality through the use of past events or supernatural elements. *Falling into Glory* (1993) contains one of the most fully developed sexual relationships, but since it is semi-autobiographical, it is safely distanced in time. In it, the protagonist, Robbie, is a bit of a 'Mary Sue' character: attractive, athletic, academic, and the love interest of Emma, the attractive young widow who teaches classics. He also turns out to be good at sex. Like all of us in the days before YA literature talked about sex, Robbie has been reading about it where he can: "torrid love scenes" and "sloppy corniness" in his mother's books; gymnastic exploits in his father's "dirty" books (156). These, he pronounces once he has some experience, have it all wrong. There follows an ornate passage about women's bodies and how he feels like a great magician, able to "raise storms, tempests" at will (157).

Even this book, which allows Robbie a great deal of sex of one kind or another, keeps an eye on the adult gatekeepers. As well as its use of the past; there is also a vivid warning in the form of Robbie's friend Benny, who has had to marry his pregnant girlfriend and support her. Robbie is clear that he'd "rather be a monk for life" than end up like Benny (159). In 1993, fear of pregnancy was no longer the deterrent it once was, yet the story continues to emphasise the potential consequences of their relationship for both Robbie and Emma.

As these examples show, between 1975 and 1995, the taboo that forbade talking about sex was finally broken, though the conversations varied on the basis of class and they privileged white, male, heterosexual experience. Usually they also focused on problems and consequences rather than shared pleasure and relationships. The emphasis on problems intensified when a new consequence arrived in the form of AIDS. This, Britain's continuing high rate of teenage pregnancy, and increased rates of other STDs reignited earlier ideological struggles around the need to control young people's sexual activity. In the early 2000s, Melvin Burgess was attacked in ways reminiscent of *Growing Up* for his frank portrayals of adolescent sex in books such as *Junk* (1996), *Lady, My Life as a Bitch* (2001), and *Doing It* (2003) (see, for instance, Fine). Nevertheless, in a 2005 interview to celebrate 30 years of *Forever*, Judy Blume was cautiously optimistic, first identifying the 1970s as "a much more open decade", then pointing to the censorship occasioned by the current "fanatically religious political climate", but finally saying that publishers were finding ways to publish some "very good books" "that deal frankly with sex" (qtd. in Crown).

In my experience, conversations about sex in YA literature today focus more on abuse and grooming than cultivating positive attitudes as part of learning about the kind of sexual, or indeed asexual, being one is. Behind the scenes, entrenched discourses and policies still equate sexual liberation of any kind with challenges to authority. As a consequence, while YA fiction is talking about sex, a question for future researchers is how far these conversations respond to the needs and experiences of twenty-first-century youth and how far they are mired in old debates and attitudes.

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