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NOW and Forever



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The Power of Sex in Young Adult Literature

In 1975, a book was published that cracked the young adult literature field open with its honest portrayal of sex. That book was Judy Blume's *Forever*. The main character, Katherine, had a positive sexual relationship that was described in detail. The book was used in classrooms to open a dialogue about healthy sexual relations. But what happened next? *Forever* became one of our most frequently banned books. The unabashed social climate of the 1970s gave way to the more buttoned-up decades of the '80s and '90s. And from the time *Forever* was published until just a few years ago, it was difficult to name many YA books that delved into the topic of sex.

But the tide has recently turned. Authors are writing brave books that acknowledge the reality of teen sexuality and publishers are publishing them. There are even new imprints such as Penguin's Razorbill and Simon & Schuster's Pulse that showcase boundary-pushing books. Not surprisingly, this upturn has been met with a sharp increase in censorship and book challenges. The American Library Association (ALA) reported 458 challenges in 2003 and 547 in 2004, and they expect that number to increase in 2005. They also note that these voluntarily reported challenges reflect only about 25 percent of the total number that take place. The mass media has also criticized the genre. In August 2005, Janet Shamlian of *NBC Nightly News* produced a segment titled "Racy Reads" and categorized teen fiction as "more *Sex and the City* than *Nancy Drew*." She also said that "books like these are gratuitous—even dangerous."

As a YA author who has written a book about teen sex (*A Bad Boy Can Be Good for a Girl*, Wendy Lamb Books/Random House, January 2006), the criticism has made me wonder about the changing role of sex in YA literature. Are we introducing topics that our readers are not ready for? Have portrayals of sex become more explicit? Why is there such an abundance of sex in YA literature these days, and why do some of us choose to write about it?

REFLECTING REALITY

Remember how confusing sex was when you were in high school? Well, it is no less confusing today. Teens are thinking about it, talking

about it, and doing it. Today many authors are, in effect, saying to teens, "We know you're experiencing these things. We know it's complicated. We trust you enough to tell the truth."

And we are doing just that, even though it agitates potential censors. Some of them argue that it is risky to explore such issues because it puts dangerous ideas into teens' minds. But books are possibly the safest place for them to learn about sex—not just the physical part but also the complex web of emotions that accompanies it. Through fictional characters, readers can ponder multiple perspectives and gain insight into this new world that they are beginning to encounter. They can consider how they might feel or act in a given situation and empathize with a character.

Contemporary realistic fiction is not shying away from issues that have an impact on young adults. Finding a few sexual descriptions in a YA book is relatively commonplace these days. Some books focus squarely on sex as a theme. Why does this topic seem so prevalent in fiction lately? Perhaps it is partly in response to the fact that television, movies, and magazines constantly pelt teens with overt sexuality. But how is sex related to selling deodorant, for example? And why do teen magazines seem to focus more on looking hot for your man than in discussing the real issues of sex? These primarily visual media often provide an excess of sexual content without context. This situation seems to resonate with a group of people—writers—who are all about context and who care about the issues that affect teens. It seems only natural that when it comes to sex, YA authors are exploring an increasing variety and depth of topics.



THE POWER OF DESIRE

The power of desire is the stuff of some of the most thought-provoking sexual scenes in YA fiction. Sometimes that power is found in pure emotion and sometimes it hinges on necessary sexual detail. The all-consuming intensity of a couple's first time together is captured beautifully in Angela Johnson's story *Watcher*, from Michael Cart's anthology *Love & Sex: Ten Stories of Truth for Teens*. "Jacks got up to look out the window, pressing her face into the rainy night sky. For a few minutes she



went away from me, and I almost cried because I didn't ever remember her doing that before. I thought she knew something that I should know. I went to her, standing behind her, rubbing her stomach. My touch didn't bring her back fast enough. I felt her slipping away. But slowly she came back to me, and the sky exploded with lightning. That was the first time I had to have all of her" (191). The last scene of Chris Lynch's **Inexcusable** contains one of the most memorable moments in a sexual scene that I've ever read, yet no sex is described: "She feels like a long tall rag doll. I jerk back. She hasn't even closed her eye when I kiss it. It is the most chilling, most creeping thing, and I push up off her" (164).

Detail serves Kathleen Jeffrie Johnson's **The Parallel Universe of Liars** well, a book in which the main character does not have intercourse. Johnson takes us on a sensual ride that begins with Robin's curiosity-driven voyeurism and moves to her almost accidental experimentation with the stud next door. It is easy to empathize with her while we become privy to the most intimate details of what she sees, feels, and does. And in Rita Williams-Garcia's **Every Time a Rainbow Dies**, a lovemaking scene occurs near the end that is both vivid and beautiful in its details, which are absolutely pertinent in conveying the desire and connection that has developed between Thulani and Ysa.

In contrast, conveying the power of sexuality can be thwarted by leaving out details. It can even be to the detriment of the story arc. When a book builds to a crescendo only to turn off the lights at the critical moment, readers might react negatively to being kept in the dark. Of course, we don't need to see everything all the time. But I sometimes wonder, when the action is kept off screen and somewhat mysterious, why that choice is made. Is it to widen the audience? Is it for fear of the climate? To me, these can be opportunities missed to bring us closer to characters.

SAFETY IN FANTASY?

Oddly, sex explored within the context of fantasy seems to ruffle fewer feathers. For quite some time, we have been able to enjoy Tamora Pierce's and Francesca Lia Block's wonderfully sexy characters without much, if any, backlash. Is that because it seems safer to would-be censors to frame sexuality in non-realistic settings? In Melvin Burgess's **Lady: My Life as a Bitch**, the main character gets in touch with her sexual side once she has been magically transformed into a female dog. And in **Blood and Chocolate**, Annette Curtis Klause delivers a part girl/part wolf character ready to explore her desire.

WHO AM I?

In some books written by authors such as Alex Sanchez, Brent Hartinger, and Julie Ann Peters, teens read about characters struggling with gender identity and sexuality issues. Alex Sanchez's **Rainbow Boys** addresses the difficulties of coming out in high school head-on, with honesty and tenderness. I completely agree with one of Sanchez's main characters, Nelson, when he realizes, "Maybe sex was never simple and he needed to stop expecting it to be" (225). The idea that homosexuality could exist as a non-issue is a breath of fresh air in David Levithan's **Boy Meets Boy**. His fictional community is too good to be true, which is the point, giving us a romance for romance's sake. There is a similar element in Lisa Papademetriou's and Chris Tebbetts's novel, **M or F?** In this book, the gay protagonist has dealt with his own self-acceptance before the story begins.

Of course these more recent authors were not the first to write positive portrayals of gay characters comfortable in their own skin. M. E. Kerr opened this door in 1977 with the introduction of a minor character who was openly gay in her novel, **I'll Love You When You're More Like Me**. Nancy Garden's **Annie on my Mind** (1982) was named one of the 100 Books that Shaped the Century by **School Library Journal** in 2000. The two main characters in this book, Liza and Annie, come to terms with their feelings for each other with a notable lack of shame.

TABOO OR NOT TABOO?

It is only recently that oral sex has been discussed openly in public forums, and it now appears in YA literature as well. According to the National Center for Health Statistics, more than half of 15- to 19-year-olds have engaged in oral sex; 75 percent of those have had intercourse. On November 21, 2005, **New York** magazine ran an article by Stacia Thiel called *Everything You Don't Want to Know About Your Kid's Sex Life*. This article polled 100 high school students and 100 (unrelated) parents. On the question of oral sex, 61 percent of students reported receiving it and 51 percent acknowledged performing it. In sharp contrast, only 10 percent of parents thought their teen had received it and 5 percent guessed their teen had performed it.

Closing our eyes to any of these statistics is not helpful to teens, and accordingly, YA fiction is including this realistic aspect of sex in the lives of its characters. Novels such as Ellen Wittlinger's **Sandpiper**, John Green's **Looking for Alaska**, and Laura Ruby's forthcoming **Good Girls** contain oral sex scenes—not necessarily as a main focus but as an accurate portrayal of teen sexuality. And although girls aren't often seen on the receiving end of oral sex (perhaps mirroring high school reality), it does occur in a few books such as Lara M. Zeise's **Bringing up the Bones**, Johnson's **The Parallel Universe of Liars**, and my own novel.

THE CHOICES WRITERS MAKE

As we push the envelope with more accurate sexual portrayals, what might be the new boundaries? I think boundaries have more to do with the approach to topics rather than the topics themselves. There are certain tactics that I find troubling. For instance, any scene that does not advance a story line or deepen character development is arguably gratuitous. When an unnecessary scene is explicitly sexual, however, I believe that an author has gone too far. Exploring sex and sexuality in YA literature is worthwhile; exploiting it is not.

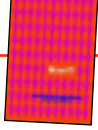


During the revision process of **A Bad Boy Can Be Good for a Girl**, I gave careful consideration to whether my scenes included any gratuitous content. There are three main characters: Josie, Aviva, and Nicolette. All my girls have strengths and weaknesses, but it was Nicolette who gave me the most angst. She is a girl with a healthy sexual appetite, which does not come without its complications. Ultimately in order to portray her as authentically as possible, I did take a few things out. One

change was as small as removing a two-word phrase that described a pair of shoes. I didn't let go of this phrase until the last minute. My editor had circled it both times that the manuscript came back with queries, and both times I explained why I wanted to leave it in. In the end, I changed my mind. Why? Because I thought I might be going too far unnecessarily and I realized that my adult knowledge was interfering with my perspective of very specific readers—fourteen-year-old girls. I came to the conclusion that for a young reader already familiar with this phrase, it didn't add anything important. The character of Nicolette was clear without it. And for a reader unfamiliar with the phrase, it wasn't necessary to put it in her head.

I also toned down two of Nicolette's scenes in instances where my editor and I eventually agreed that the explicitness might "distract the reader from my weightier themes," as she put it. It is important to note, however, that it was only well after the characters' stories had been written and I was into the revision process that I allowed myself the objectivity to look at my themes in the first place. If I had done so from the outset of writing, I believe that it would have been detrimental to the book.

As I thought about sex in YA literature and the characters we have



known and loved, I remembered the informative VOYA article by Amanda M. MacGregor, *Let's (Not) Get It On: Girls and Sex in Young Adult Literature* (February 2004). As a reader, I wholeheartedly agree with MacGregor's sentiment that it would be nice to see more examples in the genre of female characters enjoying sex, and fewer instances of girls suffering dire consequences for having it. I also agree that when authors "depict it in a negative light, they create an unpleasant and scary view of sex." But as a writer, this overview article raised the question: What is the role or responsibility of the author?

For me, it is to write a story that revolves around a fully realized character. I would not be compelled to write a YA character—male or female—who jumped into bed without a care in the world and did not either experience some kind of transformation or trigger growth in another character. It's not because I think it would be immoral or dangerous or wrong to write a character like that, but because I write realistic fiction and I don't believe that reflects reality. Sex is complicated enough for adults, let alone for teens having their first experiences. It makes sense that YA characters reflect that complexity.

Good books come from the heart, not from analyzing the market and intentionally attempting to fill in the missing blanks. I didn't set out to write a novel with a sexual message. The title came to me first—"a bad boy can be good for a girl"—and piqued my interest. What different things might that mean to a girl? I started thinking about a girl named Josie and how a bad boy liked her. She was confident but insecure about boys. She was aroused yet fearful. How far would he tempt her to go? And how, no matter what happened between them, could the experience with him be good for her? Josie led the way for me.

Other YA authors with whom I've spoken experience similar processes. Mary Pearson didn't sit down to write *A Room on Lorelei Street* with the intention of making a commentary on how sex can be used to fill an emotional void. She began with the character of Zoe Buckman. "I didn't even plan to have sex in the book; it just presented itself in her story. Zoe is a girl who's been around the block; it wasn't likely that she was going to be a virgin," Pearson said. And the choices Pearson makes throughout the book are in perfect sync with Zoe's character. In an encounter with a boy Zoe cares about, we are told, "She wants to make him happy. She can make him happy. She knows how. She needs him to need her" (203).

Sometimes writers speak to a particular issue. Even so, the heart of the book is found in the character whom he or she discovers in doing so. Laura Ruby started writing *Good Girls* because she had something to say about how damaging sexual rumors can be to girls. But then, Ruby says, her main character, a nice girl named Audrey, "had a lot more to say about passion, self-discovery, and friendship. I listened to her." Themes do emerge as we write, and can occur to us in some shape before we write, but powerful fiction isn't message-driven, it is character-driven.

I would like to see books for teens reflect male and female main characters who are allowed to be healthy sexual beings, able to experience sex and intimacy without feeling ashamed or being punished. That being said, I also want to be responsible about how sex is portrayed to a group of people first setting out to experience it. I want to acknowledge that girls are girls and not simply younger versions of women who already have the benefit of experience behind them. Sex is good. Telling the truth about its complexity—as many YA authors are doing today—is incredibly important. Young adult authors are showing how much they care about young readers by being honest in their portrayals of sex and not serving it up simply for the sake of "edginess."

However slim, my hope is that the adults intent on banishing sex from books for young adults will someday realize that instead of trying to hurt anyone, most people who write for this audience care deeply and passionately about their readers. They want them to grow up and become strong, independent, free-thinking individuals.

It is both interesting and worthwhile to look at how a genre treats a theme; to look at our societal tolerances and preferences. The more I

read, however, the more I know that what I remember most about books is character, not plot. It is not the details, however explicit, of what happened to a boy or a girl that will stay with me. It is the most believable, most fully-formed, most three-dimensional characters whom I will carry with me for a lifetime.

So although I do expect to see more sexual content and hope to see more portrayals of healthy sexuality, in the end we do our job best when we are telling our truths. Sexuality is part of growing up and our readers are not children—they are adults—young adults. They must be able to seek out the characters and situations that reflect the world in which they live, and resonate with them. Those are the characters and books that will live on in the minds of our readers . . . **Forever.** ■

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Tanya Lee Stone has published nearly eighty children's books and is a former editor. She has a degree in English from Oberlin College and a Masters in Education. Her debut YA novel, A Bad Boy Can Be Good for a Girl, was released in January 2006 by Wendy Lamb Books/Random House. Visit her on the Web at <http://www.tanyastone.com>.