LEARNING curves

Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature

BETH YOUNGER

Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature
Series Editor: Patty Campbell

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Learning Curves

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For my mother, Ann Carol Younger

Contents

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Introduction

Young adult literature is an important source of cultural information for young readers in that it portrays adolescents negotiating the social and sexual standards of the dominant culture. Often defined as writing specifically published for teenagers, the genre is uniquely subject to social supervision and frequent challenges in public and school libraries, which puts YA novels in a marginal cultural position like that of the life stage they seek to describe.

In existence since the 1960s, YA fiction has become a distinct body of literature with an established canon. Because of its focus on adolescents in formation, the genre also frequently centers on sexuality and sexual development and depicts a wide variety of characters who represent common ideas about female sexuality.

In an article analyzing sexuality in children's literature, Linnea Hendrickson argues that "establishing one's identity and finding one's role in life while at the same time trying to confront one's emerging sexuality has a long tradition as a theme in our children's literature."[1] Her statement better applies to young adult literature. By examining more than fifty young adult novels in relation to each other over a fifty-year span, *Learning Curves* traces the literary history of female sexuality in young adult fiction.

Reflecting YA literature's popularity, several noteworthy books have critically examined this aspect of YA literature. Deborah O'Keefe's *Good Girl Messages: How Young Women Were Misled By Their Favorite Books* (2000) examines classics in light of embedded social missives about femininity. In *Is It Really Mommie Dearest?* Hilary Crew (2000) analyzes the prevalence of mother-daughter relationships, while Nancy St. Clair and Joanne Brown's *In a Distant Mirror* (2005) and *Declarations of Independence* (2002) study historical fiction and "empowered girls in young adult literature." *The Heart Has Its Reasons* (2006) by Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins analyzes YA literature with gay and lesbian content.

Other critical writing on young adult literature has come from scholars in education, psychology, and library science. Amy Bowles-Reyer and Michael Cart have made major contributions by recognizing the significance and influence of this genre. Bowles-Reyer's dissertation, *Our Secret Garden* (1998), examines the influence of second-wave feminism (a social movement that aimed to spread equality beyond legal issues to social ones as well) on young adult literature, and Michael Cart's history of young adult literature, *From Romance to Realism* (1996), is an insightful, informative, and concise overview. Both of these studies classify young adult fiction according to social era or decade, a useful and necessary categorization.

Another groundbreaking work is Roberta Seelinger Trites's *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), which examines twentieth-century YA fiction by using the ideas of French philosopher Michel Foucault. Her work examines common themes found in YA literature and analyzes how the narratives uphold or subvert institutional, social, and individual power. Trites's study moves beyond the categorization of texts by era and instead groups books according to theme, content, and narrative structure. She addresses gender and sexuality in a chapter subtitled "Sex and Power in Adolescent Novels" but makes no clear distinction between male and female sexuality in her analysis. Such a distinction is vital in a culture in which a sexual double standard persists.

One book that does consider the sexual double standard, Linda Christian-Smith's *Becoming a Woman through Romance* (1990), examines YA romance novels from a political-feminist perspective. This

study explores the extreme popularity of teen romances in the 1980s, a popularity she directly correlates to the conservative Reagan/Bush era. Each of these studies has anticipated and participated in the creation of a growing critical community of scholars interested in YA fiction. My book joins this community by examining the importance and prevalence of the image of female sexuality in a genre that focuses on the life stage of adolescence. The emergence of critical works that analyze this neglected genre reflects a new appreciation for the depth and breadth of YA novels.

I examine YA literature from a feminist perspective. The feminist lens I use is unique and reflects my awareness that there is no single unified feminist theory but many theories, each based on unique perspectives. My theoretical position owes a great deal to my feminist foremothers and has gained much strength, knowledge, and assistance from them. My own personal experience influences this study as well. I read and cherished many of the novels in this project when I was a teenager. I have also continued to read and value YA literature throughout my adult life. While I am aware that the perspective I bring to these novels differs greatly from that of my younger self, I try to keep in mind how I felt when I was experiencing adolescence and all of its turmoil.

I define my critical lens as one that critiques and values the female experience in patriarchal culture. I recognize that these novels, published at differing social spaces throughout the twentieth century (and into the beginning of the twenty-first), reflect different social milieus and mores. Thus, I use feminist techniques that take into account these eras.

This book seeks to examine and reveal the ways in which oppressive social structures have converged to create a definition of femininity and female sexuality that is often contrary to women's reality. By examining young adult literature, I expose how cultural assumptions and social constraints are reinforced and complicated through representations of young women. I also reveal that many YA novels reject cultural constraints and reimagine futures for young women in ways that resist and reject traditional and regressive ideas of femininity, sexuality, and body image.

Adolescence is often a time of confusion, growth, and change for young women and men. This transitional time is an in-between stage of

life, a kind of limbo between childhood and adulthood. Teens are not yet full-fledged adults with adult responsibilities and freedoms, nor are they any longer children. As described by Lyn Mikel Brown and Carol Gilligan in *Meeting at the Crossroads*, for girls, adolescence is

> a crossroads in women's development: a meeting between girl and woman, an intersection between psychological health and cultural regeneration, a watershed in women's psychology which affects both women and men.[2]

It is during this "intersection" between childhood and adulthood that the importance of sex and gender roles becomes visible to growing young women. As their bodies develop and mature, teens become increasingly aware of sex and sexuality, and sexuality is undeniably one of the more challenging aspects of growing up. In Western culture, this process is especially difficult for girls.

In a society that still values females more for appearance than for accomplishments, young women are given competing messages about appearance and sexuality. As Craig LeCroy and Janice Daley argue in *Empowering Adolescent Girls*, "While girls are exposed to media messages that encourage them to acquire a highly sexualized appearance, they are also met with many adults' reluctance to discuss sex in a forthright manner."[3] The constant social and cultural pressure exerted on young women to appear sexual yet not *be* sexual is at the very least confusing; at worst it is damaging. Young adult literature provides a safe space where young people can read about themselves and discover options, alternatives, and information.

The young female body has become a cultural battleground in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994) and Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *The Body Project* (1997) document the cultural preoccupation with the adolescent female body. Female sexuality, and more importantly who is allowed to control and construct it, is a contested area. In the introduction to *The Sex Lives of Teenagers: Revealing the Secret World of Adolescent Boys and Girls* (2000), Lynn Ponton asserts that "sexuality is a vital aspect of teens' lives." Ponton has studied teens for twenty-five years and acknowledges that teenage sexuality is a controversial topic. A psychiatrist who specializes in counseling teenagers, Ponton argues:

> Sexuality in general and adolescent sexuality in particular has become part of an intense political struggle with some supporting celibacy, and others advocating a full range of sexual activity for young teens. The media, which uses adolescent sexuality to create excitement and sell products, only adds to the confusion.[4]

Ponton advocates "sensible, down-to-earth discussions" about the sexual choices teenagers are facing. She also reports that teenage sexual activity is rarely the result of impulsive, hormone-driven lust but rather "a largely conscious decision, thought about rationally" (194). Whereas teenage sexual behavior is often represented in media and popular culture as wild and frenzied, as Ponton indicates, the truth is far from that extreme or simple. She also argues that what our culture needs is more information and more discussion to help adolescents deal with sexuality, not less. Much of what many young women and men know about sexuality they learn from peers, television, movies, and the books they read. As a part of popular culture, YA literature is an important source of information about sex.

Of course, YA literature is only one source of information about sex, gender, and sexuality. But critic Joyce Litton points out in her essay "Innocence to Experience" that explicit "novels on sexuality are necessary because America's parents are often reluctant to provide their children with adequate information and guidance."[5] Young adult novels often seem to be burdened with the responsibility of providing useful and practical information for young readers; many articles that discuss the genre focus solely on sexual content. But the sexual content of these novels is more than didactic; the subtext of adolescent literature creates a history of late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century gender roles and sexuality. The innocent teen romances of the early 1940s and 1950s aptly depict the oppressive sexual double standards of that era, such as compulsory virginity and chaste kisses. Then, in the more liberal 1960s and 1970s, adolescent books began to portray more realistic versions of sexual standards and included such topics as foreplay, birth control, and abortion. But classifying these texts solely by their placement within a social era does them a disservice by oversimplifying their function and meaning. Within each historical period, young adult novels exist that overtly challenge conventional social

values. There are also novels that unreservedly uphold them. The exceptions are those books that complicate issues of representation by exposing social ideologies and questioning their validity. By examining selected novels for their sexual content, situating them within their social era, and analyzing their discursive qualities, this book seeks to reveal a continuum of complex and complicated depictions of how our culture pictures teenagers and their sexualities.

In each chapter, I analyze selected thematically linked books published throughout the history of YA literature. I begin by analyzing what might be the most pervasive issue confronting contemporary young women in adolescence: body image. This chapter leads the study because body-image issues pervade almost every young adult novel in one way or another; issues of weight, beauty, dieting, and "lookism" (the idea that a person is judged solely by looks) can be found in every subset of YA literature. Chapter 2 focuses on the pregnant female body and analyzes a subset of YA literature known as the pregnancy-problem novel; in this chapter I examine and analyze representations of reproductive issues such as pregnancy and abortion. Chapter 3 analyzes YA novels that depict lesbianism as a challenge to compulsory heterosexuality. Chapter 4 focuses on romance as an important literary trope present in much of YA literature. Finally, chapter 5 focuses on the oft-maligned subset of series fiction and includes the more contemporary version of series novels referred to as "chick lit."

YA literature occupies an area of negotiation between dominant and opposing cultural elements. By portraying the lives of adolescents, YA fiction provides a unique literary space where cultural tensions centering on young female bodies are revealed. By depicting young women in formation, these texts expose, question, and challenge conventional ideas about female sexuality and femininity.

Notes

1. Linnea Hendrickson, "Quenchable Flames: Expression and Suppression of Sexuality in Three American Novels for Young Adults," *Bookbird* 32 (1994): 20–24.

2. Carol Gilligan and Lyn Mikel Brown, *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girls' Development* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

3. Craig Winston LeCroy and Janice Daley, *Empowering Adolescent Girls: Examining the Present and Building Skills for the Future with the Go Grrrls Program* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001).

4. Lynn Ponton, *The Sex Lives of Teenagers: Revealing the Secret World of Adolescent Boys and Girls* (New York: Putnam, 2001).

5. Joyce A. Litton, "Innocence to Experience: Fiction Attempts to Address Teen Issues," in *Gender in Popular Culture: Images of Men and Women in Literature, Visual Media and Material Culture*, ed. Susan Rollins (Cleveland, Ohio: Ridgmont Press, 1995).

CHAPTER ONE

Do I Look Fat?
Body Image in YA Literature

Although feminism has made significant advances, girls' lives are still adversely affected by social pressure to adhere to an ideal standard of beauty. One influential source is YA literature, in which representations of body image complicate portrayals of young women. Much of YA literature mirrors the advances feminism has made for young women, yet some books continue to perpetuate an unrealistic "ideal" physical appearance. The only genre that portrays and is consumed by a young and primarily female readership, YA literature deserves feminist critical attention, especially for its representations of young female bodies.

While many YA novels depict sexuality, not many portray the intersection of sexuality and body image. Even within the books that depict both subjects, many novels that are liberating in terms of sexuality are regressive in terms of body image. Spanning the years 1975 to 2005, the novels I examine in this chapter portray female sexual experience and connect sexuality to body image. These YA novels reflect the changing social mores of 1975–2005, years in which women questioned cultural standards of beauty along with traditional sexual stereotypes. One important cultural change that took place during these years was an increasing awareness of body-image issues; these books reflect that growing awareness. For example, Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975) contains

an ultrathin protagonist, who by early twenty-first-century standards might appear anorexic but who in 1975 seemed to be just a normal teen concerned with her appearance. While Blume's depiction of Katherine's weight might have seemed harmless in 1975, as the years went by authors and readers have become more aware of body-image issues, and many YA novels clearly reflect this knowledge. In *Forever*, the weight issue is deeply embedded and barely acknowledged, but in later fiction body image becomes an acknowledged and often crucial aspect of the character's development. What remains important about Katherine in *Forever*, and many of the characters I analyze, is that in the novels in which they appear body image, weight, and sexuality are inextricably linked.

YA novels frequently depict female sexuality as a threatening force for young adults. For young females in contemporary society, sexuality (particularly sexual desire) is often viewed as a primitive, taboo drive that must be regulated. As documented by Peggy Orenstein in *Schoolgirls* (1994), Mary Pipher's *Reviving Ophelia* (1994), and Joan Jacobs Brumberg's *The Body Project* (1997), coming to terms with sexuality "in a society that treats women's bodies in a sexually brutal and commercially rapacious way"[1] is a pervasive struggle for young women. This struggle might be one of the reasons so many girls turn to YA fiction. Unlike other genres, YA literature provides multitudinous representations of young girls as sexual beings and reflects the social anxiety about controlling these bodies.

Because these stories reflect that social anxiety, books that are popular among young adults are often censored or challenged by parents and others. Many considered controversial contain frank and graphic portrayals of sexuality, and some of those most often challenged continue to be widely popular in the critical canon of YA literature, such as Judy Blume's novel *Forever*. While Blume has now attained canonical status, in the early years of her career she was frequently criticized for her controversial and explicit writing. Michael Cart argues that many books that "were receiving scorn and disapproval from adult reviewers" were often the very books that were the most popular with young adult readers.[2] In his 1985 article "Reconsidering Judy Blume's *Forever*," critic John Gough explains that *Forever* remains very popular in part because teens can "find themselves truthfully presented, undistorted, not *in*

extremis—just ordinary life and its awful emotions." Gough continues, "It is an unfortunate fact that the books for teenagers which receive critical approval are nearly all concerned with extreme characters and extreme situations."[3] Yet critic David Rees labels *Forever* "amazingly trivial" and "second rate," and dismisses the novel as being without literary merit.[4] Despite such critical scorn, the continuing popularity of *Forever* reveals its importance to young female readers. Much like *Forever*, many of the books I examine in this chapter can be considered popular YA fiction, but many were written by award-winning, critically acclaimed authors.

YA literature reflects girls' lives back to them, and this genre contains many representations of young women that illuminate body-image stereotypes. In this chapter I examine several of these portrayals, especially ones that are linked to sexuality, to demonstrate how they reinforce the contemporary ultrathin standard of beauty. One ultrathin character is Katherine in Judy Blume's popular bildungsroman, *Forever*. First published in 1975, *Forever* contains graphic, female-centered depictions of teenage sexuality. Described on the cover as "A moving story of the end of innocence," the novel focuses on the protagonist's loss of virginity and her subsequent discovery of sexual power and pleasure. Yet embedded in this novel is an underlying theme of weight and body image. Two novels by Norma Klein, *It's OK If You Don't Love Me* (1977) and *Breaking Up* (1980) portray young women learning about sex and love. Both novels depict sexuality openly with female characters who use birth control, achieve orgasm, and ask for what they want from their partners. However, these protagonists derive some of their power from their looks—they are in control, powerful, and responsible—and are very thin. Susan Terris's novel *Nell's Quilt* (1987) portrays a young woman who gains control of her life only after she starves herself into near anorexia. Judith Ortiz Cofer's *An Island Like You* (1995) also links female sexuality, body image, and class. Cofer portrays young girls growing into their bodies and being aware of their sexuality; in addition, her characters struggle with ethnicity and assimilation. *Life in the Fat Lane* (1998) by Cherie Bennett shows one beauty queen's battle with her weight and her sense of self as a sexual being. In Connie Porter's *Imani All Mine* (1999), protagonist Tasha has a baby at age fifteen, combats poverty,

and struggles to accept herself even though the images of thin girls she sees in *Seventeen* make her feel huge. In *Name Me Nobody* (1999) by Lois Ann Yamanaka, protagonist Emi-Lou diets secretly and tries to come to terms with her sexuality and her body image. Laurie Halse Anderson's award-winning novel *Speak* (1999) depicts one young woman's process of empowerment after she is raped; her body-image issues are just one aspect of her journey. *Rainbow Party* by Paul Ruditis (2005) draws upon the cultural moment in which parties were held (supposedly) where young women would service young men orally.

Far from simply upholding or subverting cultural expectations, portrayals of an ethnically diverse group of young girls and women reveal the difficulty they have resisting the contemporary standard of beauty. Often these novels seem to capitulate to contemporary ideas about weight, attractiveness, and body image. Characters who do not "fit" a hyper-thin European ideal are marginalized. In a revealing intersection of sexuality and body image, heavy characters are sexually promiscuous, passive, and act as if they are powerless, while in marked contrast thin characters act responsibly and appear to be powerful.

These representations of sexuality present body image as an integral component of female pleasure. In these YA novels, authors rarely describe male bodies but female bodies are continually looked at in what becomes a powerful representation of the male gaze. Although the gaze (as theorized by Laura Mulvey)[5] refers to film, its mechanism appears also in literary texts. When YA fiction uses visual imagery to describe and qualify female bodies, identifying the gaze as antifeminist is crucial. In many YA novels readers are encouraged, even directed, to examine characters from the perspective of a judgmental voyeur. The gaze is defined by many feminists as objectifying women, and this is connected with the experience of being looked at. These social constructions of young women's bodies become accepted norms. As Susan Bordo argues in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (1993), the source of oppression does not arise from "physical restraint and coercion . . . but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms."[6] YA fiction encourages young women's self-surveillance of their bodies, and in these stories a pattern emerges connecting female sexuality and body image. Promiscuous sexual activity is often linked to a character's weight and signals that character's lack of sexual restraint.

These associations of weight with sexuality serve a dual purpose in YA literature; they reinforce negative ideas about body image and signal the reader to "read" a fat character as sexually and socially suspect.

While these YA narratives treat female sexuality frankly and openly, the novels also present damaging and stereotypical ideas about the standard of beauty and body image. The novels reflect the cultural ideal that portraying sexuality is acceptable only when the character fits the stereotype of a sexually desirable young woman. "Weightism" might be an appropriate term for this form of discrimination. Weight appears to function in the same way that white often serves as a "default" for race. When the race of a character is not specifically named, white is assumed. In these YA novels, an unacknowledged assumption about weight functions similarly: If a character is presented and no reference is made to her weight, the reader assumes a "normal"—read "thin"—weight. Most often weight is mentioned only if the character is considered abnormal, i.e., fat or chubby, or if the character is thin as a reminder of the importance of being slender. Women and girls who are heavy are *always* identified as such. Even in otherwise progressive books, the fat person is marked as "other."

Evidence indicates that many young women see themselves as a fat "other." In trying to attain the impossibly thin standard of beauty promoted by media and consumer culture, many young women and even children suffer from eating disorders. In a 1986 study of almost five hundred schoolgirls, 81 percent of ten-year-olds reported that they had dieted at least once.[7] A continuing problem for women in Western society, body-image issues damage young women and girls particularly. In a survey conducted by *Psychology Today* magazine in 1997, 56 percent of the female respondents thought they were too fat. The incidence of body dissatisfaction is not decreasing, but increasing rapidly. This large-scale survey found that body dissatisfaction was increasing in both men and women "at a faster rate than ever before."[8] Body-image dissatisfaction is even more pervasive for young women. According to Natalie Angier, the physical development that comes during adolescence is partly to blame:

> Girls, poor girls, are in the thick of our intolerance and vacillation. Girls put on body fat as they pass into adulthood. They put on fat more easily

> than boys do, thank you very much, Lady Estradiol. And then they are subject to the creed of total control, the idea that we can subdue and discipline our bodies if we work very very hard at it. The message of self-control is amplified by the pubescent brain, which is flailing about for the tools to control and soothe itself and to find what works, how to gather personal and sexual power. Dieting becomes a proxy for power . . .[9]

It is not just social pressure to be thin that burdens adolescent girls; the very real physical changes that puberty and adolescence bring complicate the process of becoming young women.

Contrary to popular belief, social pressure to be thin affects girls of all ethnicities. Many ethnicities and cultures such as African American and Latino are assumed to accept and even desire bigger women, while women in Asian cultures are often assumed to be perpetually thin and unconcerned with issues of body image. These perceptions are as much stereotypical as are portrayals that show all Western women as obsessed with being pencil thin, according to recent studies that have shown that the Western standard is becoming the norm.

In a survey conducted by *Essence* magazine in 1994, the results from over 2,000 respondents indicate that African American women have the same risk for eating disorders as their white counterparts.[10] Preadolescent black women also suffer from body-image problems. In her 1996 study of 2,379 nine- and ten-year-old girls, of which approximately half were white and half were black, Ruth Striegel-Moore found that 40 percent reported that they were trying to lose weight.[11] The major change that has taken place over the past few decades is not a decrease in eating disorders but an increase in how body-image issues damage women of all ages, races, and social classes. Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia are widely recognized as major health problems, yet the fact that more than of 90 percent of those who have eating disorders are women is rarely commented on. And eating disorders are not the only problem. It is not surprising that the diet industry rakes in millions, if not billions of dollars a year. The effects of negative body image are pervasive. A 1990 American Association of University Women study showed that negative body image increases the risk of suicide for girls but not boys.[12] With these facts in mind it is vital that we analyze the areas of our culture, including YA novels, that question negative body image.

Many researchers have noticed the problems young women have with the Western standard of beauty. In the best-selling *Reviving Ophelia*, Mary Pipher documents case after case of young women who hate their own bodies because they do not conform to an impossibly thin standard. Pipher describes the ordeals that many young girls endure, and she offers valuable observations about how Western culture devalues the strengths of girls. Pipher's work provides a useful intervention, promotes positive change for young women, and acknowledges that "girls are terrified of being fat."[13] While discussing the pervasive impact cultural pressure to be thin has on young women, Pipher seems to reinforce the problem by blaming the girls for being vulnerable to such pressure. Early in *Reviving Ophelia*, Pipher states, "Girls with eating disorders are often the girls who have bought the cultural messages about women and attractiveness hook, line and scales." She later writes, "Looks do matter. Girls who are chubby or plain do miss much of the American Dream," reinforcing how powerful cultural messages can be. She criticizes "lookism," and the problem she describes has influential sources—the books young women read as well as the movies, TV, and ads they watch.

In many YA novels the thin characters represent control, responsibility, assertiveness, and sexual monogamy. The heavier and voluptuous characters represent passivity, irresponsibility, and sexual availability. This binary opposition appears in most of these novels, represented by two or more individual characters, but *Life in the Fat Lane*'s protagonist Lara is the only one who changes from thin to heavy within the novel. Her transformation signals that to lose control of your weight is to lose control of your life, your sexuality, and your value as a female. Before her metamorphosis into a "big" girl, beauty queen Lara enjoyed sexual exploration with her artsy boyfriend. After her weight gain, she loses her previous sexual confidence along with her boyfriend. Lara has something in common with Tasha of *Imani All Mine*, who is raped and becomes pregnant, and who is also heavy. Tasha's self-esteem is directly linked to her body size, and she often fantasizes about losing fifty pounds. In *Forever*, the differences between thin and heavy characters are painfully clear. One of Katherine's friends, Sybil, has low self-esteem because she is fat. The novel begins with a reference to Sybil's weight and sexuality, which presents a warning to readers:

> Sybil Davison has a genius I.Q. and has been laid by at least six different guys. She told me herself, the last time she was visiting her cousin, Erica, who is my good friend. Erica says this is because of Sybil's fat problem and her need to feel loved—the getting laid part, that is.[14]

Here, Sybil's promiscuity is directly linked to her weight. In stark contrast to Sybil is Katherine, who is slender, smart, and in control. In the novel we are told that Katherine is five foot six and weighs 109 pounds (20). This weight seemed extremely thin to me, so I entered it into a website that calculates body mass index (BMI),[15] which is the current standard for determining healthy weight. Katherine's BMI would be 17.6, which is considered dangerously underweight or starving. Katherine doesn't seem to worry about her weight but overhears her father reminding her mother (who also weighs 109 and is five six) that "if she doesn't start to work out at the gym soon, she'll wind up with flabby thighs" (29). Katherine views this dialogue as loving husband-wife joshing, but underlying the comment is a thinly veiled threat, for readers as well as for Katherine's mother. The implied threat is that "flabby thighs" are to be avoided at all costs and that attractiveness is based on not having flabby thighs. This scene motivates readers to internalize social ideas about standards of beauty; even at her already ultrathin size, Katherine is self-critical.

Confident, assertive, and responsible, thin characters in YA fiction do more than simply display themselves as models of appropriate body type. More often than not, they perform body assessments on themselves. In Norma Klein's novel *Breaking Up* (1980), sixteen-year-old Alison Rose contemplates her image in the mirror while trying on her new bathing suit:

> Maybe this is a vain thing to tell about, but once in gym the teacher was weighing us and seeing how tall we were and when she came to me she said "You have a perfectly proportioned body. Do you exercise a lot?" I felt awful because I never exercise at *all*! But I said I played tennis a little. "Well, whatever you're doing, it's the right thing," she said. "Keep up the good work."[16]

Alison embodies the thin ideal—and she doesn't even have to exercise to attain her "perfectly proportioned body." Her character typifies the

sexual assertiveness evidenced in many of Norma Klein's YA novels. Alison ends her unsatisfying relationship with a boyfriend she's outgrown in order to pursue her best friend's older brother. Alison initiates the relationship by telling Ethan "The thing is . . . I might have a crush on you" (75). Confident and sexually assertive, Alison is a positive portrayal of a young woman with one crucial exception: the cultural ideal of thinness is seen as an important component of her self-confidence.

In another example of sexual assertion, Norma Klein's *It's OK If You Don't Love Me* (1977) depicts protagonist Jody engaging in intercourse with her new boyfriend. Jody, who at five foot five inches and 115 pounds is almost as thin as Katherine in *Forever*, embodies sexual responsibility, control, and monogamy. She is on the pill and enjoys sex, but she has intercourse only with her boyfriend. During their first time he has an orgasm so quickly that it prompts Jody to complain "I didn't even have time to try and come myself" (132). Jody, like Katherine in *Forever*, takes responsibility for her own sexual pleasure. Unlike their nonskinny counterparts who embody passivity, Katherine, Jody, and Alison project sexual confidence and self-assurance.

In the novel *Imani All Mine*, Tasha's lack of self-confidence is directly correlated to her size and reflects our cultural struggle with weight and body image. Tasha fantasizes while reading *Seventeen* magazine, mesmerized by a photograph of a slender, blond young woman at a party:

> There was this white girl in a plaid dress that was red, green and black that look like a tablecloth. . . . I imagined me at one of them parties in a velvet dress and fifty pounds skinnier with some braids Eboni put in. They tight and hurting my head, but I ain't care because they looked good.[17]

Tasha has already accepted the idea that even if braids hurt her head, pain is less important than looking "good," just like the too-small skates she forces her feet into at the skating rink in order to conceal her actual shoe size. By portraying Tasha's incessant attention to weight, beauty, and looking good, Porter exposes these regressive ideas about beauty and weight.

Tasha provides a startling example of a passive sexual subject during her consensual sexual explorations. While enjoying a positive sexual

encounter with her lover, Peanut, Tasha is depicted as a passive recipient of Peanut's sexual attention. When she has her first orgasm (ever) with Peanut, he tells her "Tonight, I made you a woman" (147). Tasha doesn't reply but looks at Peanut and sees herself in his eyes, as if she only exists as a reflection. In contrast to Katherine's efforts to achieve orgasm, Tasha has little agency in achieving sexual pleasure.

In Janet McDonald's 2001 novel *Spellbound*, readers learn, along with protagonist Raven, that body size matters. Raven is a teenage mother who is struggling to work her way out of the projects by becoming a spelling champion. But after her pregnancy, Raven has gained weight. As she prepares to go to a job interview, she remembers what her sister Dell has told her:

> Employers can tell a project girl from a mile away by those truck-wide, ghetto hips and, believe you me, nobody wants to hire that. To succeed in this world, you have to have a downsized business body, not a teen-mom project booty.[18]

Of course what Raven learns is that what she really needs to get a job is a high-school diploma. And that piece of paper will get her only an entry-level job as a file clerk. But the message here, for readers, is that fat reads as "project" and lazy. There is no power in being big—the power lies in thinness. McDonald provides a contrast to the idealization of thinness, however, when Raven goes to church. At church Raven observes that "too often slim was a warning that a person was on their way down, on drugs or real sick. Here, fat was in. All that flesh meant you were healthy."[19] But tellingly, McDonald's appreciation of the fleshy body is as a cultural phenomenon rather than a meaningful appreciation of full-bodiedness.

In *Forever*, the character of Sybil, who has multiple sexual partners and is portrayed by Blume as flawed because she is fat, reinforces the danger of not being thin for readers. The explicit connection between Sybil's body size and her perceived promiscuity suggests that sexual misbehavior and even passivity can be correlated to a larger body size. Sybil's lack of control over her weight explicitly connects to a lack of sexual control; in the novel, her voracious appetite for food translates into an appetite for sex. Ironically, while Sybil is shown to be promis-

cuous in contrast to Katherine's monogamy, Sybil's sexual activity is described in terms of her passivity, as in Sybil "has been laid" (9). Katherine, who often initiates her sexual encounters and also gets "on top" (186) to ensure her orgasm, comes across as in control and in charge of both her body and her sexual life.

YA literature depicts monogamy as the appropriate relationship choice, reinforcing social constraints on sexual freedom. In *Forever*, Katherine's appetite for sex is moderate and regulated; she has sex with only one person, and an entire chapter is devoted to her trip to Planned Parenthood to obtain birth control. Katherine is in control; Sybil is not. Katherine is extremely thin and in apparent control of her weight and her sexual activity. Sybil is fat and therefore unable to control her body's size or her sexual experiences. Consequently, Sybil is punished for her sexual activities (and her weight) by getting pregnant. In an interview for the book *Presenting Judy Blume*, Blume reinforces the perception of Sybil as being irresponsible by indicating ". . . a girl like Sybil might have a genius IQ but she has no common sense."[20] While Sybil's sexual activity is depicted as reckless and dangerous, Katherine's sexual activity, with one male who is her boyfriend, is shown to be perfectly acceptable and even desirable for a young girl.

Often considered radical, *Forever*'s portrayal of sexual freedom has provoked decades of controversy. Katherine's sexual explorations and her pleasure at her first and subsequent orgasms, as well as her boyfriend's affection for his penis, Ralph, are part of what make *Forever* a controversial book. Some critics complain about the book's sexual content, but no critic has acknowledged the damaging portrayals of body image in this text. In *Disturbing the Universe,* Roberta Seelinger Trites, a well-known critic of YA fiction, comments on the importance of sexuality in *Forever* but does not acknowledge the importance of body image in the text. Trites's discussion does reveal the longevity and profound effect of *Forever* on its readers. In a chapter entitled "Sex and Power," Trites analyzes *Forever* using philosopher Michel Foucault's theories about power. She critiques *Forever* as a work that reinforces cultural sexual standards that "at once liberate and repress sexuality" yet also views *Forever* as a kind of "self-help" manual for teenagers, albeit one that sends "conflicting messages."[21] She acknowledges that *Forever* shows Katherine's desire for sex as natural but does not comment on

the significance of Katherine's weight for her sexuality. In fact, Trites makes no comment on Sybil's weight or body-image issues at all. Trites acknowledges that "the double standard about sexuality is reinforced by the objectification of women that occurs in this book" (91), referring to the flabby thighs discussion, but does not connect this objectification to body image. Trites describes Katherine as the "apotheosis of control" and criticizes Sybil for "callowness" (90) as well as for having "more trouble giving the baby up for adoption than she had imagined," but nowhere does she link Katherine's control or Sybil's lack of control to body image or weight. Trites sees *Forever* as a treatise on sexual power and repression; I see it as a liberating depiction of female sexual assertion and pleasure, but primarily for thin young women.

Rainbow Party, by Paul Ruditis, can hardly be considered high-quality YA fiction. But it is worth noting that the novel's very existence is due to the prevalence of the so-called oral sex parties that were the subject of many local evening news programs (and many parental anxiety attacks) in the early twenty-first century. *Rainbow Party* is on the whole unremarkable; characters are flat, the storyline is banal, and the premise questionable. Yet it deserves a mention for its complication of the "thin is powerful" paradigm that plagues so much YA literature. Sandy, one of the protagonists, is constantly questioning her own body image. Other characters also comment on her weight. Gin, her friend and the party-giver, is the designated thin character. Here is where the complications develop. Gin is sexually active, very sexually active—and very thin. Sandy, on the other hand, is constantly worried about her body image, although we don't know her weight. Gin is constantly reminding Sandy that she needs to watch her weight—thus functionally reminding readers as well.

Rainbow Party (a reference to numerous bands of different-colored lipsticks, collected by males at the party) is at best a humorous homage to the teen sex novel, at worst an attempt at an indictment of male-centered sexuality. The opening lines set the tone:

> Gin took the slender shaft of the tube in her palm. She gave a gentle tug along the base and watched as the lipstick extended to its full length. Her eyes darted to the sides, making sure no one was watching as she tilted the ruby red to her lips.[22]

The narrative centers on the rainbow party itself, which never actually takes place, although we learn that thirty-nine sophomores have contracted gonorrhea. While this novel honors some of the conventions of YA romance fiction, its contrived plot and unbelievable characters make it all but unreadable. Intriguingly enough, although *Rainbow Party* counts on public awareness of teen sexuality to sell itself, it fails to provide any sexual content other than reinforcing cultural ideals such as the standard of beauty.

The cultural ideal of thinness reveals that fat is not the only offender; secondary sexual characteristics like breasts cause anxiety as well. In a culture where the lean shape is the ideal, young women whose bodies develop early or who are simply more endowed are viewed as already sexual simply because of their figures. Judith Ortiz Cofer reveals some of the dilemmas that come with cultural expectations about body size in her book of short stories *An Island Like You* (1995). For example, in "Beauty Lessons," fourteen-year-old Sandra, who happens to be thin and flat-chested, is worried that she will never look like her voluptuous Aunt Modesta:

> Modesta is wearing a tight red dress that shows off her hips and breasts, which my American friends would say makes her look fat, but to Puerto Rican men is just right.[23]

Differing perceptions of beauty held by Latinos and Euro-Americans appear to cause Sandra to be torn between the two ideals. Her friend Anita has more developed breasts and receives the attention she wants from boys. Another girl in the story, Jennifer, is described as being like a "Barbie doll" with developed breasts, hips, and butt. Sandra describes Jennifer with derision, but she notes that Jennifer has "the look that boys like" (42). In turn, Jennifer taunts her as Sandra goes up to the board to do a math problem:

> Someone pushes Jennifer's button, the one that makes her talk in one-syllable words, and she calls out, "Come on Sandi baby, show off your brains. What size are they? I think they're triple A cup, myself. Hee, hee, hee. (44)

In this passage Sandra is teased for being flat-chested, while Jennifer is portrayed as the dumb bimbo with big breasts. Again, it is the female

body that draws criticism, in this case by girls as well as boys. Thus, Sandra and readers view Jennifer's body as inappropriately sexual. In her book *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation*, Leora Tanenbaum describes a phenomenon familiar to many women:

> Some girls who aren't sexually active at all are presumed to be so because of their physique. When everyone else in the class is wearing training bras, the girl with breasts becomes an object of sexual scrutiny. . . . A girl with visible breasts becomes sexualized because she possesses a constant physical reminder of her sexual potential.[24]

Sandra (and readers) view Jennifer as already sexualized simply due to her voluptuous, developing body. Likewise, in *Breaking Up*, Alison and her best friend Gretchen criticize a classmate's sexual behavior along with her large breasts. Narrator Alison describes her in harsh terms:

> Nancy Simon was this gross girl who transferred to our class in seventh grade. She had the kind of breasts people call "boobs"—really gigantic ones—and she used to make out with her boyfriend, who was in a class two years ahead of ours, in front of *everybody*. (33)

Klein exposes this phenomenon through her narrators, who seem to take for granted that a voluptuous body is a sexualized body. Readers will infer that Alison's "perfectly proportioned" body, in contrast to the "gigantic" boobs of Nancy Simon, will mark Alison as sexually in control. In a remarkable moment of awareness, in the novel *Nell's Quilt* the protagonist feels herself being looked at by a lecherous neighbor, and in that instant realizes her large breasts mark her as a sexual object:

> Tobias lowered his eyes and sniffed as I took hold of the second heavy bucket. The moment its weight was in my hands, he lurched, tipping the yoke against my breasts. Startled, I staggered backward, alarmed to find his eyes examining my body.[25]

During this encounter, Nell realizes her voluptuous body attracts male attention. Soon thereafter, she begins to starve herself. In this historical novel a lean, thin body is a personal, not a cultural goal. But control of the female body and sexuality is the source of Nell's actions. She starves herself in order to make herself unattractive and to deter her

upcoming marriage to a man she barely knows. Nell rebels against an arranged marriage in this novel set in 1899 rural America, and readers are drawn into her struggle for autonomy, self-definition, and personal choice. The choice Nell makes—to stop eating in order to dissuade her future husband—is presented as a choice of self-control and self-definition. Even the back cover of the book argues breathlessly: "An enthralling dramatization of the need for self-definition." While some readers will find Nell's struggle for self-preservation "enthralling," the author's depiction of her strength as coming from her newly acquired thinness is problematic. Readers never know Nell's weight before or after her transformation, but before she starves herself she is described as outweighing her male friend of the same height by "ten pounds or more" (14). Reinforcing her size, at one point a young girl calls her "fat" (19). In other words, Nell is not thin at the beginning of her story. But as she stops eating, the leanness of her body becomes the focus of her gaze, as Nell views herself in a mirror:

> When I passed the mirror a second time, what I saw was altogether pleasing. I saw someone I liked. It was Nell Edmonds. She was lean and smooth. Her belly was flat. A cap of sleek hair clung to her head. But she didn't look like a boy, more like a young girl—a strong and wiry one whose eyes glinted with a strange yellow fire and whose fingers were long and thin and ringless. (91)

Nell's vision of herself in the mirror reinforces the power of the judgmental gaze. Nell's bigger, stronger, perhaps "fatter" body is appealing to her suitor, but it is troubling and ironic that her anorexia becomes a symbol of power and self-determination. Again, it is the thin and "sleek" figure that allows young women to attain a sense of power and control of their own destinies. While the idea of the desirable female form may be inverted in *Nell's Quilt*, the lesson is familiar. Female power, sexual and otherwise, is connected to a thin, lean body.

The "Beauty Lessons" Sandra learns in *An Island Like You* serve the same purpose as the guidelines embedded in *Forever*: females are evaluated on their looks by men, and their looks define their sexual desirability. Sandra learns to incorporate the judgmental gaze into her self-perception, and her awareness of how her body determines her perceived attractiveness to men is a key theme in this story. Cofer illuminates a

conflict between cultures through the portrayal of a young girl whose body image is in formation. Sandra, the conflicted teenager, finally decides her own body is acceptable after she sees her Aunt Modesta without her makeup, false eyelashes, and dentures. By showing Sandra's horror at her aunt's natural appearance, Cofer gives value to youthful women's appearance. Sandra learns the lesson that girls learn early in Western society: looks are all-important. Toward the end of the story, Sandra spells out the lesson for her readers:

> I look at myself close up in the mirror and try to find some good things: I have a very nice nose and high cheekbones, and big eyes with long eyelashes. Everything by itself is okay, it's just that it doesn't come together into what I hear Mami and Modesta call belleza, beauty. In school my friends have a sort of checklist for great looks: breasts, legs, skin, smile, clothes. I don't get A's in any of the above, but I am gonna go ahead and give myself a *P* for potential. Maybe I'll bloom. (51)

Sandra's gaze at herself in her mirror reflects lookism as it exists in Western culture, and her self-assessment provides another example of its internalization. In the previous passage Sandra has accepted and incorporated social standards about beauty and looks. A self-critical gaze is a pervasive presence in YA novels and is often linked directly to issues of body image in young women.

When we read that Tasha sees herself as fat and are told repeatedly that Sybil is fat, we as readers might find ourselves visualizing them negatively. In *Imani All Mine*, for example, the reader must rely on protagonist Tasha's perception of her size, since her weight is never specifically given. Throughout the novel Tasha expresses uneasiness with her body size and shape, continually struggles with her body image, and is profoundly aware of the Western standard of beauty that is all around her. The man who rapes her calls her "fat bitch," reinforcing her poor self-image (51). The night of the rape Tasha is out at a skating rink, and she rents skates that are two sizes too small (she wears a size nine but rents a size seven) because she doesn't want "that red number blazing out from the back" of her skates (49). When she later thinks about the man who raped her, Tasha realizes:

> How stupid I was that night, the summer before Imani was born. Thinking he really liked me. As fat as I am. As black as I am. As much as my body look like it ain't never supposed to be loved by no boy. Touched by no boy. That's why I went from Skate-A-Rama with him instead of staying there like I should have.[26]

Tasha blames herself for even thinking that someone might be attracted to a girl who looks like her. On the night of her rape Tasha is literally "hobbled" by her too-small skates and figuratively hobbled by her socially influenced self-perception. But for astute readers, Tasha's self-criticism is also a critique of cultural standards of beauty. Readers know that Tasha is self-conscious just as they might also be self-conscious about weight and body image. Thus, a connection is made.

Both Sybil and Tasha are portrayed as easy sexual targets because of their size. Sybil is not raped but is portrayed as a willing but passive recipient of frequent sexual attention, while Tasha perceives herself an easy target for rape, perhaps due to her size and uneasiness with her body. Sybil's promiscuity is also depicted as attributable to her size. Unlike Sybil, whose weight is assessed by her peers, Tasha frequently calls herself "fat." Peanut, Tasha's occasional lover, says in response to her claim that she is fat, "No, you ain't. You big. Thick. My mama like that. That's the way I like girls to be" (30). Peanut's comment does seem to reassure Tasha, although his attraction to her seems to be more of a personal preference than a statement about cultural standards, since nowhere else in the text is her weight referred to positively.

In Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak*, readers get to know Melinda bit by bit through her first tumultuous year of high school. What readers don't know, and slowly come to learn, is why Melinda rarely speaks. She was raped at a summer party and has been ostracized by her peers because she called the police to report the rape. But the moment of the phone call marks the beginning of her silence—she finds she cannot speak about the rape to the operator that night, or to anyone. The narrative is a powerful exploration of the devastating effect sexual assault has on a young woman, and Anderson depicts Melinda's struggle with remarkable sensitivity and insight. Melinda's character is funny, sarcastic, vulnerable, and smart. She just happens to be recovering from being

raped. Body image comes into play in this novel because mute Melinda communicates through body language. She bites her lips until they are raw and bleeding, she wears big baggy clothing to hide her size-ten body, which she tells readers used to be a size eight as she looks for a pair of jeans that fit her:

> I need a size ten, as much as it kills me to admit that. Everything I own is an eight or a small. I look at my canoe feet and my wet, obnoxious anklebones. Aren't girls supposed to stop growing at this age?[27]

If the female form is what attracts sexual assault, then the unassailable logic is that altering the form might deflect the attention. Intriguingly, in the film version of *Speak*, the actress who plays Melinda is notably nowhere near a size eight. She appears to be even slimmer, a casting choice that my students always notice.

Much like the stories of *An Island Like You*, cultural differences in standards of beauty are explored in *Name Me Nobody* (1999) by Lois Ann Yamanaka. In this novel, weightism and lookism appear in the protagonist, her family, and her peers. Emi-Lou's body and the question of who has the power to control it are the focus of this novel. The protagonist, ninth-grader Emi-Lou, is called "Fat Albert" or "Emi-fat" by some of her classmates. Emi-Lou's best friend steals diet pills and laxatives in a misguided attempt to help Emi-Lou lose weight. Ironically, Emi-Lou's obsession with dieting centers on her lesbian best friend, Von, whom Emi-Lou believes she's losing because Von has taken a lover. Her struggle with her own body image, her relationship with boys, and her friendship with Von are viewed through the lens of body image. Like Tasha in *Imani All Mine*, Emi-Lou sees all of the slights and losses in her life as an expected result of her perceived unattractiveness. At a dance, Emi-Lou sees a boy she likes and tells herself:

> The skinny part of me wants to like Sterling. The fat part of me inside keeps reminding me: Who you kidding, chubs? He doesn't like you, fatso. He's only your friend, dork. You're making a fool of yourself, Fat Albert. It's all in your mind, white whale.[28]

Here Emi-Lou internalizes the voices she hears every day, chastising herself in what can only be read as a brutal and cruel fashion. When

she has hope that an attractive boy might like her, in a scene very similar to Tasha's night at the skating rink, she takes on the role of social monitor, reminding herself of her status as fat, unattractive "other." Everyone in Emi's life has something to say about her weight, critical or complimentary, and Yamanaka shows that a young girl's body is seen as a defining characteristic. Even when Emi-Lou finally accepts that the boy she likes, Sterling, might actually like her, it is only because he tells her that her body is okay. She never gets to a place of self-acceptance; her acceptability as a female is shown to be dependent on male perception and validation. Again and again, lookism asserts authority in determining the worth of female bodies.

As I have shown, body-image issues pervade YA novels. The idea that a female body has to be a certain way—i.e., thin, lean, and non-voluptuous—in order to attain status and power appears repeatedly in these texts and is often held up as a cultural standard, one that should be criticized. The female body is all-important in Cherie Bennett's 1998 novel, *Life in the Fat Lane*, which examines a beauty queen's response to a drastic change in her body as she goes from ultrathin to ultraheavy. A white Southern belle, Lara is a multiple beauty pageant winner. The book centers on Lara's unexpected weight gain of more than 100 pounds. (A mysterious metabolic disorder is eventually revealed to be the cause.) As a result of her physical change, Lara must rethink her entire way of seeing herself, her life, and other people. A unique portrayal of a girl's battle with her weight, the novel has an unusual feature in that each chapter is numbered to correspond with Lara's weight gain. For example, in chapter 128 she weighs 128, in chapter 145 she weighs 145, and so on up to her top weight of 218.[29] Enumerating the chapters is clever because it reinforces the female obsession with weight and numbers. It also draws readers into the obsession, forcing them to turn each page with dread. "How fat will she get?" With each pound she gains, Lara becomes less a person and more a sideshow freak, a development that reflects the dominant view of weight in contemporary culture.

At the end of the novel, Lara begins to lose weight as inexplicably as she had previously gained it. Although she comes to terms with her increased weight, when she begins to lose weight it seems as if the author just can't bear to let her protagonist, and her readers, suffer any

longer. In many ways the readers might begin to feel manipulated; we triumph with Lara as she begins to accept herself and her body, but then the weight starts to disappear. We worry—will Lara's newfound self-acceptance be lost? Is it really better to be thin after all? The book's answer is yes; thin is desirable, but body-image problems are exposed by Lara's journey from thin to fat and thin again.

In another similarity to *Forever*, *Life in the Fat Lane* depicts a daughter who inherits her mother's unhealthy body image. Lara and her mother both exercise every day and are obsessed with dieting, food, and body image. Lara's mother smokes cigarettes to avoid eating and seems to constantly worry about maintaining her status as a former beauty queen. In *Forever*, Katherine learns by watching her mother and listening to her father; in *Life in the Fat Lane*, Lara is directly trained by her mother and her father to be totally focused on her body. This parental influence is most likely a factor in the lives of many young women, but where do these cultural standards come from? In *Forever*, the parents are presented as enlightened, progressive, and permissive, but Katherine's father wants to ensure that his wife won't get fat thighs. In contrast, Lara's parents are portrayed as somewhat dysfunctional. Despite her mother's attempts to retain her youthful looks, Lara's father has an affair with a younger woman. In many ways Lara's mother is portrayed as silly, obsessive, and vain. She can be seen as an example of what can happen if you rely only on looks for your self-esteem. What remains once you lose them?

The phenomena of women relying on physical beauty for self-esteem is not new. Physical appearance remains an important, culturally determined measurement of femininity. What changes from the publication of *Forever* in 1975 and Norma Klein's novels of 1977 and 1980 is that in more recent YA novels the level of awareness of weight issues is no longer simply an embedded and unacknowledged aspect of the text. More often than not, in texts such as *Imani All Mine* and *Name Me Nobody*, weight issues are examined and commented on by not only the characters themselves but also the narrators. In other words, in more recent books body-image and weight issues are clearly depicted or even aspects of conflict within the plot. In older books, weight issues are submerged in character descriptions but not addressed as being a problem. The authors portray characters that embody the struggles of young women who must try to conform in a society that condemns them for not being thin. In more recent books, awareness of body-image issues pervades the novels;

more importantly, the authors reveal that powerful cultural pressure still exists for young women to uphold an unrealistic standard of beauty.

An integral component in the construction of female sexuality, YA novels are cultural productions that contain depictions of young women in all shapes and sizes, with all sorts of problems, issues, and attitudes. The complexities behind cultural messages about body image, especially for young women, cannot be dissected in one book about YA literature. But this chapter does reveal a critical pattern, that of the intersection of weight and sexuality. Critics, educators, librarians, and readers should carefully examine the deeply embedded ideas about the connection between female sexuality and body image.

These novels provide compelling examples of how female bodies continue to be a source of cultural anxiety. Magazines, television, and films perpetuate and reinforce the standard of beauty, but YA literature is an area of popular culture that for at least three decades has depicted, challenged, and questioned an unrealistic beauty ideal. Close examination of YA literature reveals more than just stories for and about young girls; it reveals culturally influenced portrayals of young women, sexuality, and body image that parents and teachers should discuss with adolescents.

Notes

1. Joan Jacobs Brumberg, *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* (New York: Random House, 1997), 210.

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CHAPTER TWO

Do the Right Thing
Pregnancy and Female Sexuality

Teenage pregnancy is a common theme in YA fiction. The previous chapter explored the link between body image and female sexuality; this chapter analyzes teenage pregnancy and its representations. Examining the ways in which YA novels depict sexuality and the possible consequence of pregnancy will illuminate yet another facet of female sexuality.

In YA literature, females are punished in myriad ways for being sexual. Frequently the punishment takes the form of an unplanned, unwanted pregnancy, although a few novels provide more complex depictions of young adult sexuality. However prevalent fictional punishment for sex is in the genre, a double standard persists when it comes to male and female sexuality: female characters are punished more often and more severely than males. Male sexual desire is presented as normal and natural, if often out of control, while female sexual desire is more frequently portrayed as abnormal or dangerous. Pregnancy serves multiple purposes in these novels: as a visible sign that the young woman has engaged in sexual activity, as a way to signify a young woman's transition from childhood to adulthood, and as a disruption of the ideal body image by making her fat.

Pregnancy-problem novels constitute a significant subset of the YA genre. These novels involve their readers in the plight of a usually

sexually inexperienced young girl who becomes pregnant. While many readers understandably anticipate that YA fiction will be literature that teaches, pregnancy novels are often expected to provide reliable information about sexuality, reproductive issues, pregnancy, and birth. Because these novels depict a pressing social issue, and one that is often seen as a moral crisis, the novels are frequently examined to see if they contain the "correct" information for teens. For example, in an article published in *English Journal* entitled "Books about Teen Parents: Messages and Omissions," authors Joy Davis and Laurie MacGillivray approach the subject of teen pregnancy with the idea that the novels "seem like a very easy place to educate readers."[1] The authors assert their hope that the article will "inform teachers and librarians," as well as

> encourage adults to think about the messages in the books we give to, and write for, young adults, and to stress the importance of literature as a vehicle for readers to reflect upon their own decisions and actions. (96)

While Davis and MacGillivray stop short of saying that pregnancy-problem novels should be viewed as self-help manuals for young women and men, they do admonish the authors of the novels for not including more explicit information about prenatal care and birth control. These goals are laudable; in fact, YA fiction can be a primary source of reproductive information for many young women. Analysis of YA novels should take into account the idea that the primary audience for these works is young people whose lives are still in formation. But to expect fiction to somehow take the place of accurate and explicit instruction and education about sex, birth control, and pregnancy places a heavy burden on authors. Without discounting the value of factual information that can be provided, this chapter looks beyond the informational content of these novels. The subtext reveals the way these pregnancy narratives function to reinforce, subvert, or disrupt traditional values and expectations about female sexuality and body image.

Admittedly, many of these novels are didactic; they warn and proselytize through negative depictions of teenage pregnancy and sexual activity. But there are works of YA literature that complicate the issue through representations that challenge regressive ideas about young

women and their sexuality. Much of YA literature portrays female sexuality, and pregnancy novels continue the trend by providing depictions that contribute to the construction of women's sexuality in our culture. Almost four decades of YA novels (beginning with the first YA pregnancy novel, published in 1966, and continuing to 2004) reveal a continuing cultural interest in adolescent pregnant bodies. This chapter analyzes depictions of adolescent pregnancy and reveals how these narratives deconstruct cultural institutions that wield power over young women.

Adolescent females are among the most powerless in our culture; while their bodies are continually viewed and desired, ultimately young women have little control of their lives. If a young woman becomes pregnant, her status changes within the institutions she inhabits, such as the family and school. Thus, fictional teenage pregnancy functions as a marker for the transition from adolescence to adulthood. In Norma Klein's *It's Not What You Expect* (1973), the unwanted pregnancy of a secondary character functions as a transition to adulthood for both the young woman who gets pregnant and the young girl who learns of the pregnancy. In Sheila Cole's *What Kind of Love* (1995), the protagonist has a very naive view of romance and life, and her unplanned pregnancy signifies an unexpected transition to adulthood. In *Annie's Baby* (1998) by Beatrice Sparks, the unplanned pregnancy is the result of an abusive relationship and functions as a powerful representation of growing up and social anxieties about female sexuality. In Sarah Dessen's *Someone Like You* (1998), pregnancy functions primarily as a warning and punishment, but it also mirrors subtext about becoming an adult. Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* (2004) depicts a teen pregnancy from the perspective of a young father who chooses to raise his daughter after his girlfriend lapses into a postpartum coma. Janet McDonald's *Spellbound* (2001) depicts protagonist Raven's transition from stereotypical project girl to college-bound young mother, despite an unplanned pregnancy. Marilyn Reynolds' *Detour for Emmy* (1993) portrays fifteen-year-old Emmy's transition from scared teenager to confident young adult primarily because of her unplanned pregnancy.

In these novels, pregnancy is a trope designed to raise awareness of reproductive issues. Birth control, abortion, and fetal rights all come to light in these novels, and all reflect the cultural zeitgeist of the time

in which they were produced. *My Darling, My Hamburger* (1966), for example, manages to vilify abortion as an irresponsible, selfish choice while simultaneously illustrating the horrors of a society where abortion is necessary but remains illegal and dangerous. The very title of this novel refers to a pseudo form of birth control touted by a teacher who advises a young woman how to stop "a guy on the make."[2] The teacher, Miss Fanuzzi, tells her class that a girl should suggest "going to get a hamburger" (7) as a way to discourage male sexual desire. The idea that the young woman should suggest going to get a hamburger reinforces the double standard implying that male sexual desire is out of control and needs to be curbed by the ostensibly desire-free female. "Extension Four," a short story about pregnancy help lines, illuminates many aspects of reproductive rights. In this short story, Rob Thomas skewers anti-choice groups that misrepresent themselves as helping young women but instead direct young women away from birth control and abortion and toward adoption. In Lissa Halls Johnson's *Just Like Ice Cream* (1982), for example, reproductive issues abound. In this novel the protagonist is directed by almost every authority figure in her life as to what she should do about her pregnancy—even the male doctor who will perform her abortion. He observes her tears and tells her she is "not emotionally ready to make this decision,"[3] taking away any tenuous sense of agency and power she has.

Not all of these YA novels reinforce conservative ideas about reproductive issues. *It's Not What You Expect* and *No More Saturday Nights*, both by Norma Klein, complicate expectations about reproductive issues with realistic portrayals of abortion and teenage parenthood. Published in 1973, the year of the Roe vs. Wade decision legalizing abortion, *It's Not What You Expect* envisions a society in which abortion providers are reviewed in *Consumer Reports*. While teenage pregnancy is not the main focus of the novel, Klein shows readers what it might be like to deal with the issue. Two novels, *No More Saturday Nights* and Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last*, depict teen pregnancy from the father's perspective by essentially "deleting" the female body from the narrative.

In these novels, teen pregnancy also reinforces the "sacredness" of the traditional, heterosexual family with two parents. The idea that a child born outside of marriage is "illegitimate" serves a similar function.

Despite the increasing acceptance of single parenthood in Western culture, a baby born without being legally sanctified by marriage is still a marginalized being in YA fiction. In one way or another, almost all of the YA novels in this chapter use pregnancy to reinforce the importance of maintaining the traditional nuclear family, with the notable exception of Norma Klein's *No More Saturday Nights*. In this 1988 novel, Klein challenges traditional family structures with her portrayal of a young man who chooses to raise his child. While pregnancy does not function in this novel as a warning or punishment, in many of these books punishment is the preeminent ideology.

Punishment for sexuality is often more severe when the young woman in question is from the working class. As such, teen pregnancy functions as a literary reminder that young women are limited and ultimately defined by their social class and economic status. Yet in these novels almost all the protagonists are middle class; it is often the friend of the protagonist who becomes pregnant. The very title of one of the novels, Jeannette Eyerly's *A Girl Like Me* (1966), would lead readers to believe that the young woman who becomes pregnant is, like her peers, just a typical teenager. Yet the young woman in this novel is portrayed as coming from a large (i.e., poor and uneducated) family that lives on the "other" side of town, thus labeling her as a less fortunate, underprivileged person. The implication is that those from economically diminished backgrounds have less capability to control themselves or to practice birth control, and that these young female bodies matter less to society in general.

Despite the decrease in recent years, teen pregnancy rates are remarkably higher in the United States than in other developed countries such as England, Canada, and Japan. There is still widespread resistance to practical sex education in the school system. That resistance, along with a general squeamishness about discussing issues of birth control and sexuality, is what keeps the teen pregnancy rate in United States one of the highest in the industrialized world. In the United States, there has always been social resistance to access to safe and legal abortion and other reproductive services for women. While the population wants to control teenage bodies, particularly female ones, we still don't want to have to admit that teenagers are sexual beings.

However much adults don't want to acknowledge facts about teenage sexuality, statistics imply that comprehensive sex education helps to reduce the rate of unwanted teen pregnancy. In a 2004 study of teenage pregnancy and contraceptive use by teenagers, the Alan Guttmacher Institute reported that a sexually active teenager who does not use birth control has a 90 percent chance of becoming pregnant within one year.[4] Despite a recent trend toward making reproductive information available to teenagers, information about birth control is still not easily accessible or affordable for all teens. The prevalence of the pregnancy-problem novel as a staple of YA fiction could be a reaction to the existence of the very real social problem in the United States.

In the YA pregnancy-problem novel, the narrative usually centers on an unplanned teenage pregnancy. With rare exceptions, these novels portray a sexually naive young woman's experience of becoming pregnant and dealing with her situation. These fictions ultimately end with some kind of resolution to the "problem," usually the unplanned pregnancy being carried to term. Rarely is abortion presented as a viable option. Even when abortion is present, it is usually portrayed as a "bad" choice. In his short story "Extension Four" from the collection *Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad* (1997), Rob Thomas portrays a young woman performing her high-school service learning component at a local pregnancy help line, which is really a thinly disguised pro-life (anti-choice) organization. The narrator reveals that she is the product of an unwanted pregnancy and that her mother gave her up for adoption:

> But it's not like I hate her. She made at least one good decision in her life. When she got herself knocked up, she didn't run off and have an abortion. That's the reason I'm here. Not just in this chair, but alive . . . existing on the planet. I'm lucky.[5]

In this story, the first-person narrative both validates and critiques the protagonist's perspective. Jill feels lucky because her mother chose not to abort her; thus she believes that abortion is wrong. Author Thomas exposes the false logic of his character's belief system, however, by repeatedly showing her to be narrow-minded and bigoted through her comments and observations. Jill stereotypes young women who come into the pregnancy help line as promiscuous because "from their

clothes and makeup, I'm guessing they don't refuse many offers" (64). She also tries not to see who calls the line by avoiding checking the caller ID. She reveals her ignorance with her observation that

> When I have looked—by accident—it's been names I don't recognize. Girls named Washington or Johnson, Rodriquez or Vizquel. Occasionally some notorious white trash name . . . it's not like my friends are the ones getting knocked up. (66–69)

This passage reveals Jill's narrow-mindedness, since she feels secure that she'll never see any of her friends come into the clinic. Additionally, this statement reinforces her class prejudice as she reveals that she believes ". . . it's not like my friend are the ones getting knocked up" (69). This short story depicts the stereotypes that surround teen sexuality and pregnancy. Thomas portrays abortion as an incorrect choice by favoring keeping an unplanned infant or adoption over abortion. Despite the story's overt critique of anti-choice organizations, the narrative ultimately approves of carrying a pregnancy to term by presenting abortion as wrong. Thomas continually reinforces the protagonist's perspective that she wouldn't be alive if her mother chose abortion; her position reinforces the dominant culture's view of pregnancy as sacred and more important than the life or wishes of the mother.

In most cases the pregnancy-problem novel is typified by first-person narration. Especially in books like *Annie's Baby*, *What Kind of Love*, and *Just Like Ice Cream*, the diary or first-person narrator format seems to present characters much like the young female readers. But the transformation that takes place, from naive young girl to experienced mature young woman, almost always reflects the virtues and values of traditional, conservative gender roles.

Traditional roles for young women (both implied and explicitly stated) include school, extracurricular activities, and eventual marriage and children. These expected traditional roles do not include giving birth as a teenager. The powerful social forces in the lives of many young women include parents, teachers, and political leaders who disapprove of sex outside marriage and reject abortion and the idea that sexual pleasure can come from anything but intercourse. The experi-

ences that these young fictional characters have, and their response to these events, are representations of the conservative sexual ideologies promoted by the dominant social culture.

Since young women are still viewed as the property of their parents, when a young woman becomes pregnant it symbolizes her eventual detachment from her original family structure. Whether the pregnancy leads to her breaking away from one family structure and creating another depends on how the pregnancy is handled. The choice to keep the baby (an infrequent occurrence in YA fiction) signifies a transition to adulthood and creation of a new family. Giving the baby up for adoption seems the preferred literary method of dealing with an unwanted pregnancy. Adoption depicts the young woman's return into her original family unit, where she is still the child. Either way, the young woman is changed forever.

Detour for Emmy (1993), by noted YA author Marilyn Reynolds, depicts the consequences of an unintended pregnancy for fifteen-year-old Emmy, who finds herself pregnant after falling in love with Art, a popular boy at school. Emmy is changed by her relationship with Art; initially she realizes that "now people whose names I didn't even know would smile and say Hi."[6] Emmy's recognition of her newly found status as Art's girlfriend comes at a price—she finds herself pregnant and terrified. Reynolds depicts Emmy's journey as more than just a young woman dealing with an unintended pregnancy; Emmy's experiences begin to help her define herself outside her family's expectations as well as outside what her boyfriend Art wants her to do and be.

One of the common tropes that appear in YA novels is that of the changeable boyfriend—the boy who initially seems great and then, somehow, when adversity strikes, is revealed to be a jerk. Art fits this pattern, as he seems very attentive and thoughtful to Emmy but then turns on her when she tells him she is pregnant. In this pivotal scene, Art tells Emmy, "*We're* not going to have a baby, Emmy. *You're* going to have an abortion. We're not ruining our lives for one little mistake" (89). Their argument is a decisive moment for Emmy and for readers; one can sense Art's impatience with her indecision and Emmy's reluctance to be controlled. When Emmy discusses her pregnancy with her brother David, he tells her she's "still got time" to have an abortion. But Emmy has waited a bit too long for her pregnancy to be so easily

resolved. She tells David, "Officially, there's still time. But David, I've already felt those little butterfly moves inside me. It's alive and it's . . . it's . . . part of me" (90). Despite the fact that her pregnancy derails her eight-year plan, which includes college, Emmy makes her own decision, carries the pregnancy to term, and keeps little baby Rosie.

The beauty and power of this novel lies not with Emmy's decision to keep her baby, but with how she grows up when her journey is "detoured." Emmy learns what it means to be a parent and learns how it feels to be betrayed by someone she loves. She ends up stronger for her experience—a lesson that while embedded deeply into the novel does not overshadow the story itself. The book cover displays "True-to-Life Series from Hamilton High" and has a soft and fuzzy picture of an infant alongside a picture of a happy young woman with braces. The message is clear—you're never too young to be careful.

In many of these novels, a young woman may get pregnant after engaging in intercourse on only one occasion. Fictional first-sex pregnancy reinforces the typical warning against unprotected sex: it only takes one time to get pregnant. Teenage pregnancy can be read as a warning that to engage in sexuality is potentially dangerous. In these novels, unplanned pregnancy functions as a kind of embodied scarlet letter that serves as a warning to others. Especially for a teenager, sporting a visible pregnancy reads "I've had sex, and I'm paying for it." One early novel (published pre–*Roe v. Wade*), *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* (1968), tells a cautionary tale of a teenage couple who meet, have sex, get pregnant, and then marry. Extremely popular in the 1960s and '70s, this novel reflects 1950s-era values and social mores as it warns readers about premarital sex and reinforces the sanctity of traditional marriage. The pregnancy results in the death of the premature baby, but the young couple's efforts to make their marriage work are shown to be all-important. The loss of the baby is intriguing since it reinforces the romantic ideal that their marriage was the primary value even if it was initially entered into solely because of the unplanned pregnancy. But this novel does more than just reinforce heterosexual marriage; the death of the baby punishes July and Bo Jo for having sex and vilifies sex outside marriage.

The widely held belief that a child needs a traditional family structure in order to be raised in a "normal and healthy" environment is

challenged by Norma Klein's 1988 novel *No More Saturday Nights*.[7] The protagonist is a high-school senior who decides to raise his son after his girlfriend tries to "sell" the baby to an infertile couple. While Klein does a fine job of challenging the concept of the neo-conservative traditional family, her portrayal of the young woman is problematic. Cheryl is described again and again as a social climber and being from a poor family. Tim, the father, is the son of a college professor, attends Columbia University on scholarship, and is referred to as a "catch." Cheryl decides to give up her baby through a private adoption, which is challenged by the baby's father. Tim's family takes her to court, and their attorney wins the case by effectively showing that Cheryl was "selling" her baby for $10,000. This depiction of a callous young woman who would sell her baby for money reinforces social distinctions about class and economic status. Klein is trying to show that Cheryl has more limited options than her middle-class boyfriend and so is practically forced into "selling" her unwanted child. Still, the overall portrayal assumes that the father is the "good" one who takes on the responsibility of raising his son even as he is trying to get through his first year of college. The "bad" one, social climber Cheryl, takes the easy route by using her unplanned pregnancy as a way to get out of her diminished social status. Klein reinforces Cheryl's desperate position by having her marry an older, established local merchant whom she apparently doesn't love. Even in a novel that treats teenage sex more liberally, the female is to blame. However, by depicting Cheryl's choice to marry an older man for his money, Klein also reminds readers of how social and economic pressures are more exacting for young women, even in the late twentieth century. So while her ex-boyfriend goes off to college, Cheryl uses whatever options she has in order to survive.

Survival is also an important theme in Janet McDonald's novel *Spellbound* (2001). We enter the narrative after protagonist Raven has already had her son, Smokey, and is struggling to raise him. Raven is a feisty YA heroine—she is smart, successful, and determined to succeed despite her early motherhood. This pregnancy narrative transcends the typical problem novel by depicting Raven's progress from teenage mother to spelling-bee winner to college-bound senior. One feature that sets the novel apart is its narrative point of view. McDonald's omniscient narrator gives insight into many of the characters in the

novel, thus providing insight into Raven, her sister, her mother, and her best friend Aisha, who is also a teenage mother. One function of this multivoiced perspective is that it validates the idea of a community of women being vital to a young woman's development. Much like the community of women in *Imani All Mine*, the women in *Spellbound* offer support, advice, and just plain family to Raven and her son. The way the novel creates all of these women as Raven's family helps to redefine what a family can be.

Raven also reminds readers that possibility exists even in the most trying circumstances. Her efforts to train herself to be a champion speller, when she feels like she can't spell at all, end up winning her a scholarship to attend college. So while McDonald's novel does transcend many common aspects of the typical pregnancy-problem novel, it also reminds readers of what leads up to Raven's circumstances. When Raven thinks back on the sexual encounter that resulted in her pregnancy, she remembers that it was "the first time she'd ever fooled around with a boy" and that she went with him into a "dark room . . . and then she lost hold of her world."[8] Significantly, the way she remembers the sex recalls many other YA novels in which the protagonist loses herself at the moment of intimacy. Somehow, self becomes obliterated in the heat of sexual passion. But despite her fear, Raven continues on with her life and reminds readers that hope is still a part of her life. In a lovely image that is repeated throughout the novel, Raven looks out of her living-room window at the Brooklyn Bridge—an image of hope, power, and purpose that acts as a metaphor for her journey. For Raven, spelling is her bridge out of the projects; she crosses that bridge at the end of the novel on her way to college and a better future for herself and her son.

Angela Johnson's *The First Part Last* (2003) challenges the tradition of pregnancy novels from the mother's perspective. In it we are introduced to Bobby, a teenage father who raises his daughter, Feather, after his girlfriend lapses into a coma after giving birth.[9] They had been planning to give the baby up for adoption, but Bobby's decision to raise his daughter also contributes to the construction of the family as a unit that can be other than traditional. Bobby's journey mirrors Raven's in *Spellbound*; they both realize that their lives are unalterably changed, but they both also realize that having a child means growing up. It is

rare in YA pregnancy fiction to see a male character portrayed with such depth and growth; Johnson's novel allows readers to see a different side of the teen pregnancy equation.

As it did for Raven, in the world of YA literature, sexual activity frequently leads directly to pregnancy, so how sexual desire is to be avoided is most strongly represented for readers. Paul Zindel's *My Darling, My Hamburger* (1969) forcefully criticizes teenage sex by portraying two young women, one sexually active and one chaste; the sexually active character gets pregnant. On the surface, *My Darling, My Hamburger* is overtly critical of the young woman who engages in sex, yet it does a remarkable job of capturing the angst of teenage lust. Sexually active protagonist Liz is shown to be strong and in control as long as she resists her boyfriend's (and her own) sexual desire. While sexual desire is depicted as normal and natural for males, in females desire is shown as a form of weakness. Giving in to desire is the ultimate failure for a young woman in a pregnancy-problem novel, and when she gives in, becoming pregnant punishes her and warns readers. Zindel's descriptions of how Liz initially resists Sean reveal that the burden of resistance is on her:

> This feeling was something she never felt with any other boy, and she was frightened at how naturally she had learned to enjoy their closeness. "Please" he said softly. He made her look at him. "We love each other, don't we?" She couldn't answer. "Please . . ." "No." His voice became suddenly angry. "Why not?" (19)

This exchange between Liz and Sean typifies representations of young women trying to resist the powerful, almost uncontrollable sexual desire of their male partners. Liz is shown to be resistant but ultimately complicit because she has these feelings, too. In other novels, the female is portrayed as being without desire and is punished if she capitulates to the desire of her male partner. In this novel Liz is severely punished; she becomes pregnant and endures a horrific illegal abortion, while Sean escapes suffering—all he does is pay for the operation. In reality the female is the one who ultimately bears the burden of the pregnancy, so in some ways Zindel's severe punishment of Liz is a fair

warning. Liz is an explicit example of transgressive behavior and what will befall a young woman if she gives in to sexual desire.

Liz is a strong counterpoint to her friend Maggie. Maggie barely lets her date brush her lips with a kiss and feels guilty even for that minor aspect of sex. Maggie's restraint is held in sharp contrast to Liz's struggle with sexual desire. While Maggie is in many ways held up as an ideal of young womanly behavior, the more powerful example in the novel is Liz. Zindel portrays Liz as an example of how not to behave when confronted with the desire to engage in sex. In many ways, the novel depicts Maggie's avoidance of any sexual feeling as eminently preferable to Liz's more realistic struggle to quench hers. Liz's unplanned pregnancy again depicts pregnancy as a punishment for sexual activity and female desire.

The sex portrayed in *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* is not even described, revealing the overall prudishness of the novel. For a work published in 1968, the novel reads like a 1950s narrative in which sex is an unmentionable act. July and Bo Jo attend a party, drink some champagne, and then July confides to her reader:

> I was feeling lighthearted and festive, and besides, anywhere else we went, Alicia would probably be there so when Bo Jo said, "Let's go have a look at the ocean," I don't remember feeling daring about it or giving it a thought one way or another. I trusted Bo Jo. I trusted myself. I had no idea that there actually is a point of no return.[10]

The narrative continues in July's voice, and she tells readers that she "was shattered" by her experience. She responds to Bo Jo's question if she is "mad" by saying, "I mean I've always felt superior to the kind of girls . . ." (9), revealing her shame at her realization that she is now "one of those girls," one who has had sex outside marriage. July then goes on to reveal to the reader that "it wasn't just the champagne. It was the way Bo Jo had made me feel" (9), thus indicating it was desire that led her to engage in intercourse. This admission by the protagonist functions as a warning in itself to readers: trusting yourself or your boyfriend is not enough. Desire leads to sex and sex leads to pregnancy, so beware of the way you feel.

Sexual desire is almost absent from *Just Like Ice Cream*, but sexual activity still engenders punishment in this 1982 novel. Protagonist Julie is seduced into sex by her transparently manipulative boyfriend, who persuades her that sex is "just like ice cream."[11] Ice cream is Julie's favorite treat, so when Kyle tempts her to "try something just as good as ice cream, something everyone regrets they hadn't begun enjoying sooner" (17), Julie seems easily seduced, since her sexual desire has been aroused by kissing. In this novel, author Lissa Halls Johnson creates a protagonist who seems easily lured but then does not enjoy sex at all. Her first sexual experience is disastrous. Johnson doesn't try to portray sexual pleasure in this novel but focuses instead on the pain that can be involved. Almost nowhere in the book is sex described as being pleasurable, except by Julie's married Christian friend Jan. She responds to Julie's statement "most people think God doesn't want people to enjoy sex" with advice that sounds like an advertisement for the Promise Keepers:

> On the contrary, he wants you to have a great time with sex. That's why he set up marriage as the perfect place to enjoy it. In marriage, commitment is the shelter over your head. It *protects your emotions and proves love*. . . . Being a virgin is something special—for guys as well. Then you come into marriage with only each other to learn from. You learn what pleases your husband, and you aren't distracted by what pleased someone else. You start fresh. There aren't painful memories to overcome or fight against. (26; italics mine)

The implication is clear to readers: sex is painful and results in disastrous consequences for the female, unless you're married. Jan's advice that marriage "protects emotion" and "proves love" is a leading statement but also one that many young males use as an inducement to have sex: "prove that you love me by sleeping with me." Johnson's characterization of marriage as "proof" of love reiterates the book's conservative agenda. Johnson's descriptions of Julie and Kyle's sex, along with their postcoital behavior, are particularly telling:

> I allowed myself to return his kisses just as passionately as he gave them. It didn't take long for us to get our clothes off and climb into bed. I was surprised my nakedness didn't embarrass me. Maybe because he enjoyed

> it so much. But then. It hurt. No one told me it would hurt. I wanted to cry out, but instead bit my lip. (18)

In Johnson's description of sex, as empty as it is of any detail, the emphasis is clearly on the sexual pleasure of the boyfriend, even if it is from Julie's limited perspective. These details reveal that male sexual pleasure is expected and to be focused on, while female sexual pleasure is only sanctified through marriage.

In essence, the narrative punishes Julie for being gullible and for having sex and warns readers that men will take advantage of young women in order to please themselves. In fact, when Julie tries to break up with Kyle, she tells him "I can't pretend I enjoy sex, because I don't. I hate it." He tells her, "Sex with me is great. How can you *not* like it (29)?" This exchange between Julie and her self-absorbed boyfriend shows readers how far apart these two are in their perceptions of their mutual sexual experience, which in turn reinforces the author's message. The glaring message in this novel is that sex outside marriage is wrong, sex is not pleasurable for women, and if you have sex outside marriage you will be punished in one way or another.

Just Like Ice Cream ends up a stereotypical pregnancy-as-punishment warning story, but with a twist—the pregnant teen battles her parents, her erstwhile boyfriend, and even doctors for control of her body and ends up finding God as her salvation. Her born-again Christian friend Jan is the person Julie turns to for understanding after the baby is born and she decides to put him up for adoption. Jan spends a lot of quality time indoctrinating Julie into the ways of God; thus at the end of the novel, Julie reveals to readers "The choices I've made will affect me forever . . . sometimes I don't *feel* loved, yet I *know* that I am. God loves me" (163). Julie has found faith, which is what the author shows as being missing from her life. Julie's final words reinforce the narrative thread that having sex is a momentous and profound event—one best saved for marriage. *Just Like Ice Cream* uses a common method of controlling women in patriarchal culture: religion. As Adrienne Rich argues in the 1982 introduction to her pivotal essay on compulsory heterosexuality:

> The New Right's messages to women have been, precisely, that we are the emotional and sexual property of men, and that the autonomy and

> equality of women threaten family, religion and state. The institutions by which women have traditionally been controlled—patriarchal motherhood, economic exploitation, the nuclear family, compulsory heterosexuality—are being strengthened by legislation, religious fiat, media imagery and efforts at censorship.[12]

In her essay Rich reveals the social institutions that enable cultural control of women. *Just Like Ice Cream* uses religion in particular to rein in the sexual explorations of Julie, who ultimately succumbs and dutifully recites the party line at the close of the novel. Julie's punishment for sexual activity is pregnancy, but her experience reinforces the primacy of male sexual pleasure and male (read "religious") control of the female body.

Punishment for sexual activity is not restricted to the novels themselves; reviewers participate, too. An anonymous reviewer in *Publishers Weekly* describes the protagonist of *What Kind of Love* as "the mostly wholesome Valerie," implying it is unwholesome to engage in sex. Sheila Cole's 1995 novel[13] portrays a romance gone bad when a talented musician protagonist becomes involved in a sexual relationship that ends up in an unwanted pregnancy. The novel begins with an unsubtle metaphor for male invasion of female space. It is in diary form, and the first entry describes how Valerie's little brother has to be chased out after he "put his fingers into the bowl" (1) of batter that she and her friend are making. This initial invasion into a typical female space (the kitchen) and into a round, feminized vessel (the bowl) by a male member (in this case, a finger) foreshadows the male incursion into the female body that takes place later in the novel. Valerie's sexual activity, unlike that of some of the female protagonists in this chapter, occurs as a result of her sexual desire. Valerie describes her first intercourse in some detail in her diary and remembers her desire:

> I know we shouldn't have, only it was too late to stop. I couldn't get enough of him. I wanted him inside me but it hurt, and when he pulled away, there was blood on my thighs. It freaked me out. (4)

Valerie's sexual desire is clearly linked to eventual pain in this passage, reminding readers that desire is bad and only results in hurt. Her first sex, like much of the first sex in these novels, happens without plan-

ning and without any discussion of birth control. However much these scenarios reflect reality, they reinforce the idea that giving in to sexual desire literally leads to spilled blood. This image is another not-so-subtle metaphor for unplanned pregnancy, perhaps even foreshadowing the possibility of abortion, an option the protagonist ultimately rejects. Again and again in YA pregnancy novels sex is portrayed as painful, dangerous, and unfulfilling for women.

Many pregnancy-problem novels are (probably inadvertently) in accordance with Andrea Dworkin's argument that intercourse is an instrument of male domination. The depictions of intercourse in most of these novels equate the act with aggression, power, and force. As Dworkin argues in *Life and Death*, women need to recognize that the structure of intercourse rehearses male domination over women:

> If we are not willing to look at intercourse as a political institution—directly related to the ways in which we are socialized to accept our inferior status, and one of the ways in which we are controlled—we are not ever going to get to the roots of the ways in which male dominance works in our lives.[14]

By depicting intercourse as domination, and as mostly (and sometimes completely) unpleasant for women, these YA novels overtly attempt to discourage young women from engaging in sex. Yet these depictions also function as cultural critiques of male domination, male-centered sexual practices, and female oppression. When sex is portrayed as unpleasant and almost always resulting in unwanted pregnancy, each sexual interaction seems more like rape than consensual sex. But when a YA novel depicts pregnancy as a result of a rape, the novel is often less a critique of male violence and more a depiction of the "problematic" young woman who is raped. With the notable exception of Anderson's *Speak*, in YA fiction that depicts sex or sexual violence, the focus inevitably falls upon the female, reiterating a cultural construct that says if a young woman is raped, she must have asked for it. Focusing on the object of sexual desire, in these cases young women, reflects another form of social anxiety about female bodies.

Annie's Baby (1998),[15] subtitled *The Diary of Anonymous, a Pregnant Teenager*, is the creation of Beatrice Sparks, well known for writing

the "anonymous" *Go Ask Alice*, a popular antidrug novel of the 1970s. Although her "boyfriend" rapes Annie, reviewers of this novel neglect the abuse subplot and concentrate on the unplanned pregnancy. This author is unusual—Sparks has a Ph.D. in human behavior and is billed on the back cover of her books as being a professional counselor. Intriguingly enough, some of the book's reviewers seem to be taken in by the promotional materials and believe that the book is indeed a young woman's diary. Although Sparks is credited with having "edited" the diary, it is clearly mostly fictional. According to her promotional website, Sparks's "books are mainly written from case histories," an assertion that reveals they are by and large patchwork literary constructions, not genuine diaries.

In *Annie's Baby*, Sparks presents the diary of Annie, a young woman who gets pregnant and who is also physically and emotionally abused by her boyfriend. In this novel, the unplanned pregnancy warns readers against the dangers of premarital sex as well as low self-esteem. In a brief article in *Adolescence*, the reviewer writes:

> The everyday problems of teenage girls usually do not include motherhood, but when a fourteen-year-old discovers she is pregnant, the issues of shopping, soccer and sleepovers are eclipsed by the need to make decisions that will affect her for the rest of her life. . . . *Annie's Baby* is the real life diary of an anonymous pregnant teenager, edited by Beatrice Sparks.[16]

Besides the unquestioning interpretation of the diary as being "real," the reviewer assumes that any decisions Annie makes will "affect her for the rest of her life," perhaps revealing more about the reviewer's beliefs than anything substantial about the novel. The reviewer's emphasis on how Annie's decisions will affect her forever echoes a widely held belief that any pregnancy changes a woman in a substantial way. This belief reveals that pregnancy is revered and sacred, so how could it not change one forever? If it somehow doesn't change the young woman, then what is wrong with her? This belief devalues the pregnant woman in favor of the pregnancy itself. However misguided an attempt it is to warn readers about sex, *Annie's Baby* does a valuable service by showing how abusive treatment can escalate from emotional battery to more serious and even more harmful physical assault. Sparks shows

how Annie's seemingly thoughtful boyfriend goes from attentive to obsessive and from playfully aggressive to violent. Thankfully, Sparks draws the line at linking Annie's submissive behavior to her abusive boyfriend, but the end result of this novel is that the pregnancy functions as a warning against sexual activity.

Disturbingly, Sparks provides misleading information at the end of the novel on birth control and birth rates. She incorrectly asserts that among teens "the birth rate is increasing" (240). According to a 2004 study of U.S. teens done by the nonpartisan Alan Guttmacher Institute, "between 1988 and 2000 teenage pregnancy rates declined in every state."[17] Sparks tells her readers that "out of wedlock births more than doubled between 1986 and 1996" in an attempt to reinforce the primacy of traditional marriage, but she ignores the fact that more and more women are *choosing* to have children outside marriage. She continues to marginalize women who have children outside marriage by calling them "unwed mothers," a term that hearkens back to the 1950s. While *Annie's Baby* is indeed compelling fiction and might prompt young readers to be wary of male violence, the embedded and blatant messages it provides about sexual activity make it a regressive novel. Sparks wants to influence her readers not only to avoid sex until marriage but also to recognize that traditional marriage is the only safe place to be. Sparks's ideology notwithstanding, her use of misleading statistics amounts to scare tactics. Her reinforcement of traditional gender and sexual roles for women excludes lesbians and gays, and it also seeks to return young women to a more oppressive time when women had fewer options.

Sarah Dessen's *Someone Like You* (1998) is billed on the back cover as a novel about "true friendship," but at the center of the novel are the perils of sexual activity for teens. It is not just young women who are punished; young men are also duly chastised. In this novel, the young man involved in the unplanned pregnancy dies, punished much more severely than Sean in *My Darling, My Hamburger*, who only has to pay for an abortion. In this book, (the not-so-subtly-named) Scarlett and Halley are best friends. Scarlett's boyfriend impregnates her during their first intercourse. That same evening, as Michael drives home, he is killed in a motorcycle accident. As a result of one act of sexual intercourse, Dessen's readers are presented with a dead boyfriend and

a pregnant teenage girl, cementing the idea that having sex leads to punishment.

But Dessen doesn't stop by punishing Scarlett for her single act of intercourse; she creates a good girl/bad girl parallel narrative. Scarlett is contrasted with best friend Halley, who becomes involved in a relationship with a boy she describes as being ". . . a Boy with a Reputation."[18] Macon, the boy with the reputation, is depicted as a kind of sexual predator. Dessen's characterization of Macon seems contrived, as he is initially portrayed as a devoted boyfriend to Halley (he mows her family's lawn to save Halley from the task, really seems to listen to her, and otherwise treats her with respect), but then he rather suddenly begins to pressure her to have sex. Dessen portrays Macon as quirky but thoughtful and generous toward Halley. Yet when Halley's sexual desire leads her to consider having intercourse with Macon, both she and Macon get in a terrible car wreck. In Dessen's world of sex and punishment, merely the presence of sexual desire leads to disaster. In this good girl versus bad girl equation, Halley is the good girl who almost becomes bad by engaging in sex.

Dessen equates the perils of premarital sexual activity with dangerous driving. Marriage is apparently the only true license to engage in sex. Thus, those who engage in sexual activity outside marriage are compared to reckless—i.e., unlicensed—drivers. *Someone Like You* very clearly makes a distinction between male and female drivers, or initiators of sex. In this fictional world, the males drive the vehicles that crash. The males initiate sexual activity. Scarlett's punishment is her pregnancy; Halley, who has not yet engaged in sexual intercourse, is warned of her danger by being in a car crash where her boyfriend is driving. She is supposed to be the lucky one. Her narrow escape in the car wreck parallels her narrow escape in the bedroom. The novel implies that engaging in sex, or even considering having sex, is an unacceptable and even life-threatening option. The strong friendship between Scarlett and Halley is not enough to protect either of them from the consequences of sexual activity.

Other reproductive issues related to sexual activity, such as access to birth control and abortion, are frequently depicted in pregnancy novels. Through representations of these controversial topics, these novels define the boundaries of young women's sexual lives. Additionally, the

novels let adolescent females know it is socially unacceptable to become pregnant while a teenager. They mark the appropriate time and place for having children, literally and metaphorically. What changed in the years from 1968 to 2004 (the years these novels span) is that in the 1960s abortion was not yet legal and the social mores of the 1950s were just beginning to recede. YA novels of the 1950s rarely even addressed sexuality, much less pregnancy, and it is only during the late 1960s that unplanned pregnancy is seen to be an apt topic for fiction.

However, the fear of an illegal abortion is tangibly present in many YA novels of the 1960s. Depictions of female sexuality and teenage pregnancy in particular embody the zeitgeist of the times in which they were produced; once abortion became legal, novels reflect this new fact. While most YA novels do not endorse abortion, a few recognize that legal abortion is an option for their protagonists who become pregnant. It is a rare YA book that portrays an abortion as an acceptable measure, however. So while abortion is generally not portrayed as an acceptable way to deal with an unwanted pregnancy, it is wielded as a threat and shown to be a life-altering, often traumatic event. In *Just Like Ice Cream* (1982), Lissa Halls Johnson has her pregnant teen protagonist make the decision to have an abortion and portrays her trip to a "family planning clinic" as a nightmarish experience. The novel is set in 1982, and abortion has been legal for almost a decade. Yet the building is described as "ugly, old, block-shaped," and once they're inside the "ugly green and white speckled linoleum" room is occupied by "unhappy looking girls" (59). Once Julie takes a pregnancy test and decides to go through with the abortion, the nightmare begins. She decides to end the pregnancy, and then her mother says "Julie, I don't know if I approve of abortion" (81). Julie's mother seems to present the view of many who espouse anti-abortion views; she expresses no concern for her daughter's well-being or feelings. Her only concern is whether abortion is a morally correct decision.

Julie's mother's reluctance to engage in meaningful discussion with her daughter, either before or after she finds out she's pregnant, reflects many parents' reluctance to address the sexuality of their young adult children. When Julie tells her mother she's pregnant, her mom says, "I guess because I never thought I would see you in this situation, is the reason I never discussed . . . umm . . . sex before" (78). Julie's mother's

ideology can easily be read as the ultraconservative belief about sex education that you don't need education if you're not going to engage in sex. Yet even Julie recognizes her ignorance when she thinks to herself "A little information like I received at the Family Planning Clinic would have helped a lot" (79). Even a conservative novel such as *Just Like Ice Cream* supports the idea of more information about birth control, even while it places the blame on Julie's mother for neglecting to talk to her daughter about sex. The underlying criticism implicit in this novel is that Julie's decision to engage in sex was wrong, not just because she didn't have information about sex and birth control, but because sex outside marriage is wrong.

By depicting conservative sexual values as the only correct options, *Just Like Ice Cream* makes it clear that abortion is wrong and abstinence is preferable, and that religious faith is what is really missing from Julie's life. A review in *Publishers Weekly* endorses the religious aspect of the novel by asserting that Julie's best source of support is "a woman with maturity and deep faith whose guidance helps Julie gain a sense of self and make the right personal choice" (54). This assertion implies that there is a "right" (i.e., correct) choice to be made, even if it is modified by the word *personal*. While this YA novel seems to present options to its readers, some options are not portrayed as being viable at all; they are shown as distinctly bad choices.

By depicting sexual and reproductive options as complex, Norma Klein's *It's Not What You Expect* treats readers with more respect than do other blatantly didactic novels. In this novel, published just after 1973's *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion, Klein portrays an unplanned teenage pregnancy ended by an elective abortion. The pregnancy story line is secondary to the main plot, which involves twin fourteen-year-old siblings Oliver's and Carla's summer of growing up and discovery. Their older brother's steady girlfriend gets pregnant, has an abortion, and suffers no ill consequences. Despite her neutral representation of premarital sexual activity, Klein still favors the relationship between Ralph and Sara Lee since they are in love and plan to marry some day. While not yet a state-sanctioned marriage, their relationship fits into the dominant culture's approved definition. The aftermath of the abortion reassures the reader that the procedure isn't

necessarily traumatic. Carla looks at her as Sara Lee sits talking to her family, and observes:

> She looked so calm and composed. Of course, why shouldn't she be? It's only in old-time movies that people lie around pale and fainting after abortions. Still, it was odd to think of.[19]

In this passage Carla realizes that an abortion isn't necessarily a life-altering tragedy. This matter-of-fact depiction of an abortion also serves as educational material for readers. They are shown that a young woman can have an abortion and go on with her life and her relationship. The circumstances surrounding the abortion illustrate a decidedly pro-choice attitude.

Klein might reinforce the concept of the traditional family in this novel, but she also illustrates the tremendous optimism that was present in the early days of legal abortion. Her prediction of abortion providers being reviewed in *Consumer Reports* might seem somewhat odd from a current perspective, but it reflects idealism about women's issues rarely seen in YA fiction. Klein envisioned a future where women's reproductive rights and issues would be aboveboard and out in the open, with little or no stigma attached.

It's Not What You Expect is an exception in YA literature but shows the potential of these novels to make a positive impact on readers. Norma Klein wrote many novels about adolescents learning about sexuality and seemed to favor, as Joyce Litton argues, "non-punitive attitudes"[20] toward teen sexuality. Norma Klein and Judy Blume are authors whose books are often challenged and removed from library shelves. While Blume's books are continually in print, unfortunately many of Klein's books are out of print and unavailable in libraries. Perhaps the more liberal and objective attitudes about teenage sex displayed in Klein's books have made them so controversial as to be almost completely unavailable. But Joyce Litton believes that neither the more conservative novels nor the more liberal "provide adequate models for dealing with the main problems—although Blume and Klein come a lot closer" (187). Litton argues "that in the age of AIDS and teen pregnancies, adults should encourage teens to delay sexual

activity until they are more mature" (187). Litton asserts that it is easier to avoid dealing with teen sex by advocating abstinence than to help adolescents learn to make responsible decision for themselves.

When a young woman is impregnated in these novels, the choices she makes about her pregnancy are very rarely designed in her best interest. Most often, she must decide what is best for the "child" inside her. Rarely do authors (or narrators) consider abortion as a viable choice in an unwanted pregnancy. Also, while the health of the fetus is considered, it is rare to read about the health of the mother being given any other than minor consideration in the decision. Even though having a legal abortion is vastly safer than giving birth, abortion is shown time and again to be a dangerous and selfish choice. As philosopher and social critic Susan Bordo writes in *Unbearable Weight*, "I believe the ideology of woman-as-fetal-incubator is stronger than ever and is making ever greater encroachments into pregnant women's lives."[21] I would add that if the woman happens to be a young adult rather than legally of age, her status as an autonomous person is even more in danger. Once a young woman becomes pregnant, she is no longer herself, since she contains the potentiality of another being.

Often the fate of the young woman is given some attention, but in general what's right is almost always what's right for the "baby." In *Someone Like You*, Scarlett repeatedly reminds herself "I'm doing the right thing" (200) by keeping her baby, revealing that Scarlett's own fate is of secondary importance in this novel. She is in high school and works part-time in a grocery store. She wonders how she will support her child on the pittance she earns in her low-wage retail job. In a startling representation of class and economic status, her best friend, Halley, the narrator of the book, reminds her:

> "We've already talked about that. . . . You have that trust your grandparents put aside, you'll use that." "That's for college," she moaned. "Specifically." "Oh, fine," I said, "you're right. College is much more important right now. This is your *baby*, Scarlett. You have to hold it together because it needs you." (138)

Halley reminds Scarlett and readers that the life of the fetus is already more important than the life of the young pregnant woman, reinforcing the rarely questioned dominant ideology of the sacredness of pregnancy.

Pregnancy-problem novels depict a fairly uncommon transitional stage in the lives of young women. While the rate of teenage pregnancy has decreased, the public's perception is that the problem has not really diminished, and teen mothers and single mothers are still vilified as being unfit and a drain on social resources. These YA novels warn against sexual activity by punishing young women for sexual desire and pleasure, but they also criticize reluctant parents and the social structures that make it difficult for adolescents to obtain access to family planning. Many novels reinforce the choice of carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term by excluding realistic representations of alternatives such as abortion. By portraying young women and men dealing with unexpected pregnancy, YA novels reveal the ongoing cultural obsession with female teenage bodies and reproductive issues. This chapter reveals that despite a tendency toward reinforcing the dominant culture's ideology about teen pregnancy, these YA novels also contain challenges to stereotypes. The more recent crop of YA pregnancy novels offers more than punishment, criticism, and censure; they offer hope and empowerment for young women.

Notes

1. Joy B. Davis and Laurie MacGillivray, "Books about Teen Parents: Messages and Omissions," *English Journal* 90, no. 3 (2001): 90–96, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

2. Paul Zindel, *My Darling, My Hamburger* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969; Bantam 1978), 6, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

3. Lissa Halls Johnson, *Just Like Ice Cream* (Palm Springs, Calif.: Haynes, 1982; Bantam, 1984), 91.

4. Alan Guttmacher Institute, U.S. "Teen Pregnancy Statistics: Overall Trends, Trends by Race and Ethnicity and State by State Information," http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/teen_preg_stats.html.

5. Rob Thomas, *Doing Time: Notes from the Undergrad* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 64, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

6. Marilyn Reynolds, *Detour for Emmy* (Buena Park, Calif.: Morning Glory Press, 1993), 39; hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

7. Norma Klein, *No More Saturday Nights* (New York: Ballantine, 1988).

8. Janet McDonald, *Spellbound* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 13.

9. Angela Johnson, *The First Part Last* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003).

10. Ann Head, *Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* (New York: Penguin, 1967), 8, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

11. Johnson, *Just Like Ice Cream*, 18, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

12. Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," in *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*, ed. Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Helperin (New York: Routledge, 1993), 228.

13. Sheila Cole, *What Kind of Love? The Diary of a Pregnant Teenager* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995; Avon, 1995), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

14. Andrea Dworkin, *Life and Death* (New York: Free Press, 1997), 120.

15. Beatrice Sparks, *Annie's Baby: The Diary of Anonymous* (New York: Avon Books, 1998), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

16. Mary Compton and Juanita Skelton, "A Study of Selected Adolescent Problems as Presented in Contemporary Realistic Fiction for Middle School Students," *Adolescence* 17 (1982), 637.

17. Alan Guttmacher Institute, U.S. "Teen Pregnancy Statistics: Overall Trends, Trends by Race and Ethnicity and State by State Information," http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/teen_preg_stats.html.

18. Sarah Dessen, *Someone Like You* (New York: Penguin, 1998), 31.

19. Norma Klein, *It's Not What You Expect* (New York: Pantheon, 1973; Avon, 1974), 113, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

20. Joyce A. Litton, "Innocence to Experience: Fiction Attempts to Address Teen Issues," in *Gender in Popular Culture: Images of Men and Women in Literature, Visual Media and Material Culture*, ed. Susan Rollins (Cleveland, Ohio: Ridgemont Press, 1995), 186, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

21. Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 81.

CHAPTER THREE

Better Than Ice Cream
Lesbian YA Literature

As controversial as the teen pregnancy novel, the lesbian YA novel is somewhat less discussed, but novels that depict lesbianism are now so numerous as to be a recognized subset of YA literature. In 2006, Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins published *The Heart Has Its Reasons*, an overview of YA literature with gay/lesbian/queer content. This book provides a much-needed historical timeline and thorough analysis of lesbian and gay YA fiction. Cart and Jenkins note that, in spite of the second wave of feminism, YA novels with lesbian content are outnumbered by novels that depict gay male themes.[1] In her annotated bibliography of gay and lesbian YA fiction entitled *Lesbian and Gay Voices* (2000),[2] for example, Frances Ann Day identifies seventy-one novels as having themes that depict homosexuality. Out of the seventy-one titles she lists, forty-one depict male homosexuality. Although some critics have examined lesbian YA novels in particular, relatively few articles exist on the topic. None that I am aware of analyze lesbianism as part of a larger study of female sexuality. Because my focus is on female sexuality, I will analyze the lesbian YA novel apart from novels that depict male homosexuality, especially since the lesbian novel has particular features that deserve scrutiny beyond issues of sexual orientation.

In our culture, male homosexuality receives more attention than lesbianism. Christine Jenkins confirms the imbalance present in YA

fiction, revealing that "the 'gender gap' continues with three books featuring gay males for every one featuring lesbian characters" (300). In her study of feminist children's and YA novels *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (1997), Roberta Seelinger Trites situates lesbian novels in a broader category in which she includes fiction specifically focused on female bonding. Trites argues that in these novels, including the YA lesbian novel, female bonding explores

> female relationships as a metaphor for community. And within the metaphorical community, female protagonists are free to explore their subjectivity and engage their agency and their voices.[3]

Trites views lesbian YA novels as an aspect of a larger theme in feminist YA fiction that focuses on empowering female relationships. She asserts that "female community established between the characters and between the author and reader can provide a source of empowerment like no other" (93). While female bonding is an important feature of many YA lesbian novels, they also provide alternatives to the cultural paradigms of heterocentrism, male-centered sexuality, and male dominance.

Lesbian YA literature usually portrays a young woman in her teens becoming aware of her sexual orientation. Emphasizing the struggles young women have with being lesbian in a heterosexist society, these novels portray male predators and reveal the experience of heterosexuality as coercive, especially for young women. Lesbianism appears as a positive alternative. A few lesbian YA novels depict lesbianism from the mediated perspective of another character, such as a family member or close friend. This narrative perspective allows for an alternate vision of accepting lesbianism. The lesbian YA novel provides readers with alternative visions of female sexuality in a heterosexist culture; these novels allow young women the space to reimagine female sexuality by depicting female sexual pleasure without punishment. In a genre that tends to reinforce restrictive cultural standards of femininity and sexuality, the lesbian YA novel criticizes those social paradigms.

These narratives also allow young readers to imagine themselves outside the dominant culture's idea of what it means to be female. Despite a tendency toward conservative sexual values, these novels address the

difficulty of being gay in a largely homophobic culture. Portraying the struggles and abuses young lesbians often face during formative years, the novels I analyze span the years 1969 through 2003. They include *Patience and Sarah* (1969) by Isabel Miller, *Ruby* (1976) by Rosa Guy, *Hey, Dollface* (1978) by Deborah Hautzig, *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (1978) by Sandra Scoppettone, *Crush* (1981) by Jane Futcher, *Annie on My Mind* (1982) by Nancy Garden, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1997) by Jacqueline Woodson, *Name Me Nobody* (1999) by Lois Ann Yamanaka, and *Keeping You a Secret* (2003) by Julie Anne Peters.

The existence of lesbian YA novels reveals a continuing interest in sexual orientation as a topic important for adolescents in formation. Examining these novels shows that as sexual orientation has become more openly discussed, literary representations have become more overt as well. Initially, many books depicted lesbianism as another problem to be solved, but in recent novels sexual orientation is portrayed as a more complex issue.

Almost all of these novels criticize compulsory heterosexuality through narrators and characters that reveal potential male predators. The critique of heterosexuality extends to a critique of heterosexual sex itself and allows the characters and readers the possibility of reimagining what better sex is, both for lesbians and heterosexuals. The lesbian YA novel depicts female sexual pleasure as a critique of male-centered heterosexist culture by portraying female sexual pleasure as cooperative and mutual. Sexual pleasure is not the focus of every lesbian YA novel; some focus on understanding sexual orientation through the mediation of a secondary character.

Mediated narrative perspectives perform an important function in these novels. In these novels, mediation occurs when one character learns about lesbianism through another character's coming out. This narrative strategy subtly introduces the topic of lesbianism in a less confrontational fashion through a protagonist who is experiencing a similar introduction. The narrative device reinforces the idea that lesbianism is too controversial to be represented by a main character. These books inform and reinforce cultural stereotypes about lesbianism and female sexuality through their depictions of young female characters. In some novels, lesbians are depicted as stereotypically hostile toward men and having masculine physical characteristics; in contrast,

other more enlightened representations reveal lesbians as having a different sexual orientation, with no specific characteristics required.

The history and chronology of the lesbian YA novel mirrors the American social cultural progression from minimal acknowledgment to some acceptance of bisexuality, homosexuality, and lesbianism. As second-wave feminism and the civil rights movements converged and grew in the 1960s and '70s, the issue of sexual orientation was addressed. Michael Cart identifies the first YA novel to address homosexuality as John Donovan's *I'll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip*, published in 1969 (xv). However, Donovan's book portrays its gay male protagonist's sexual orientation as a tragic flaw in a pattern typical of early YA gay novels.

Another novel also published in 1969 portrays lesbianism positively. *Patience and Sarah*, the first lesbian YA novel published in the United States, is also one of the most popular and often cited lesbian novels. For example, both the protagonists and their teachers in the novel *Annie on My Mind* read the book. Isabel Miller, a pseudonym for author Alma Routsong, was unable to find a publisher for *Patience and Sarah* (originally entitled *A Place for Us*), so she published it herself. McGraw-Hill eventually purchased the rights to the novel, renamed it *Patience and Sarah*, and released it in 1972. While not published specifically as a YA novel, *Patience and Sarah* has become widely read by teens (as evidenced by placement on bookstore shelves and inclusion in YA sections in libraries).

The negative pressures affecting lesbian teenagers are enormous, and books that depict gay, lesbian, or bisexual characters can provide a safe space for understanding and accepting lesbianism. Compulsory heterosexuality and a homophobic culture make being lesbian or gay difficult, especially for young adults in formation. In 1998, the journal *Pediatrics* asserted that gay students receive more violent threats than straight students do.[4] Gay bashing and other violent crimes continue to be perpetrated against gays and lesbians. Teenage suicide is a public health crisis, and certain studies show that up to one-third of all teen suicides are by homosexual kids. Adolescence is a difficult time for most people, and for lesbians it can be even more difficult. These novels also provide a place for much-needed education about lesbianism, since fiction can be the only source of information young readers have.

In the novels I discuss, the main character is a lesbian, and lesbianism is depicted as a "normal" sexuality. Representations of sexual orientations other than heterosexual are increasing in YA literature. Critic Michael Cart affirms the importance of overt portrayals of lesbianism in YA literature. He argues:

> For it is not enough simply to publish a book because it deals with gay themes or depicts gay characters. The books also need to be honest and candid in their treatment of the subject.[5]

Despite the positive functions of these novels, YA literature that depicts lesbianism is often challenged in schools and public libraries. In fact, many of the books addressed in this chapter are out of print or have been discarded by libraries, suggesting that they are among the first novels to be made less accessible to readers.

Lesbian and gay YA novels deserve scrutiny separate from the wider category of problem novels. While some critics continue to place them in the "problem" novel category, these novels depict issues of sexuality and sexual orientation and are not really equivalent to pregnancy- or divorce-problem novels because they don't depict a problem. The inclusion of lesbian YA novels in the problem-novel category might reflect the culturally conservative view that homosexuality is a problem rather than an orientation. In an informative 1994 article in the *ALAN Review*, Nancy St. Clair analyzes popular YA novels that portray lesbianism, recognizing that these novels are placed in the category of realistic problem novels that flourished in the 1960s.[6] While her discussion of the problem novel is informative, she explains the inclusion of novels about lesbianism in the category by asserting that adolescents in the late 1960s and early 1970s were less ready to read about issues of sexual orientation. As do many critics, St. Clair includes this issue alongside other so-called problem issues such as pregnancy, abortion, divorce, drug use, and death. But the inclusion of lesbianism in such a negatively oriented category is problematic. Western culture still has difficulty accepting that adolescents are sexual beings at all, much less accepting sexualities other than heterosexuality. But to automatically proclaim lesbianism as a problem to be solved simply reinforces cultural stereotypes and does not fairly represent lesbian sexuality.

Some YA books depict the ideals of gay pride, but most land somewhere in between these two extremes. In an attempt to classify lesbian YA fiction, Lisa Miya Jervis published an annotated bibliography of lesbian novels in the magazine *Bitch* (1998).[7] Jervis asserts that most lesbian YA fiction becomes "either a force of indoctrination into cultural codes of compulsory heterosexuality or a lesson in gay pride" (15). The stark either/or choice is a tempting and helpful guide to these works, but it leaves little room for complexity. Jervis argues that some of the novels, including *Ruby*, *Crush*, and *Happy Endings Are All Alike*, seem to reinforce the already heavy burden of compulsory heterosexuality. But the novels I discuss illustrate that lesbian YA fiction offers more than just the two extremes of compulsory heterosexuality and gay pride.

YA lesbian novels can be categorized in many ways. The "coming out" novel reveals for readers and other characters a protagonist's sexual orientation. The regressive "cure or kill" novel depicts lesbianism as a disease or phase, which is to be cured either by force or the death of the protagonist. Additionally, there is the more enlightened self-realization novel, which simply explores sexual orientation without heavy-handed judgment from the author. These categories, while descriptive, are too reductive. In her 1995 article, Nancy St. Clair created a more inclusive and descriptive set of categories. She argues that lesbian YA novels fall into three groups: books that depict lesbianism as a "tragic flaw," books in which the "representation of adolescent lesbianism [becomes] increasingly complex and decreasingly moralistic," and, lastly, books in which "gay characters and gay issues are often depicted sympathetically" (6). More recently, another critic has categorized this fiction. In "Unshelter Me: The Emerging Fictional Adolescent Lesbian," Vanessa Wayne Lee also creates three categories for the YA lesbian novel: novels that "position lesbianism as a threat or problem," followed by novels that focus on the "formation of lesbian identities," and lastly those novels that "interrogate received wisdom about lesbianism and lesbian identity."[8] As we can see, critics have tried to categorize these works; many of the resulting categories focus on whether lesbianism is portrayed either negatively or positively. But whatever categories fit the purposes of particular arguments, the most useful way to analyze this fiction is to recognize the lesbian YA novel as a subset apart from

problem novels and distinct from YA novels about gay males. In other words, regardless of content or perspective, the lesbian YA novel is its own category.

Lesbian YA novels, like YA novels in general, are almost always narratives about formation and growth. They function as a kind of bildungsroman, novels of development that reconfigure what it means to be female in a patriarchal and heteronormative culture. Thus, YA lesbian novels are worthy of the kind of critical attention that Bonnie Zimmerman gives adult lesbian fiction in her groundbreaking study *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989*. In this critical overview, Zimmerman names the features of the lesbian novel:

> A lesbian novel has a central, not marginal lesbian character, one that understands herself to be lesbian. In fact it has many or mostly lesbian characters; it revolves primarily around lesbian histories. A lesbian novel also places love between women, including sexual passion, at the center of its story. . . . Unlike heterosexual feminist literature (which also may be very woman-centered), a lesbian novel places men firmly at the margins of the story. [9]

Indeed, many YA lesbian novels place "love between women at the center" of the narrative, but rarely do they focus on the "sexual passion" aspect of relationships. Also, rather than placing "men firmly at the margins," these books reposition the importance of men rather than excluding them totally. Lesbian YA novels must be regarded in a different light than adult lesbian fiction, and for YA lesbian fiction new criteria should be considered.

Any history of the lesbian YA novel should include early portrayals of gay and lesbian characters in other YA novels, as these depictions are important precursors to the full-fledged lesbian YA novel. For example, within Judy Blume's groundbreaking novel *Forever* is a stereotypical portrayal of a young gay male character, which reveals the book's heterosexism. Artie goes through a tumultuous struggle as he tries to come to terms with his sexual orientation. He attempts suicide, an experience that mirrors an unfortunate trend in many YA novels. Artie tries unsuccessfully to convince his parents that he should be able to attend art school rather than study a general college curriculum. Eventually his suicide attempt fails, and he is shipped off to a psychiatric hospital.

Blume's depiction of Artie's conflict is stereotypical but not markedly different from many early YA novels that portray lesbianism as a problem rather than just another sexual orientation.

A few novels, such as Jane Futcher's 1981 novel *Crush*, depict lesbianism as a problem that must be overcome, but these depictions complicate the issue by also showing that that problem lies within the homophobic society. These books portray the process of self-discovery as a painful struggle for young lesbian women. *Crush* tells the story of Jinx and Lexie, who fall in love while they both attend a private girls' prep school.[10] The narrative, from Jinx's perspective, illustrates her increasing awareness that her attraction to Lexie is much more than the "crush" she first thought it was; Jinx realizes she is in love and that she is a lesbian. The conflict begins when Lexie, who is reluctant to admit her lesbianism and resists naming her sexual orientation, reveals her feelings about their relationship to Jinx:

> "You try not to feel anything," I whispered. "You try as hard as you can not to." "Jinx . . ." "You try not to feel what you feel," I said slowly, "Lexie, it's not just friendship. It's . . . sexual love." Lexie's voice was cold. My words frightened her. "You sound like a ten-year-old." (157)

And later, when their affair has ended, Lexie tells Jinx:

> "You tried to trap me. You wanted . . ." Her face tightened; her mouth turned down. "You wanted me to be . . . like you. I'm not like you." It hit me the way a dentist's drill hits a nerve. I stood up. "What do you mean—'I am not like you'?" Lexie folded up her French whore's bra and put it in her suitcase. "You're a lesbian, Jinx. You wanted me to be one, too. I prefer men, you know." (251)

Lexie's denial reveals the difficulty young women may have in accepting a lesbian sexual orientation; for Jinx, the betrayal is personal and social, but she retains her sense of self. Ultimately Jinx survives Lexie's betrayal, and the narrative ends as she prepares to go to college. This kind of more hopeful ending reveals that the struggle for acceptance is not overwhelming, but simply another life process.

Another way that authors of lesbian YA fiction resist the label of problem novel is by presenting lesbianism through the voice of an-

other character. Rather than focusing on the lesbian's self-acceptance, these narratives present a lesbian who has already accepted her sexual orientation and a protagonist who is learning of her friend/relative's lesbianism. This strategy allows readers to engage with and discover lesbianism through the eyes of a heterosexual character, allowing both the protagonist and her readers to approach the topic of lesbianism indirectly. *Deliver Us from Evie* (1995) is written from the perspective of a teenage lesbian's younger brother, and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995) is a portrait of a lesbian mother by her son. The lesbian characters in these books are not marginal but at the center of the story. The protagonists are not gay, but they are very close to someone who is. The importance about this mediated view of lesbianism is that readers who are unsure of their own sexuality (or homophobic readers) might find it easier to see lesbianism from a slightly distanced point of view. These novels belong in the subset of lesbian YA fiction because of their focus on lesbian sexual orientation.

Another form of mediation occurs in YA fiction when a lesbian character is depicted but is not a central character in the story. These portrayals of lesbian characters provide examples of sexual-orientation differences without making the issue central to the novel. Author Norma Klein provides more positive portrayals; in her 1980 novel *Breaking Up*, Klein focuses on relationships and early sexual experience. In a subplot that complements the main narrative, protagonist Alison learns that her mother, who is divorced from her father, is a lesbian. While her father obviously has trouble accepting his ex-wife's sexual orientation, Alison comes to terms with it rather easily. In a discussion with her father about where Alison and her brother will live in the future, and her mother's sexual orientation, her father's view of lesbianism is apparent as he asserts:

> It's up to a court to decide what environment is best for a child. . . . You're so vulnerable to everything. It could be a real disaster for you to stay under those circumstances. . . . What kind of feelings about men are you going to pick up living there?[11]

Klein portrays Alison's father as a stereotypical homophobe but thankfully counters his damaging views with the more accepting, enlightened

vision of his own daughter. Alison reveals her feelings to the reader toward the end of the novel, as she thinks to herself:

> As I was lying there, I thought about Mom and Peggy. Maybe I really knew it all along, deep down, but just didn't want to think about it, because I didn't really feel as surprised or shocked as I would have expected. It did seem strange in a way, but not *that* strange. Maybe it was because Mom is such a regular sort of person, not that far-out or weird in any way, so it seems like anything she would do would be okay. (152)

Alison's apparent acceptance of her mother's newly revealed sexual orientation might reflect her maturity as it is portrayed in the novel. Importantly, however, she is able to accept lesbianism in part because her own mother is the gay person. Her knowledge and trust of her mother helps her to confront her preconceptions about lesbianism. Nonetheless, her mother's lesbianism in the story is subordinate to the main plot. These kinds of depictions make the lesbian character just another part of the setting.

Jacqueline Woodson's *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (1995) depicts a young black teenager's discovery of his mother's sexual orientation and affair with a white woman.[12] Melanin Sun, a thirteen-year-old boy living with his law-student mother, is an average teenager trying to understand his own sexuality and place in the world. His friends view his emotional sensitivity and his stamp collecting as unmasculine and often use "faggot" as a derogatory adjective to describe him. Even Mel himself admits it is "faggy to collect stamps" (19). But when Mel's mother tells him she is a lesbian and in love with another woman, Mel reacts with anger and bewilderment. Eventually, as in *Breaking Up*, he learns to accept his mother's lesbianism in part by getting to know Kristin, his mother's lover. Because he learns to accept Kristin as a person he knows and respects, he is able to be more accepting of his mother's sexual orientation. While Mel's use of "faggot" is criticized by his mother, it is not until he realizes that his mother is the female equivalent of a "fag" that he begins to question his use of the term. Woodson's depiction of Mel as a sensitive, thoughtful young man being raised by a single lesbian mother challenges cultural biases, illustrating how difficult it is for a young man to pursue "unmasculine" interests

and maintain his status in a male-dominated culture. The novel criticizes homophobia and stereotypical "masculine" behavior.

In Lois Ann Yamanaka's *Name Me Nobody*, the bonds of female friendship are tested by a romantic attachment. In this award-winning novel, young Hawaiian Emi-Lou struggles with her body image and her relationship with her best friend, Yvonne. When Emi-Lou learns that Yvonne is a lesbian, her main concern is that she will lose the friendship that means so much to her. She assumes that a romantic relationship will become the focus of Yvonne's life, and that she will be excluded. In one pivotal scene, Yvonne confirms to Emi-Lou that she is a lesbian and seeks her acceptance of the relationship:

> "Just tell me, Von." She takes a deep breath. "Me and Babes, we—" "I know," I interrupt. Von lowers her gaze. Her jaw tightens but she continues. "We way more than friends. You gotta just accept it, Louie."[13]

Later on, their conversation continues and Von reaffirms the primacy of her friendship with Emi-Lou by reassuring her, "You my number one girl, always. But you gotta take Babes in as part of me. You can?" (137). By positioning Emi-Lou as "number one girl," Yvonne reinforces the importance of the friendship, yet makes room for her new love as well. Emi-Lou's struggle to accept her friend's sexual orientation provides a unique insight into the experience of a heterosexual young woman's perception of lesbianism. Yamanaka's portrayal of Emi-Lou's struggle may have resonance for readers, as Emi-Lou seems to be more concerned with losing her best friend than with Yvonne's sexual orientation. In this novel, female friendship and attachment are shown to be vital in the lives of young women, lesbian or heterosexual.

Bonnie Zimmerman asserts that "lesbian novels are read by lesbians in order to affirm lesbian existence" (15). For YA readers this might also be true, but the fiction provides more than affirmation of lesbianism. In fact, many YA lesbian novels are what Nancy St. Clair identifies as coming-out novels. The term *coming out* has generally been used to describe the process by which a gay or lesbian person reveals his or her sexual orientation to family, friends, co-workers, or anyone else. The term derives its meaning from the idea of hiding one's sexual orientation, i.e., being in the closet; thus, revealing lesbianism is coming out

of the closet. By portraying others coming out of the closet, many YA novels that portray sexualities of all kinds serve as a sort of safe space for an adolescent character (and her readers) to discover the place sexuality has in her life, and maybe to practice coming out.

An important and powerful example of a story that provides a safe space for acknowledging lesbianism is Nancy Garden's *Annie on My Mind*.[14] In this novel, Garden portrays two young women who become close friends, and the process of developing the friendship helps Liza to discover her sexual orientation. Besides being a compelling and well-written narrative, the novel involves readers in Annie and Liza's sexual discovery. Along the way, the two protagonists meet opposition and derision but are helped by two teachers who are also lesbians. While their family members don't really seem to fully accept or understand the truth, the young women ultimately come to terms with their sexual orientation.

The narrative's focus on the strength of the relationship makes the novel popular with readers and critics. For example, *Annie on My Mind* is described by Roberta Seelinger Trites as one of "the most important feminist novels" (92) depicting female bonding. Besides its portrait of a young adult lesbian romance, *Annie on My Mind* provides a powerful critique of a heterocentric and homophobic culture. By portraying the struggles the young protagonists experience as they discover a lesbian sexual orientation, the novel reveals the hypocrisy inherent in heterocentric, patriarchal culture. In a parallel plot twist, the two young women who become intimately involved with one another inadvertently expose the lesbian relationship of their two teachers. In the scene where a school administrator discovers the adolescent protagonists in an intimate setting, she chastises them for being "immoral and unnatural" (168). These public "outings" create social disruptions and repercussions for all involved, and especially for Liza, who is lectured by one of her teachers:

> "So I understand the pull that—sex—can have on young and inexperienced—persons. I do not understand the—the pull of . . ." she finally turned and looked full at me—". . . abnormal sex, but I am of course aware of adolescent crushes and of adolescent experimentation as a prelude to normalcy. In your case, had I only known about your unwise and out-of-school friendship in time . . ." (183)

This depiction eventually reveals the disappointment and betrayal that Liza feels and lets readers know that she feels her "whole body tightening" (183) when she realizes the cultural resistance to her sexual orientation. But as disturbing as these personal betrayals are, they perform an important function in this novel. By depicting a homophobic reaction to lesbianism and showing the characters resisting this derision, the narrative reveals the hypocrisy of adults who wield power over young women. Previously in the narrative, Liza feels supported and understood by Mrs. Poindexter, the teacher who lectures her so harshly. But ultimately Poindexter's homophobia is exposed and is depicted in a harsh light by the author. So although Roberta Trites categorizes *Annie on My Mind* as a "lesbian revision" of the romance genre, the novel also functions to critique homophobia and adult hypocrisy. And while *Annie on My Mind* reminds readers of the difficulties of being lesbian in a homophobic culture, it also encourages self-discovery.

Self-discovery is portrayed as more problematic in *Hey, Dollface*. Even in the otherwise affirming tone of this 1981 novel, two young female protagonists who slowly discover their sexual orientation end up renouncing lesbianism in an odd denouement:

> "Chloe? I'm not a—a lesbian," I said. "I'm not anything at all. Some guys turn me on a lot, but I'm not ready to have sex yet. What we did—I mean—I did what I wanted to do. I didn't even think about it first. It just came naturally, because I—" What am I trying to say? I thought helplessly. Why is it coming out so mixed up? "You're my best friend," I said. "And now—you won't be—"[15]

While it is abundantly clear to readers, it is not so to the protagonists that they are lesbian, perhaps reflecting the difficulty many teenagers feel when faced with accepting a sexuality that is not accepted by everyone else. Still, their renunciation of labels at the climax of the book seems oddly forced. *Hey, Dollface* was published in 1981, when acceptance of homosexuality was just beginning to edge closer to mainstream consciousness. While one can read Val's statement as an assertion of the fluidity of sexuality, or perhaps bisexuality, it also could be extremely harmful to young readers to read her saying "I'm not anything." Readers might take her statement to be not just a disavowal

of her sexuality but a renunciation of lesbianism. Or her assertion could be an affirmation of bisexuality. Val's assertion that she is "not anything" reveals her reluctance to embrace her sexual orientation. Her stated fear that her and Chloe's sexual interaction will threaten their close friendship colors her perception so much that she feels she must nullify herself and her sexuality by her statement "I'm not anything." The authorial presence felt in these passages is very strong—readers might sense that Hautzig is herself reluctant to label her young protagonists. However readers interpret this important scene at the end of this novel's otherwise positive portrayal of homosexuality, the reluctance of the characters to embrace lesbianism can be read as recognition of the fluidity of sexuality.

In contrast to grown women who recognize (but may be struggling to accept) their own lesbianism, presexual young women find in lesbian YA fiction an alternate view of the compulsorily heterosexual universe. Young women are bombarded with messages every day from television, peers, and parents that reinforce heterosexuality as the norm. In a small liminal place of respite from these powerful cultural messages, YA novels and short stories function to mirror real-life issues of sexual orientation that many young women face. In a culture that continues to ostracize lesbianism, many of these novels validate and affirm that lesbianism is indeed an acceptable, normal sexual orientation. And importantly, they provide a critique of heterosexuality and predatory sexual behavior, and a place where young women can reimagine sex beyond heterosexual intercourse.

The lesbian YA novel reimagines sex and provides an alternate view of sex for young women. In Western culture, it is commonly accepted that sex equals heterosexual intercourse. When young people are asked if they have had sex, more often than not the answer to that question is based on whether they have engaged in intercourse. Here, the definition of the term *virgin* also comes into question. Is one a virgin if she has engaged in oral sex? Again, usually the answer is based on the idea that virginity is being able to say you have not yet engaged in heterosexual intercourse. Intercourse as the primary sex act has a long and powerful history in Western culture. Of course, intercourse is the primary way for conception to take place, which makes it an obviously vital sexual act. Yet, for many women, intercourse is not the primary

source of sexual pleasure. So, while YA novels are not necessarily designed or written to be sex manuals, some young women (and men) do turn to them as a source of information.

Lesbian YA novels provide an alternative vision of sexual pleasure for young women. An alternative view is important not simply for young presexual lesbians but just as much for young heterosexual women. In a culture that promotes heterosexuality centered on intercourse and male pleasure, the female-centered sexuality present in these stories provides a reimagining of sexual pleasure for young women. In her 1976 novel *Ruby*, Rosa Guy depicts the relationship between eighteen-year-old Ruby and her seventeen-year-old classmate Daphne. Ruby's mother has died a year earlier and she lives with her violent-tempered father and her younger sister in New York. This book is one of the few lesbian YA novels with a black protagonist: Ruby and her family are from Trinidad. The story centers on the relationship between Ruby and her classmate Daphne, an assertive and bold young woman who challenges her teachers with her intellect and skepticism. Ruby, who at first is portrayed as shy, grows stronger and more assertive throughout the novel. She is strongly attracted to Daphne, and her descriptions of Daphne convey her emotions:

> Daphne, Daphne. Daphne of the smooth, tan skin. Daphne of the heavy, angry black eyebrows that were so fantastically right in combination with her gray eyes. Daphne of the thick, well-formed lips, the large white teeth. Feminine Daphne with her thick, crisply curly, black shoulder-length hair. Boyish Daphne with her thick neck, her colorful silk shirts, her tweeds.[16]

Ruby's strong emotions are apparent as she describes Daphne. Intriguingly, once readers are given this powerful portrait of Daphne, we are then introduced to the hated Miss Gottlieb, whose role in *Ruby* is vital to the progression of the narrative. Miss Gottlieb is disabled and uses a cane; she has trouble removing her coat and simply moving around. Ruby explains in the novel that she has been trained to respect elderly people, so she alone among her classmates helps Miss Gottlieb despite the teacher's outright cruelty to her students. In this novel adults are almost always cruel and seem to lack compassion; Miss Gottlieb calls her students derogatory names, and Ruby's father is explosively violent.

There is stark contrast between the love expressed between Ruby and her sister Phyllisia, and between Ruby and Daphne, and the controlling, manipulative, and violent behavior of Ruby's father, Calvin. In this novel, love (and more specifically sex) between women is shown to be strong, supportive, and fulfilling.

Another depiction of lesbian sex, in *Annie on My Mind*, is shown as mutually pleasurable and noncoercive. Here, sex is described indirectly through the impressions of adolescent protagonist Liza. After she has her first sexual encounter with Annie, Liza looks back on their experience and describes it for readers:

> I remember so much about that first time with Annie that I am numb with it, and breathless. I can feel Annie's hands touching me again, gently, as if she were afraid I might break; I can feel her softness under my hands—I look down at my hands now and see them slightly curved, feel them become both strong and gentle as I felt them become for the first time then. I can close my eyes and feel every motion of Annie's body and my own—clumsy and hesitant and shy—but that isn't the important part. The important part is the wonder of the closeness and the unbearable ultimate realization that we are two people, not one—and also the wonder of that; that even though we *are* two people, we can almost be like one, and at the same time delight in each other's uniqueness. (146)

In this passage, Liza's memory of her first experience with Annie reminds readers that sex can provide more than just a physical bond.

The depiction of sex in *Ruby* is oblique rather than explicit and describes the interactions in terms of feelings, moods, and metaphor. This reimagining of what sex is, and what sex means, provides an important alternative for young women of all sexual orientations. The focus is on closeness and intimacy, as conveyed by narrator Ruby in an almost stream-of-consciousness style:

> Holding, touching, fondling, body intertwined with body, racing around the world on rays of brilliant color, roaring into eternity on cresting waves of violence, returning to tenderness, a gentle, lapping tenderness. (57)

This description comes directly after Ruby and Daphne declare their love for each other and then consummate their relationship. The nar-

rative moves between Ruby's struggles with her controlling father and her affair with Daphne, and like many other lesbian YA novels lesbian interaction is contrasted with a depiction of predatory male sexuality. Older heterosexual men use their status and power to try to coerce young women into sexual liaisons, which exposes the dangers of being a young, attractive female.

In *Hey, Dollface*, the author juxtaposes lesbian sexuality with heterosexuality by portraying an older man who sexually pursues one of the protagonists. Fifteen-year-old Val baby-sits for a divorced couple, parents of an eleven-year-old boy, and begins to perceive the boy's father noticing her as he makes increasingly obvious sexual advances. Val is fifteen. Dr. Elgin, the boy's father, is forty-five. Hautzig illustrates how young women are often sexual targets for older men by portraying Dr. Elgin as a lecherous older man who seems to want to seduce his underage baby-sitter. Hautzig devotes an entire chapter to the issue, well before Val and Chloe have figured out their sexual attraction for each other. Even though it can be argued that the lustful older man and his baby-sitter are nothing but a cliché, in this novel the episode serves an important function. Dr. Elgin's inappropriate sexual behavior toward Val is a warning against predatory heterosexual men who pursue young women:

> Dr. Elgin, who was sprawled on the other couch, put out his hand to stop me. I looked down at him. His hand was on my knee. He asked me if I'd bring him some water and I said of course. Then he ran his hand very slowly up my leg and said in this low, oozy voice, "You have nice legs." I was shocked when I saw where his hand was going and hurried off to the kitchen, saying, "Thank you," and blushing. (47)

Val extricates herself before he actually does anything else to her, but he still manages to touch her lips and wrap his arms around her. It is a telling moment, for Val and for readers, as she describes her feelings during the moments he has her captured in his arms:

> I didn't know myself anymore and wondered where I'd gone; I felt like an onlooker, watching two strangers. I put my arms around him and let him hug me and rub his cheek against mine. It felt like sandpaper. Then he left, and I glided, stupefied, to the telephone to call Chloe. (48)

Val's discomfort is apparent, along with her confused excitement. The crucial phrase here is "I didn't know myself anymore and wondered where I'd gone," revealing that Dr. Elgin's sexual advances to her make her feel obliterated; she is not herself and feels violated.

Although Val experiences some sexual excitement from the encounter, her overriding feeling is one of fear and disgust. That the author allows her sexual excitement and desire is important; it is never implied that Val's increasing sexual desire brings on her assault, but rather illustrates that while her desire is valid it does not respond to coercion or force. It is an important moment for both readers and Val when, during her phone call to Chloe describing the incident, Chloe hears the details and tells her, "Wow, Val, this guy is sick" (51). Chloe aptly (and protectively) defines his predatory and invasive sexual actions toward Val as "sick," which is how some might describe lesbianism. The reader knows, even if Val and Chloe yet do not, that what occurs between Val and Chloe is not sick, and that Chloe is right. What's additionally ironic is that older men seducing (or violating) young, even underage, girls is common in Western culture. While Val's father might object, many men would consider it a triumph. But more importantly, for readers and for Val, the initial representation of heterosexuality in this novel is one of an uncomfortable incident between an older man and a vulnerable young woman. Some readers might argue that this depiction is an aberration and represents heterosexuality in a negative light, but I would argue that it serves as a warning to young women to watch out for men who might take advantage of them.

Hautzig's juxtaposition of heterosexuality and lesbianism serves an important function in this novel, that of allowing young women another vision of how sexuality can be noncoercive, mutual, and pleasurable. Indeed, in the very next chapter Val realizes the strength of her attraction to Chloe, and for readers the contrast between her experience with Dr. Elgin and Chloe is palpable. Val tells readers "It was around then I began to realize that there was some current between Chloe and me that was unlike anything I'd experienced before . . ." (76).

These novels also reveal that predatory males learn their behavior early and are not always older and more powerful. Much like the predatory forty-five-year-old man in *Hey Dollface*, in *Ruby* the antagonist males are her same-age classmates. Ruby waits in her classroom before

the teacher has arrived and notices that two of her male classmates are "laughing obscenely" (33). She tries to avoid looking at them and is somehow aware that something sexual is going on. In a gesture of self-protection, she makes sure her skirt is pulled to her knees, and then begins to realize what is occurring:

> The lasciviousness, the coarseness of their laughter—a kind of grunting—made her curious, forced her to turn. She looked down at her desk and glanced sideways at the boys. They were playing with themselves! Both of them! Their pants were unzipped, their penises in their hands, and they were racing each other toward climax. (34)

This display of overt sexuality by the two boys scares Ruby; she thinks to herself "Couldn't someone do something?" (34) Daphne takes control and asserts herself by telling the boys to zip up their pants. Ruby sees Daphne's assertion as protective and strong, which draws her to Daphne even more. But more than just the public masturbation scene serves to warn Ruby against male sexuality. While the indecent exposure incident at school frightens Ruby and other young women and is a reminder of their sexual vulnerability, what becomes an even more powerful warning is the violence her father enacts against Ruby and her sister.

In *Ruby*, her brutal father enacts this paradigm of male power and oppression. As Ruby's relationship with Daphne deepens, she seeks distance from her domineering father. Calvin, Ruby's father, often hits her and her sister Phyllisia as a form of punishment and to instill discipline in his daughters. Ruby tells readers that her father hit Orlando, a boy she kissed once, when he brought her home from a party. When Calvin discovers that his eldest daughter is involved in a lesbian relationship he beats her brutally. Calvin represents the patriarchal culture's stereotypical response to lesbianism; he is infuriated at being displaced as the object of desire. How dare women exclude men? How dare they not need men for sexual pleasure? This anger also represents, as Andrea Dworkin argues, fury over the loss of the possession of women as sexual objects. Dworkin argues that "In the society in which we live, intercourse is a phenomenon of ownership of women" and lesbianism appropriates ownership away from men and toward other

women.[17] While Ruby's father's brutality toward her and her sister is an example of lesbian-bashing, it also demonstrates male domination. In Ruby's case, she has little social recourse against her father.

Sometimes the portrayal of brutality exposes hypocritical social institutions that fail to punish homophobia. A brutal and powerful depiction of a heinous lesbian-bashing is exposed in Sandra Scoppettone's *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (1978).[18] When misanthropic teen Richard Summers (nicknamed Mid) discovers young lesbian lovers Jaret and Peggy making love in a forest clearing, he waits until one of them leaves after an argument and then brutally rapes and beats Jaret. Mid believes Jaret will not reveal his identity because of his threats to reveal her lesbianism to the public. In a disturbing depiction of the continuing trauma rape victims still often face, Jaret reveals Mid as her attacker only to be treated extremely badly by the police captain who interviews her while she recuperates in the hospital. He is the perfect embodiment of a sexist, antiquated archetype and hateful member of the patriarchal culture. He asks her questions like "Was he your boyfriend?" and, more tellingly, "What did you have on?" (150) The male police chief clearly places blame on the victim, and Jaret struggles mightily, with the aid of her parents, to counteract this police brutality. In a startling vision of wrong thinking, the police captain tries to explain the attack by asserting:

> I have experience in these matters. A boy, a girl, a little kissing, maybe some petting, naturally the boy gets excited and then the girls says no. The poor boy goes crazy with frustration and . . . (152)

In a scene that could easily be taken from a Susan Brownmiller treatise on male sexual dominance, Scoppettone reveals the dangers inherent in accusing a man of rape. By depicting the possibility of lesbian-bashing, rape, and continued police brutality, Scoppettone could be advising readers of the dangers of being young, female, and lesbian in a homophobic and sexist culture.

But her portrayal of the violent rape and beating, juxtaposed against the gentleness of the interaction between Jaret and Peggy, cannot be overlooked. By making the assault a central aspect of this novel, Scoppettone questions compulsory heterosexuality and criticizes the power

of male dominance and patriarchy. The jarring and intrusive juxtaposition of male sexual violence with female sexual tenderness is a telling pattern in these lesbian YA novels. The authors seem to be reminding readers of the potential for sexual violence existing in a culture that tends to accept violence and male domination.

In *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Lesbianism and Modern Culture* (1993), Terry Castle describes her theory of lesbian counterplotting, which involves a means for identifying and evaluating lesbian fiction. Her theory takes Eve Sedgwick's triangle of male homosocial desire and inverts it into a triangle that depicts "a female-male-female triangle, in which one of the male terms from the original triangle occupies the in-between or subjugated position of the mediator."[19] Castle names these counterplots euphoric or dysphoric, depending on the outcome of the plot. If the female relationship maintains itself at the conclusion, the plot is euphoric. If male dominance reigns in the end, disrupting the female bond, it is a dysphoric plot. While Castle's suppositions assume that the outcome of the plot is the determining factor, it seems more helpful to examine the novel as a whole. And like the juxtaposition of female bonding and male violence in these fictions, the actual predominance of each aspect within each individual novel should determine whether a plot is euphoric or dysphoric, not simply the outcome. For example, in *Happy Endings Are All Alike*, the brutal attack on Jaret challenges the euphoric lesbian couple's relationship. The ensuing outcry and public outing of the young women is almost another lesbian-bashing, since many in the town react homophobically against them. Castle might assert that this novel is dysphoric since the two young women are still trying to ascertain the status of their relationship at the close of the novel. I would argue that the strength of this novel is that it is ultimately euphoric and depicts continued resistance to male domination that the young women display throughout the novel. Jaret and Peggy maintain their relationship despite enduring social and physical harm, and the novel ends with the two of them planning their future together.

Another more contemporary lesbian YA novel, Julie Anne Peters's *Keeping You a Secret* (2003), also challenges the idea of euphoric versus dysphoric endings. *Keeping You a Secret* in many ways embodies the coming-out novel; Holland is an excellent student, an athlete, and

popular. She has a boyfriend, although her relationship with him seems less than exciting. Holland is the all-American high-school girl who has not yet realized that she is a lesbian. When she meets Cece, a new transfer from another school, she suddenly has a shock of recognition and her stomach flutters. This novel, as do many YA lesbian novels, acknowledges that in a heteronormative society the process of coming to understand a lesbian or gay sexual orientation often requires contact; I like to call it a contact/epiphany narrative. Holland and Cece become friends, and slowly Holland realizes that there is something more in her feelings for Cece than friendship. At one point early in their relationship, even though it's a casual moment, Holland tells readers "I caught her arm. Then dropped it when my hand caught fire." (46).[20] This incident of seemingly casual physical contact becomes significant in that for Holland, the moment marks the beginning of her awakening as a lesbian.

The politics of the lesbian YA novel cannot be overlooked, and *Keeping You a Secret* theorizes that lesbianism is a normal sexual orientation but one that is oppressed by the dominant culture. The novel seems to suggest that it often takes the shock of contact to wake up the innate lesbianism in a young woman. Holland's journey in the narrative suggests that this process is not easy; she gets kicked out of her house, is ostracized by her friends, infuriates her boyfriend, and questions her own sanity. But in what can only be read as a euphoric ending, she realizes that she has been living a kind of lie and that she only has to "let nature take its course" (250). Holland's acceptance of her sexual orientation might seem a bit facile to some readers, but it functions in the novel as the voice of the oppressed becoming liberated. Holland's mother, unsurprisingly, is the voice of the dominant (homophobic) culture. She is a caricature of the hateful, frightened, and misguided parent who sees homosexuality as a disease, and the characterization reminds readers that there are people who are still afraid of lesbianism. She also theorizes that lesbianism is a "contagion" when she yells at Holland:

> "She did this to you!" Mom's voice shrilled. "I don't know what she did, but I told her mother to keep her sick daughter away from you. She's perverted, and she's preying on innocent girls—" (243)

By having Holland's mother voice these views toward the end of the novel, Peters acknowledges the pressures gay teens face when they reveal their sexual orientation. Although Holland's story ends on a positive note, and she and Cece are together, the novel does not suggest that this happy ending is an easy or blissful conclusion but rather an honest one.

The lesbian YA novel provides powerful critiques of male-centered sexuality, male dominance, and compulsory heterosexuality. Novels such as *Annie on My Mind*, *Patience and Sarah*, *Name Me Nobody*, and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* also allow readers to learn about and understand lesbianism through positive portrayals and mediated narrative strategies. Many of these novels, such as *Crush*, *Happy Endings Are All Alike*, and *Keeping You a Secret*, also illustrate how difficult it is to be lesbian in a culture that continues to marginalize lesbianism and homosexuality. Within these narratives young women, lesbian and not, can find a space where it is possible to reimagine and reinvent what sex and sexuality are and mean. Resistance to male-dominated and male-controlled culture exists in these novels, and for young women (and men) they can be sources of enlightenment and empowerment otherwise lacking in much of the popular culture they consume.

Notes

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3. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 92, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

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5. Michael Cart, *From Romance to Realism: Fifty Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 230.

6. Nancy St. Clair, "Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel," *ALAN Review* 22 (1995): 46–52, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

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8. Vanessa Wayne Lee, "Unshelter Me," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, 23, no. 3 (fall 1998): 152–59.

9. Bonnie Zimmerman, *The Safe Sea of Women: Lesbian Fiction 1969–1989* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 15, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

10. Jane Futcher, *Crush* (Boston: Alyson Publications, 1981), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

11. Norma Klein, *Breaking Up* (New York: Pantheon, 1980; Avon, 1981), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

12. Jacqueline Woodson, *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* (New York: The Blue Sky Press, 1995), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

13. Lois-Ann Yamanaka, *Name Me Nobody* (New York: Hyperion, 1999), 136, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

14. Nancy Garden, *Annie on My Mind* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

15. Deborah Hautzig, *Hey, Dollface* (New York: Greenwillow, 1978; Bantam, 1981), 146, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

16. Rosa Guy, *Ruby* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 17, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

17. Andrea Dworkin, *Life and Death* (New York: The Free Press, 1997), 107.

18. Sandra Scoppettone, *Happy Endings Are All Alike* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978; Alyson, 1991), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

19. Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 72.

20. Julie Ann Peters, *Keeping You a Secret* (New York: Little, Brown & Company, 2003; Little, Brown & Company, 2005), 46, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

CHAPTER FOUR

Girl Meets Boy
Romance, Repression, and the Male Predator

Many adults think romance novels are frivolous, and YA romances receive more negative critical opinion than many other subsets of YA literature. Prominent YA critic Michael Cart argues that "aside from *Seventeenth Summer*, all the work in the romance category is ephemeral and eminently forgettable."[1] Despite almost universal critical derision, however, romance fiction is one of the more popular and widely read subsets for adolescent girls, as romance is for adult women. As with other subsets of YA literature such as pregnancy novels, lesbian novels, and some series fiction, the atypical YA romance joins these subversive subsets by portraying resistance to social assumptions about femininity. In her study *Becoming a Woman through Romance*, Linda Christian-Smith analyzes YA romance novels and argues that:

> Teen romance fiction articulates the longstanding fears and resentments of segments of society regarding feminism and women's growing independence.[2]

Christian-Smith discusses the ways that these popular novels construct a traditional feminine identity through their narratives and characterizations. She argues that "teen romance fiction reading involves the shaping of consciousness and provides the occasion for young women

to reflect on their fears, hopes and dreams" (3). Christian-Smith's work takes seriously a widely read subset of YA fiction previously viewed with much skepticism. *Becoming a Woman through Romance* aptly illustrates one aspect of the impact these novels can make on young readers. While YA romances are not all formulaic, as some critics suggest, they do share common features.

YA romances focus on love, or often just a "romantic" relationship, usually from the first-person perspective of a young female protagonist. As Roberta Seelinger Trites notes:

> Romantic YA novels follow a relatively predictable pattern . . . two teenagers feel sexually attracted to one another . . . but for many characters in YA novels, experiencing sexuality marks a rite of passage that helps them define themselves as having left childhood behind.[3]

Romantic YA fiction tends to follow a pattern, as Trites argues, but this chapter will examine novels that resist formula. Additionally, Trites asserts that sexuality in these narratives performs a very definite function; she argues that "sexual potency is a common metaphor for empowerment in adolescent literature" (84). In Trites's view, romance plays a subordinate role in the YA novel. However, as I will show in this chapter, romance is an integral component of how the genre defines and emphasizes female sexuality. In this chapter, I analyze the functions of heterosexual romance in YA literature and how these functions contribute to the construction of female sexuality as well as masculinity. I also analyze YA novels that depict violence and sexual assault and their relationship to romance.

In these novels, romance acts as a social impetus that enables the protagonist to see herself as separate from her family. By enabling the beginning of detachment from the traditional family structure, romance helps young women gain their independence. Adolescence is a difficult time for young women, and maintaining a strong sense of self is especially difficult. According to Mary Pipher, young girls face a crisis when they realize the deep divide between their "true" selves and what society expects of them. Pipher emphasizes the importance of this kind of reflective process as a nonlinear pattern of development:

> Girls who stay connected to their true selves are also confused and sometimes overwhelmed. But they have made some commitment to understanding their lives. They think about their experiences. They do not give up on trying to resolve contradictions and make connections between events. . . . They will make many mistakes and misinterpret much of reality, but girls with true selves make a commitment to process and understand their experiences.[4]

Romance novels help young women understand the experiences that can come with adolescence and romantic relationships. For example, when the romance narrative concludes with the severing of a relationship, young women can see that satisfying endings can exist without the obligatory attachment to a male partner. Nontraditional endings also disrupt preconceived ideas about romance narratives; conclusions are not always tied to solidifying the love relationship. Feminist romance novels focus on female sexual desire and pleasure without punishing the characters. These novels reimagine sexual pleasure for young women and redirect the focus away from male-centered pleasure and toward the female. In contrast to these recuperative functions, YA novels reveal that romantic interaction can also be dangerous. And some feminist romances (or anti-romances) warn young women of potential physical and emotional abuse from male partners. Four novels explore the problems of physical and emotional battery and depict young women abused by their male partners. Although I analyze how these portrayals illuminate the problem of abuse, some of the novels also assign blame to victims.

Through nontraditional endings, positive depictions of female sexuality, protagonist self-definition, and warnings about physical abuse, these romance narratives challenge the cultural ideal that ties female self-fulfillment to a male partner. When a young woman becomes involved in a romantic relationship, the romance can provide an impetus for her self-discovery, as long as the romance is depicted as not being the most important experience of her life. The feminist novels I discuss depict relationships as one aspect of life among many, and, importantly, defy expectation that the heroine is solely defined by her relationship to a young man. The depiction of sexual activity or sexual

desire reveals young women as sexual beings. These novels illustrate that female sexual desire exists and is acceptable.

While romance fiction published specifically for adults is almost immediately recognizable by covers illustrated with entwined lovers, YA romance fiction is not as easily identified. Many YA romance novels are published as series fiction. YA romance series such as Making Out, Sweet Dreams, and Sweet Valley High are among the most popular YA fiction. While an integral aspect of the romance subset, the conventions of series fiction will be analyzed in greater detail in the following chapter. Here I focus on single-volume YA romance novels that challenge traditional ideas about the importance of romantic relationships for young women. I focus on stand-alone novels because they provide narrative alternatives to formulaic series romances, which usually adhere to specific, traditional structures.

Traditional romance narratives portray young women whose primary aspiration is to find the perfect man to marry. As argued by Janice Radway and Linda Christian-Smith, in these stock narratives a young woman can even be portrayed as independent, self-sufficient, and strong, but she ultimately capitulates to her "true" need and desire to be attached to an appropriate male. No matter how strong and feisty she is, her ultimate social value is determined by her husband. As Anna Lee Stensland asserts, romance fictions perpetuate the idea that young women believe "someplace there was that special young man—good, clean cut, obedient—who would happily take care of her for the rest of her life."[5] Atypical romance novels disrupt this convention by allowing heroines to be self-determined, their social status and self-worth *not* dependent on attachment to a male.

While many YA romance novels follow a predictable narrative, the more feminist novels diverge from the standard plot and provide resistance to cultural expectations about femininity. Typical YA romance novels follow a standard formula, which varies slightly from the formula for adult romance novels. This standard formula, while previously applied by Janice Radway to adult romances, can also be modified for the YA romance. In YA romance, the expected outcome might not be sexual consummation and marriage but rather a commitment, or "going steady" with at least the promise of a secure teenaged future. As Brenda Daly asserts in a 1989 article, "Most young adult romances close, pre-

dictably, with a kiss (and no more),"[6] perhaps revealing the reluctance of many YA novelists to allow their teen characters to experience full sexual activity. While the standard YA romance plot provides a less permanent resolution than the adult romance, the general path of the narrative remains similar. YA romance novels that defy traditional conclusions resist the imposition of social constraints by depicting female assertion of independence. Through alternatives to traditional heterosexual romance, strong heroines redefine what it means to be female. These novels show that a young woman can enjoy a romance but view the relationship as simply another aspect of her existence, *not* the central space in her life.

YA romance novels might seem an unlikely locus for social change, but some novels provide young women an important space in which to reimagine the meaning of romance. While many traditional YA romance novels, especially early examples from the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, reinforce the cultural ideology that a woman is defined by her relationship to a man, there are several notable exceptions. The very first YA romance *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) is a nascent feminist novel that explores female sexuality and independence solely through a young woman's eyes.[7] Narrator Angie Morrow spends her last summer before college engaged in a romance (her first) with Jack Duluth. In an ending that disrupts traditional expectations, Angie chooses college over Jack, and the narrative concludes as Angie gets on the train.

This novel's feminist perspective gives primacy to Angie and her perception of her life. Michael Cart credits *Seventeenth Summer* with pioneering the first-person narrative voice in the YA genre:

> . . . in terms of the success of the novel and its place in the history of young adult literature, it was written in the first-person voice of its adolescent protagonist, Angie Morrow—a fact that made it possible for readers to identify intimately with her and with her experiences. The use of the first-person voice would, thereafter, become one of the most enduring characteristics of the young adult novel. (18)

Cart situates Daly's novel as an important literary foremother to all YA fiction, a distinction with which I concur. Despite this laudatory comment, Cart also complains that the "pacing of her story is not

just magisterially but glacially slow, bogging down in so many lengthy passages describing the flora of Fond du Lac (the book's setting) that it seems more like a botany textbook than a novel" (19). In truth, part of the beauty of the book is the leisurely pacing of the narrative; Cart overlooks the explicit link in the novel that Daly makes between Angie's romantic and sexual awakening and the cycle of nature in the summer. Many might remember how in childhood summers seemed to last forever; Daly's novel beautifully embodies that perception.

Seventeenth Summer follows the literary tradition identified by Rachel Brownstein in *Becoming a Heroine* (1982). Brownstein argues that the romance novel allows a reader to identify with a female protagonist in a "woman-centered novel" that makes a "woman and her inner life central as they are not, in fact, in the bourgeois real world."[8] Especially for young women, being able to see their inner lives as the focus of a novel affirms that the lives of young women are important. Young women need such affirmation in a culture that continually devalues them.

As the YA genre progressed from the early 1940s and into the '50s and '60s, the romance novel continued to occupy central space on library and bookstore shelves. In her 1986 article "Double Date to Double Love: Female Sex Roles in Teen Romances, 1942–1985," Joyce Litton compares gender stereotyping in romances and finds little change from early publications to more recent novels.[9] It is important to note, however, that the romances Litton examines are all series fictions, not the stand-alone romances I analyze. Wendy Smith identifies the boom in the YA romance that took place in the 1980s as a reaction to the proliferation of the "problem" novel in the 1970s.[10] These realistic narratives depicted death, divorce, abortion, pregnancy, and other social issues embedded within narratives. In the 1980s the publishing industry promoted the YA romance revolution by capitalizing on a perceived resistance to more serious novels. However reassuring most of these romance novels appear to be, the existence of the atypical romance novel as an alternative to more predictable fare reveals some cultural opposition to conformity. Atypical romances, those that do not fit into a standard, generic formula, have existed alongside the formulaic novels all throughout the history of YA literature.

In the 1970s, atypical YA romances began to flourish. Paul Zindel's *I Never Loved Your Mind* (1970) depicts high-school dropout Dewey

Daniels's quest for love with a co-worker. By portraying a romance novel from the perspective of a young man, Zindel allows his readers a glimpse into a rarely depicted side of YA romance. But Zindel stigmatizes the young woman Dewey pursues. While she is portrayed as a free spirit, she is also shown as callous and calculating, implying that a sexually assertive female is a dangerous creature. Norma Klein's *Love Is One of the Choices* (1978) defies the stereotypical ideal of what a romance novel is or should be. It challenges cultural ideals of what young adults should think, feel, and do in response to sexual and romantic options. By showing that young women and men can enter into and be responsible for sexual and emotional entanglements, Klein expresses much more confidence in teenagers than most adults do.

In the 1980s and 1990s, the YA romance novel began to return to popularity, mostly in the form of series fiction. Sweet Dreams and Sweet Valley High are two popular series that follow a predictable formula. Nonetheless, despite the popularity of series fiction, single-volume YA romance novels continued to resist gender stereotyping by rewriting the romance. In Hila Colman's *Girl Meets Boy* (1982), for example, the protagonist is an independent young woman who becomes attracted to a male-chauvinist counselor while working at a summer camp. The sparring between the two is framed by the relationship between Holly's parents, in which Holly's mother makes more money than her father. This disparity tests their marriage and provides impetus for mother-daughter discussions about gender roles. Of all the YA romances I analyze in this chapter, *Girl Meets Boy* has the most conventional ending, yet still resists stereotyping. Virginia Hamilton's *A White Romance* (1987) depicts narrator Talley, who falls in love with a young, white, drug-dealing male who has been bused into her formerly all-black high school. This atypical romance novel reveals the difficulty facing young women when they encounter potentially abusive male partners. In contrast to Paul Zindel's male-centered romance of the 1970s, M. T. Anderson's novel *Burger Wuss* (1999) also depicts romance from the male perspective with a contemporary twist. Anderson's YA romance novel is a tale of love gone bad and a critique of masculinity. Another novel, Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak* (1999), is the powerful depiction of a young woman's experience of acquaintance rape. Chris Lynch covers similar territory in his novel *Inexcusable* (2005), but from the

perspective of the male involved in the sexual assault. Sarah Dessen's novel *Dreamland* (2001) portrays an abusive boyfriend who rises from the surface story of a seemingly normal teenage romance. This important novel names and draws attention to the potential for abuse in teen relationships.

Through a first-person narrative, many YA novels such as *Seventeenth Summer* focus on the second-wave feminist ideal of the personal as political. Through first-person subjective narrative structures, these novels give primary importance to the "politics of the internal," as Virginia Schaefer Carroll argues in an essay on *Seventeenth Summer*.[11] This perspective, especially of a young female protagonist, helps readers understand the reflective process inherent in feminist thought and action. As Mary Pipher reminds us, continuing to question and think about experiences helps girls understand their lives. Maureen Daly's protagonist Angie Morrow follows the pattern that Pipher describes by questioning and thinking about her experiences. By directly addressing readers in her narrative, Daly also creates intimacy with them. The very first lines of *Seventeenth Summer* reveal Angie questioning herself:

> I don't know just why I'm telling you all this. Maybe you'll think I'm being silly. But I'm not, really, because this is important. You see, it was different! . . . People can't tell you about things like that, you have to find them out for yourself. That's why it is so important. It was something I'll always remember because I just couldn't forget—it's a thing like that. (3)

By describing her experiences, Angie seeks to understand for herself her development and place in the world, and to share that understanding with her readers. And here in these very first sentences of the novel, Angie tells readers that her experience is her own, and they will have to find out for themselves what it means to them. Angie's plea to her readers is made so they will understand—as she does—that her relationship with Jack was a transformative experience. In the space of three months, Angie comes to see herself as a being separate from her family and separate from Jack. She sees her mother, who gets migraines and subordinates her needs to her family, as a long-suffering, self-sacrificing woman. Angie rejects this model of womanhood, but with-

out consciously acknowledging that her mother's "condition" is due to her culturally prescribed subservience. Throughout the novel Angie notices other ways in which young women arrange themselves in order to be accepted by men, and she rejects these models as well. *Seventeenth Summer* is much more than just a depiction of first love; Angie's personal experience becomes political through her rejection of romance. Her choice to attend college rather than marry Jack embodies the feminist struggle for self-definition in a patriarchal culture. While Angie's experience does not result in her complete rejection of cultural constraints on femininity, she does take steps to ensure her own survival outside the typical expectations for young women. In a telling moment at the close of the narrative, Angie reinforces how her decision to leave Jack and go to college will allow her a certain amount of freedom:

> No, I thought, I won't have to worry about anything, and I looked back out of the train window to wave to them and saw Jack in the half-light of morning, standing with his hands jammed in his pockets and his basketball sweater knotted loosely around his neck. I won't have to worry about anything at all. (290)

It is in this moment that readers see Angie looking backward at her past (Jack) and riding literally toward her future. While Angie looks at Jack, the very figure of anxiety and constraint as represented by his hands "jammed" in his pockets and his sweater "knotted" about his neck (290), he is depicted as a remnant of masculine power. With the depiction of Angie's experience begins the quest for female self-definition—and sexual pleasure—in the YA romance novel.

By depicting sexuality in these novels, the authors are allowing for the possibility that female sexual pleasure exists and is in and of itself a worthy pursuit. The very existence of sexual desire in a novel published in 1942 about teenagers is remarkable. Author Maureen Daly's portrayal of Angie Morrow's desire is subtle and occurs throughout the narrative of her summer romance. But importantly, Angie's desire is juxtaposed with her older sister's apparent sexual affair with an uncaring boyfriend and serves as a warning to readers. Lorraine's affair with Martin Keefe is depicted as unhappy and unfulfilling for Lorraine, since Martin seems indifferent toward her. He breaks dates with her, sees

other women, and in general treats her badly. Lorraine continues to pursue him despite his maltreatment, calling him on the phone (which wasn't done in 1942) and thinking up excuses to walk by his rooming house. Daly's depiction of Lorraine's attachment to Keefe seems to be warning young women about "early" sexual activity.

Angie's exploration of her most intimate feelings and experiences exposes the inklings of sexual desire during her very first date with Jack:

> We were far out, drifting slowly, and the silence over the water seemed soft and thick. It was then I got that queer feeling. Maybe you won't understand what I mean. You see, I was just sitting there thinking of nothing in particular when suddenly I felt a warm tingling and then almost a guilty feeling—almost as if I were doing something I shouldn't. . . . A panicky, excited pulsing started in my throat. My cheeks were hot. I knew Jack was looking at me and I turned my head just a little so I could see his face. His arm tightened suddenly around my shoulders and a warm, contented feeling went through me like when you drink hot milk. (17)

Angie seems to be feeling the initial stirrings of desire in this scene, but since the novel was published in 1942, no explicit sexual activity is described. Besides acknowledging that a female can have sexual desire, *Seventeenth Summer* is feminist because of its ending.

Despite much of the novel's seeming commitment to the traditions of romance, Maureen Daly allows her heroine to enjoy her romance but, importantly, to *not* be consumed by it. There is one moment, when Jack proposes to Angie, when she considers giving in to her desire:

> I could feel Jack's thoughts straining toward me and then I heard his voice, so low, so tense that I wasn't sure for a moment if I heard it at all. "Angie," he said, "Angie, please! Let's get married . . . I don't want you to go!" Once it had been said, the night came suddenly alive, pulsing with it; catching up the words and echoing them over and over, singing like chimes in my head. For a moment, only a brief moment that slipped by so swiftly that it meant nothing at all, desire laid warm, tremulous fingers along my throat. (274)

Jack's proposal, which is essentially an invitation to have sex, mirrors an earlier scene where Angie is trying to explain her sense of urgency

about attaining all she can from her experiences. Virginia Schaefer Carroll reads Angie's passionate speech as her "proposal" to Jack, but I see it as Angie trying desperately to verbalize her physical yearnings. She tries to explain to Jack:

> Jack, it seems sometimes that I can't ever do things "enough." When I eat, everything tastes so good I can't get all the taste out of it . . . there seems to be something there that I can't get at. And even when I'm with you, I can't seem to be with you . . . enough. (243)

Angie's passionate speech prompts a response from Jack, but one that indicates he is responding to the passion in her voice and not to the content of what she says. Critics such as Virginia Schaefer Carroll see this moment as the denouement of the novel, the moment where Angie decides she is going to school, but I see both of these scenes as first Jack's, then Angie's, attempts to come to terms with sexual desire. Jack knows that in 1942 you'd better get married before you have sex. Angie knows and understands this cultural standard but is less consciously aware of her feelings and can only articulate that she wants more. So when Jack responds, he is not really misreading her passion but interpreting it correctly. He is aware that social rules dictate that going all the way, or even partway, is not allowed. Their different reactions to sexual desire reveal Jack's to be a more conventional response and Angie's the more atypical for her frankness and her connection to the physical world around her. Despite their mutual passion, Angie and Jack do not consummate their relationship, challenging the cultural illusion that romance is the pinnacle achievement in a woman's life. Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair argue about Angie that "accompanying her growing sexuality is a recognition of its price,"[12] correctly suggesting that Angie's entrance into the adult world of sex, sexuality, and relationships is as much a coming-of-age story as it is a romance. So for young women in a YA romance, growing up and sexuality are inextricably linked. In a probably unintentional but no less vivid metaphor for sexual penetration, Angie herself muses that "Growing up is like taking down the sides of your house and letting strangers walk in" (203).

Most romance novels (predictably) have a female narrator, probably because males are assumed to be indifferent to the details of romance.

The genre is consumed almost exclusively by young women, who are assumed to identify with the heroine in her quest for satisfying and ultimately fulfilling romance. Occasionally a male will be used as the protagonist, thus functioning as a native informant from the world of men. In his 1970 YA romance *I Never Loved Your Mind*, Paul Zindel creates a quirky main character whose pursuit of Yvette Goethals forms the basis for the romantic narrative. Zindel, who was a Pulitzer Prize–winning playwright and acclaimed YA author, deconstructs gender stereotypes in this romance. The novel begins with Dewey, our hero, fainting at the sight of a tracheotomy in the hospital where he has just been hired as an attendant. That Zindel begins his narrative with this scene reveals his desire to invert traditional gender roles. By having Dewey faint, he shows him to be sensitive and thus not your average tough guy. High-school dropout Dewey meets and becomes enamored of Yvette Goethals, who also works at the hospital. Throughout the narrative, Dewey pursues and is rebuffed by Yvette, who seems to use him at every opportunity for money and sexual gratification. Dewey is certain that he is truly in love with Yvette, and when she rebuffs him for the last time as she is leaving town, he yells to her, "You said you loved me!" In response Yvette yells back to him, "I never loved your mind!"[13] Here Zindel turns the standard romance novel ending upside down; he has inverted the functions of his characters to enact the roles usually assigned to the opposite sex.

I Never Loved Your Mind seems to reject gender stereotyping but also reinforces negative assumptions about female sexuality by vilifying Yvette's sexual assertion and pursuit of sexual pleasure without love. In an inversion of gender roles, Dewey Daniels pursues Yvette romantically and she uses him for sexual pleasure and leaves him at the close of the novel, insisting that she never loved him any way but physically. Besides inverting the traditional happy ending, *I Never Loved Your Mind* depicts a female main character who enjoys sexual pleasure but condemns her for her assertion and independence. While readers of this novel might enjoy reading about an independent woman who is content to use and dismiss her lovers as men often do, the character of Yvette is drawn much less sympathetically than is her male counterpart. In fact, whereas many would read a novel that depicts female

sexual assertion as feminist, in this case Zindel seems intent on dismissing Yvette as flawed, primarily because of her sexual independence.

While Zindel's gender role inversion reinforces the sexual double standard against female sexual assertion, it also reveals the social construction of these roles. It seems that Zindel wants his reader to identify with Dewey's plight; Dewey is in love with the hapless Yvette, and despite his flaws he is not unlikable. Yvette is depicted as a callous and amoral character who steals from the hospital and repeatedly manipulates Dewey to her own ends. She even tells Dewey she loves him in the scene where they have sex, mimicking a standard line often used to seduce women. Despite the negative connotations swirling around Zindel's portrayal of Yvette, she is still a strong, assertive, and independent young woman who takes care of herself. Even if readers see her through Zindel's eyes, the fact that she leaps out of the narrative into her own life at the close of the novel makes me want to do the same thing. The lure of freedom and independence even affects Dewey; at the close of the novel he tells readers:

> I don't really know what I'm going to do. It's not going to be that Love Land crap. And I'm not going to give civilization a kick in the behind, because I might need an appendectomy sometime. But I'm going to do something, and I have a strong feeling it's going to be phantasmagorically different. (135)

In these last words of the novel, Dewey rejects Yvette's vision of living communally but decides to continue on his own instead of pursuing his unrequited love. So instead of fruitlessly mooning over Yvette, Dewey quits his job, at least rejecting one aspect of the social power structure that would insist he continue to pursue Yvette.

In a more contemporary (1999) inversion of the standard YA romance narrative, M. T. Anderson's *Burger Wuss* also depicts romance from the male point of view. In this humorous novel that also scathingly critiques the plight of fast-food industry workers, Anderson tells the story of love-struck Anthony, who plots to win back the heart of his erstwhile girlfriend, Diana, from his nemesis, Turner. Anthony's revenge hinges on his obtaining a job alongside Turner at the dreaded

O'Dermott's (a thinly disguised version of McDonald's). Anthony's single-minded mission is to get Diana back from Turner, a goal Anderson reveals to be faulty at its core. But throughout the novel Anthony reveals his confusion about romance and sexuality frankly and openly, a characterization that allows readers to empathize with Anthony's inexperience. At one point, early in his romance with Diana, Anthony wonders who should make the first move:

> I am not sure what it is that finally allows people to just turn to each other and touch. There is some hidden trigger. There is a secret language people learn, so they can signal to stop talking and just move. I don't know it.[14]

In this moment Anthony exposes his vulnerability to readers and does something even more powerful than that. He lets readers know that males don't have all the answers, and that guys wonder, too, about when it is appropriate to engage in physical intimacy.

Anderson's narrative skewers the fantasy of perfect romantic love, in part by allowing his characters to fail at romance. At one point Anthony looks back on his romance with Diana and remembers that "Some days seem perfect. By this, I mean they seem like television" (57). This moment of insight reveals that even hapless Anthony knows that the ideal, perfect romance is a fantasy. Still, the bulk of the novel centers on Anthony's quest to somehow prove to Diana that he is more worthy of her romantic attention than is Turner. Anthony plots revenge against Turner, tries to sabotage Turner at work, steals the competitor's condiment troll, all in a futile attempt to get Diana's attention. But in a twist worthy of O. Henry, Anthony's romantic bravado turns to dust as Diana bursts his bubble. When his plot to ruin Turner succeeds, Anthony explains to Diana, "I was getting revenge. I couldn't stand that he'd stolen you." Of course, Diana replies by jabbing her finger into his chest and saying:

> That's exactly the problem. Did you ever think about this, Anthony: Turner didn't steal me. I'm not a piece of furniture. I went to him. It may have been stupid. It was stupid. But that was my choice. . . . He didn't take me. (187)

Diana becomes the voice of all women in this passage, reminding Anthony that his quest for revenge, and indeed his quest to win her back, was misdirected. *Burger Wuss*, a romance novel with a twist, deconstructs gender roles and sheds light on female sexual agency. When Diana reveals to Anthony that it was "her" choice to hook up with Turner, she challenges cultural ideals about female agency and sexuality.

Also rejecting the traditional importance given to romance, Jacqueline Woodson's novel *If You Come Softly* (1998) refuses to soothe readers with a standard happy romance ending. It is a bildungsroman that challenges the idea that female self-definition should be linked to a male partner. In this novel, Woodson depicts the high-school romance of Jeremiah and Elisha, a young black male and a young white female, by showing the development of their relationship from both his and her perspective. This dual narrative structure allows readers glimpses into how both Miah and Ellie respond to their developing feelings, without succumbing to stereotyping. While racial politics are present in this novel and contribute to the narrative tension, Woodson focuses primarily on the transitory nature of love and romance and the influence of racial bias.

In this novel, the exploration of attraction and sexual desire seems to be the initial focus, but as the story moves forward readers are forced to deal with scenes portraying adult romance relationships as the flawed and imperfect constructions that they are. In many novels about romance for young people, parents are portrayed as almost perfect, robotic examples of love and fidelity. Woodson chooses to depict the parents in this novel as flawed humans who are also struggling with issues of love and fidelity. This realistic depiction of parents contrasts with stereotypical portrayals in many YA books and contributes to the complexity of the novel. In a stark and absolutely nontraditional ending, just as the two lovers have come to an agreement over a vital issue, Jeremiah is killed in a police shooting. So while these two romance-novel protagonists do not go off into the sunset hand in hand, the ending to this novel allows readers to deal with loss. Woodson also treats the feelings that young adults have about their romances with respect. Miah and Ellie believe that they are in love, and Woodson never makes fun of them or shows their love to be less real than the

love between adults. While she stops short of portraying explicit sexual activity, Woodson shows that the events that happen in the lives of teens are just as powerful for them as for adults. In the last chapter, Ellie looks at a picture of herself and Miah in a happy moment. She tells the reader:

> Two and a half years have passed, and still, this is how I remember us.
>
> This is how I will always remember us. And I know when I look at that picture, when I think back to those few months with Miah, that I did not miss the moment.[15]

Woodson allows that her characters might have feelings that are as strong and as powerful as those of adults, and that the relationship formed has a lasting impact but will not dictate Ellie's self-development. Ellie's sexual desire is revealed and not punished, but rather portrayed as an important aspect of her self-definition.

One important feature these feminist romance novels share is a focus on female sexual pleasure. According to Janice Radway, depicting explicit sex in an adult romance narrative is an acceptable narrative feature as long as the characters are in love.[16] The view of the dominant culture is that sex without love is unacceptable, especially for teen girls. Michael Cart reminds us of this cultural paradigm in his discussion of teenage sex in the YA novel *Forever*:

> Blume fails to make any convincing equation between sex and love, though to give due credit, she does try. Unfortunately, the effort is too often more of the didactic "tell 'em" variety than the more novelistic "show 'em" school. (198)

Promiscuity (also known as sex without love) is another issue entirely. Many YA novels promote the idea that sex for the sake of pleasure, not bolstered by a "love" relationship, is explicitly wrong. This idea translates into punishment for those who might espouse or even practice sex without love. Michael Cart even blames a character's failure to perform sexually on another character's sexual assertion. In Judy Blume's novel *Forever*, virtuous protagonist Katherine is counterbalanced by her friend Erica, whose view is that "You don't need love to have sex."[17] Of course, Katherine argues that "it means more that way,"

and Cart agrees, but goes even further by blaming Erica for Artie's latent homosexuality:

> Clearly Blume hopes to create a dramatic dialectic here between two opposing views of love. Unfortunately, we have already seen what effect Erica's view will have on Artie. (198)

In this passage, Cart (who earlier in his study laments the shoddy treatment homosexuality receives in many YA novels) proceeds to blame Artie's impotence on Erica's loveless sexual attitude. Yet it is strongly implied in the novel that Artie is gay, and Cart previously mentions this fact.

Judy Blume's heroine Katherine is indebted to Angie Morrow of *Seventeenth Summer*, since both young women experience sexual desire without being punished for their feelings. Reaction to Katherine's sexual assertion and responsible sexual behavior dominates critical writing about *Forever*. Michael Cart argues that Blume's characters in *Forever* are "little more than cardboard conveniences, bodies" that serve to fulfill Blume's message, which according to Cart is "blatantly telegraphed" and "didactic" (196). Cart approves of the explicit sexual content in the novel but complains that Katherine's trip to Planned Parenthood is so detailed that:

> Readers will not have to make a similar visit, since Blume makes sure they know everything they might have learned from such a field trip—all about venereal disease, premature ejaculation, birth-control devices, periods, vaginal specula, etc., etc. (196)

Cart assumes that what he considers too much information is just that, information overload for readers, which might preclude their own trip to obtain birth control and information about sex. Despite Cart's assertion, learning about a vaginal speculum is significant and useful. While Cart critiques what he views as Blume's didactic tone, Roberta Seelinger Trites sees *Forever* as a "classic in this genre" but thinks that Blume fails to provide a truly liberating depiction of sex:

> The novel tries to liberate teenage sexuality by communicating that curiosity about sex is natural, but it then undercuts this message with a

> series of messages framed by institutional discourses that imply teenagers should not have sex or else should feel guilty if they do.[18]

Trites analyzes the balance of power in *Forever* and other YA novels, but she fails to recognize the social significance of Katherine's sexual experiences. Unlike Cart, Trites is not upset by the depiction of sex without love but still asserts that *Forever* is merely "didactic" and that, for Blume, "It proves ultimately impossible for her to write a novel about teenage sexuality without linking the story to societally sanctioned ideologies" (93).

Forever might be somewhat didactic, but the depictions of Katherine's sexual pleasure function as a resistance to male-dominated sexuality despite the presence of a penis named Ralph. Reading about her trip to Planned Parenthood might make it seem less frightening to teens that have not yet taken that "field trip." Ultimately Trites's criticism of *Forever* lies in her perception that the book presents monogamy and romantic love as an important precursor to sexual activity. But the primary function of the novel, despite its unhealthy body-image messages discussed in chapter 1, is to authorize female sexual pleasure and show that love and romance are not necessarily "forever"—thus not the most important aspect of young women's lives.

Ambiguous endings in romance novels resist neat and tidy closure and challenge masculine privilege. Known for liberating portraits of teens in her novels, Norma Klein, in her novel *Love Is One of the Choices* (1987), refuses to provide an easy ending for her readers.[19] Subtitled *Every Girl Must Make Her Own Choices . . .* , this novel also provides an ending designed to encourage readers to do just that. In this YA romance novel, Klein portrays the entwined lives, friendships, and romances of Maggie and Caroline, two close friends who happen to be very different from each other. Once again, the chapters go back and forth from Maggie's perspective and Caroline's. As these two young women finish high school and prepare for college, Klein shows how devotion to a romantic relationship can prove a barrier to independence and self-fulfillment. In the novel Maggie is portrayed as a strong, feminist young woman who would never allow her love life to interfere with her dream of becoming a scientist. This romance novel disrupts cultural

expectations of traditional female roles by depicting one independent young woman who defies convention and one who succumbs to it.

Through her characters and their actions, Klein takes every opportunity to illustrate the cultural pressure on young women to fit into a certain mold. By juxtaposing extremely outspoken, independent, and feminist Maggie with the milder and less independent Caroline, Klein allows her readers to see the potential problems that come with dependence on the patriarchal power structure for self-definition. In the novel, Klein shows how Maggie's ferocious independence and self-assurance serve her well in her life and her relationships. Klein also shows how Caroline's crush on an older man, once reciprocated, reduces her options. When Caroline becomes involved with Justin Prager, her twenty-eight-year-old divorced chemistry teacher, the relationship affects her ability to think clearly. She marries Justin and then becomes pregnant. At the close of the novel, she might be losing the pregnancy to a miscarriage. By leaving the outcome to the reader's imagination, Klein forces her audience to think for themselves. Would it be better for her to lose the pregnancy? Would it be better for her to keep it and continue her hasty marriage to her high-school crush? By allowing her readers a choice of their own, Klein shows how women's futures can be limited by their attachment to a male.

As I have indicated previously in this chapter, many YA romance novels reinforce the cultural construction that proclaims young women cannot be happy nor have an identity without boys. Yet many atypical YA romance novels reject this philosophy by portraying young women who experience self-definition through a romantic adventure. This self-discovery is due not to a romantic attachment but rather to a process in which the protagonist is able to individuate herself in response to a relationship. In Hila Colman's 1982 novel *Girl Meets Boy*, a novel subtitled *Can You Love Someone Who Doesn't Understand You?*, the narrative challenges the idea of what it means to be female and feminist. Like Angie, Holly begins the process of defining herself in response to her attraction to an older boy she works with at camp. Like *Seventeenth Summer*, *Girl Meets Boy* is the story of a young woman's summer experience. But in the more recent novel, feminism is overtly discussed and is, in fact, a source of conflict between Holly and a male-chauvinist counselor she likes.

While in many traditional romance novels, the underlying assumption that romance is the most important thing in a woman's life is rarely examined or questioned, in *Girl Meets Boy* it is explicitly discussed. Protagonist Holly writes in her journal, as she contemplates her upcoming summer, that she will "not be one of those moony girls whose life depends upon a boyfriend. Period."[20] Her sense of autonomy is apparent as she asserts that she will not rely upon male attachment—an awareness she has learned from her mother. Both of Holly's parents work outside the home, and her mother has recently turned down a promotion because she then would make more money than her husband and the family would have to move to another city. The conflict between Holly's mother and father is portrayed as an example of compromise between feminism and practicality. Holly's father's business is not doing well, yet Holly's mother turns down the promotion because, as she tells Holly, "Don't you see? It would be the end of him if I took this job and we had to move away. I don't think he'd ever recover, it would be such a blow to his ego" (10). This discussion between Holly and her mother sets the tone for the rest of the narrative, where Holly struggles with her feminist principles and attraction to a sexist counselor. The juxtaposition of Holly's experience with her mother's provides the reader with a contrast, but in many ways they're grappling with the same issues. The mother is shown to be torn between her own desire to further herself and her need to consider her husband's feelings. Holly's struggle is similar. She likes Steve, is physically attracted to him, and yet abhors his sexist and degrading treatment of her and other women.

Holly's struggle depicts her negotiation between her beliefs and her desire to enter into a romantic relationship. That the object of her desire happens to be a sexist allows the author to replicate patriarchy through the voice of a male character, whose every utterance is a reminder of cultural expectations placed on young women. When Steve and Holly argue about women's place in the culture, he is clearly the voice of the dominant culture when he says:

> Well, my mother didn't work. She stayed home and took care of my kid brother and me, and she did the cooking and cleaning, all the stuff that

> women do. She wouldn't take a job if you gave her a million dollars. And she's a pretty happy lady, let me tell you. (44)

Leaving aside the awareness that staying at home *is* work but unpaid work, this proclamation by Steve reveals not only his sexism but also American culture's. The author of this romance novel clearly struggles to convey why a young woman would be attracted to such a Neanderthal, but Holly's attraction to Steve is depicted as being almost purely physical. It might also be that the honesty of the relationship is liberating. Again and again, she describes how "the physical contact with him was electrifying" and how she "felt that she was helplessly sliding into an emotional state that she did not want" (82–83). Ultimately, Holly compromises.

In a revealing chat with her mother, Holly spells out what she believes she must do in order to get along in a sexist culture. She tells her mother:

> I've decided that I'll never get along with boys, certainly not have a real relationship with a boy, if I go on the way I have. I mean, you can't continually put a boy down, and examine everything he says and does to be sure he's not putting you down. That kills everything from the start and you never get past it. (117)

This "compromise" seems rather sad and pathetic. Holly seems to be capitulating to the idea that you cannot be a strong female and still be attractive to men. Earlier in the narrative, Holly has a revelation while discussing feminism with another boy at camp who asks her if she ever thinks about anything but women's issues. She replies, "But once you start to notice how girls, women, are treated, it seems to pop up everywhere" (58). This moment, a prophetic one, mirrors the experience of many who become enlightened; they then begin to notice inequities they never noticed before. But while Holly wants to hold on to her principles, she seems to let them go just a little bit, as her mother does when she turns down a job to protect her husband's ego. While *Girl Meets Boy* at least puts feminism in the foreground, the novel helps Holly find self-definition only through the compromise she makes to tone down her feminist views in order to be with Steve. And that compromise is shown to be, in part, a response to Holly's newly discovered sexual desire.

Sexual desire is linked to physical abuse in two novels that depict this social problem. YA novels that depict physical and emotional abuse also illustrate that romance can be not only the most important aspect of a young woman's life but it also may be the most dangerous. Thus, another function of romance in YA fiction is to warn readers with depictions of violence against women. Unfortunately, becoming the victim of abuse is a distinct possibility for many young women, and depicting sexual, emotional, and physical abuse in the YA romance acknowledges that this disturbing problem exists. The depiction of abuse is another disputed aspect of adult romance novels; according to Radway's study, "unnecessary" violence against women is deemed unacceptable by most readers of adult romance novels. In YA romance novels, violence against women is rarely depicted. Yet when abuse is portrayed, it is too often shown to be the result of personality defects in the victim or neglect by overly permissive parents.

In most YA romance novels, the issue of violence against women does not even exist as a possibility, despite the increasing numbers of young women who are battered emotionally and physically. However, Sarah Dessen's *Dreamland* (2000) deals directly with physical abuse.[21] In this story, protagonist Caitlin meets older, magnetic Rogerson, whose name links him to his abusive father, whose name is also Rogerson, implying the family inheritance began with the grandfather. Rogerson the younger systematically controls and berates Caitlin and frequently beats her senseless throughout their relationship. This portrayal of abuse is terrifyingly realistic, including the narrative's tendency to question Caitlin's reaction to the abuse. Dessen's blame-the-victim mentality begins with the back cover, which declares "Wake up, Caitlin," implying that if she would just "wake up" she might be able to avoid her situation. But Caitlin's parents are depicted as ultimately culpable for her situation, since they seem to pay more attention to her sister than to her. And when her sister runs away, the parents obsess about the missing daughter and forget about Caitlin. In the first pages, right after her sister leaves home, Caitlin tells readers, "Everyone forgot my birthday as our kitchen became mission control, full of ringing phones, loud voices and panic" (13). This scenario is inverted in a later scene in the book in which the parents finally pay attention to Caitlin; they realize she is in danger when they witness Rogerson battering her

on their front lawn. Caitlin's parents intervene to end the relationship, exposing both their culpability and their power. If only they had been paying attention, the narrative implies, this wouldn't have happened.

Blaming neglectful parents and dreamy daughters for an abusive partner exposes a cultural bias against investigating the underlying causes of battering. *Dreamland* is a compelling tale of a young woman and the young man who perpetuates the physical abuse he receives from his father. It would be even more of an important novel if the victim weren't portrayed as being responsible for her abuse. While Dessen complicates the issue somewhat by showing Rogerson as a victim himself, the depiction of Caitlin as a neglected, dreamy, hapless young woman who succumbs to the wrong boy smacks of blame. Although the primary impetus for the relationship is linked to Caitlin's lack of identity after her sister leaves, another trigger is her sexual desire. The first time Rogerson hits her, Caitlin blames herself and reveals that, "I stopped thinking and got careless," (143) linking her own actions to the abuse. When later that evening Rogerson kisses her "very tenderly," she feels "that rush that always came when he touched me or kissed me, the one that made me feel unsteady and wonderful all at once" (145). The way Dessen links Caitlin's mental state to her sexual desire exposes the view of desire the novel promotes: that desire creates danger.

This novel equates sexual desire with a kind of physiological fog, an emotional and physical state that renders its victims helpless against its very force. As Trites notes, many YA novels seem to warn young women that "sexuality is powerful and can hurt people" (85), but Sarah Dessen takes that premise one step further: give in to sexual desire, even acknowledge it, she seems to be saying, and suffer the consequence of physical abuse. In passage after passage, Caitlin's fear of Rogerson is linked to her sexual attraction to him:

> I was afraid of forgetting. It seemed too easy. Already life was back to normal—I was lost in midterms and cheering practice and long, gray winter afternoons at Corinna's. But when Rogerson and I were at the pool house, inching ever closer to the inevitable, I'd feel his fingers slide up my arm, or curve around my neck and be lost in it, only to feel a sudden jolt as I remembered. His face, so angry, glaring at me. That split second as his hand moved toward me, too quickly for me to even

> comprehend what was about to happen. But then he'd kiss me harder, and I'd go under again. (150)

In this important passage, the portrayal of Caitlin's feelings reflects the novel's overall depiction of sexual desire as dangerously mind-clouding.

As Caitlin begins to feel desire, she loses perspective and "goes under," suggesting she is overwhelmed by her feelings as well as the pot she smokes with Rogerson. Dessen has marked Caitlin as vulnerable to her sexual desire, and thus desire is partially to blame, not a society in which male violence is central. In *Dreamland*, Dessen overtly connects sexual desire and abuse, parental neglect and abuse, and her protagonist's "bad" choices and abuse. Even a cheerleading accident is blamed on Caitlin's dreaminess. On the day she first meets Rogerson, Caitlin falls during practice. She reveals her state of mind just before her fall as "dreaming, only dreaming" and then falls on another cheerleader who breaks her nose, saving Caitlin from injury. Later, as she leaves a party to be with Rogerson, whom she has just met, she says "One tumble off the pyramid and look how far I'd fallen" (59). Caitlin even compares herself to her perfect sister, whose departure from home deepened the neglect that Caitlin already felt:

> It was funny. What I'd loved most about Rogerson was that he took me to a place so far from anywhere Cass had been. And now, him hitting me was the same thing. Cass wouldn't have taken up with Rogerson, just like she never would have stayed with anyone who hurt her. But I wasn't Cass, not even close. I was weaker. (158)

Caitlin's relationship with Rogerson, now directly linked to her faulty character, eventually ends with Caitlin in a rehabilitative hospital. That Dessen chooses to hospitalize the victim in this novel is telling. Counseling and therapy are important sources of support for victims of abuse, but all throughout this novel the focus is on Caitlin and how she could have let this happen to herself, and how she must deal with the aftermath. While Caitlin is in the hospital, her statement about why she has been hospitalized reveals that she is to blame:

> Technically, I was admitted for drugs . . . but everyone knew the bruises, Rogerson, what *I had let happen to me*—was the other reason I was here. I wasn't able to tell my parents anything in that first twenty-four hours. I couldn't say I was sorry, or explain how *I'd let this happen*. (223; italics mine)

Dessen could be trying to empower young women, to make them realize that they do have some agency and control over their lives. But this novel can also be read to be promoting a more oppressive view of romantic relationships and potential abuse. Linda Christian-Smith argues that the privatization of romance

> is further encouraged by placing it outside of public life and into the realm of private life, a realm that often involves individualistic solutions. This privatization is yet another mechanism for cloaking the true nature of the power relations in romance, keeping them from public scrutiny and forestalling the possibility of change. (28)

While Caitlin blames herself for her situation, her parents institutionalize her, and Rogerson is never heard from again. The individual is criticized in *Dreamland*, not the social structures that spawned the problem initially. Thus, the social power structures are never critiqued in *Dreamland*; here the personal is not political, at least within the narrative that Dessen creates. In *Dreamland*, the blame is on everyone but the abuser. Dessen seems intent on pointing the finger at sexual desire as the cause of Caitlin's slippage into a dreamlike state where nothing seems to matter, and thus once she succumbs, the novel argues, she invites whatever happens to her.

In *Inexcusable* (2005)[22] Chris Lynch asks a question posed by Laurie Halse Anderson's novel *Speak*: how could a guy not get it that he has raped a young woman? In this powerful novel, Lynch dares to construct a narrative from the perspective of a young man—a young man who has been accused of raping a young woman he knows and cares about. When students in my course on adolescent literature read *Speak*, often one or two will wonder about the rapist. "How could he do that?" they ask. "How could he *not* understand that no means no?" While many

students also resist the call to understand things from the predator's point of view, it is clear in *Speak* that the rapist is overtly aware of his actions, if not their consequences. But in *Inexcusable*, we are asked to identify with the protagonist, who is slowly revealed, to readers and to himself, as someone who raped a young woman. In what can only be read as a direct reference to *Speak*, in *Inexcusable* Chris Lynch has Keir trying to persuade his victim to talk to him. He says to her, "Speak."

Inexcusable's compelling narrative introduces Keir Sarafian—a football hero and all-around good guy, as he repeatedly tells us. He's the kind of guy who would rather "go to my room and whack myself silly to a good song than have a whole team of actual lap dancers all to myself in person" (4). The narrative reveals that he is self-effacing, humble, and a young man who likes to hang out with his dad. But the problem is that beautiful Gigi Boudakian says he raped her. Keir loves Gigi—he tells us, "How could she not know that I would kill anyone who ever did that to Gigi Boudakian?" (141). The first-person narrative derives its power from the slowly building realization, for Keir and for readers, that he did indeed rape Gigi. The narrative slyly suggests that Keir and his father are in denial about the truth of many aspects of their lives; Keir's recent football heroism, their mutual drinking problem, and most importantly the way the women in their lives really feel about them.

Inexcusable is remarkable for its narrative force. The reader is drawn into caring about and really liking the protagonist. We believe him when he tells us he is a good guy; we want to believe him when he says he didn't rape Gigi. But Lynch constructs the narrative in such a way that readers become aware, slowly, that Keir's perceptions of what happens in his world might not be that clear. In a parallel to the rape, Keir is nicknamed "Killer" after he severely injures an opposing football player in a game. He feels guilty but knows he didn't do anything wrong. He plays according to "the letter of the law" (16). And when Keir hits the player hard he gets up and runs off, feeling exhilarated and "just a little, just a little bit horny" (18). Lynch intriguingly conflates violence and sexual desire in this pivotal moment, and sharp readers will catch on that something is just a little bit skewed in Keir's world. In an interesting critique of pharmaceuticals, Keir pops a few Viagra pills the day of the rape. Does the narrative suggest that Viagra contributes to Keir's sexual assault on Gigi? It can be read that way, and it can

be surmised that Keir needs a little chemical inducement to become sexually aroused. But the rape scene itself is what asks readers to reassess the kind of guy Keir really is.

The scene where Keir rapes Gigi takes place as they both sleep on separate cots after a very long and late night. They are stuck without transportation (Keir's doing) and are both exhausted. Keir loves Gigi—she is getting over her boyfriend's lack of attention—and he crawls into bed with her as she sleeps. We see him take his clothes off, kiss the sleeping girl, and then he tells us, "I did not stop kissing her, not enough to even let her breathe" (160). And then we know. He has sex with her, as she sleeps, perhaps as Gigi unconsciously physically responds to his touch. Is Viagra to blame? Is it because Gigi was "moaning?" The answer is no. Lynch bravely creates a character who is a rapist and at once a likeable guy. The question becomes, then, "Does this novel create sympathy for a rapist? Is it even ethical to depict this kind of event from his perspective?" I would say, yes, it is, if only for the reason that we like Keir. Gigi likes him, too. Rapists can be likeable fellows. Reading *Inexcusable* requires us to question our own judgment and makes us complicit in the idea that denial is a powerful force. *Inexcusable* also asks us to consider why sexuality and violence are so often linked together in our culture; it asks us to resist easy answers.

In *Dreamland*, the abuse is emotional and physical. In *A White Romance*, the abuse is almost completely psychological.[23] In this 1987 novel by Virginia Hamilton, Talley meets and falls in love with David, a drug-dealing young man who attracts her attention because of his looks. The title reflects the racial makeup of Talley and her boyfriend—she is black, he is white, and he controls the romance. Talley is a young woman who attends a formerly all-black high school that has been made into a magnet school that attracts many white students. *A White Romance* tells Talley's story entirely from her perspective, a well-established narrative tradition in YA literature. But in this novel, her perspective becomes the impetus for positive change in the narrative. Talley's relationship to David does not even begin until well into the novel, but her growth and self-awareness progress throughout the novel, alongside critiques of the power relations inherent in romance relationships.

In *A White Romance*, Talley is also depicted as somewhat culpable for "allowing herself" to get involved in an abusive relationship, yet

there is an important and encouraging difference. Talley is shown to have somewhat reluctantly embraced her powerful feelings of sexual desire, which lead her into a relationship with David. The difference for Talley is in how she responds to and deals with her situation. She is able to accept her desire as powerful but not be consumed by it, as Caitlin is in *Dreamland*. The first time she has a date with David, the attraction is immediate and powerful. Over a span of several pages, her desire is juxtaposed with his initial indications of brutality. She protests several times, "Don't," after which he always responds, "Don't ever tell me don't again!" (122) As they begin to consummate their relationship, Talley experiences how powerful desire can be:

> But this was different. He slid her down again but her feet still didn't touch the floor. She had to hold on to his shoulders to keep from falling. Looking up at him and he was all over her so tightly. Hard. She could feel him surrounding her. Now his mouth was on half her face. Open, he was swallowing her tongue. The feelings, like nothing she knew. Sounds passed; her eyes were closed. Her body had a mind of its own. (123)

Talley's observation that "her body had a mind of its own," mirrors Caitlin's all-consuming dreamlike state when she is with Rogerson. Once Talley gives in to her desire, she becomes attached to David even though he treats her like a servant. The parallels between their relationship and slavery are made overtly throughout the novel; Talley at one point realizes that she feels "chained" to David (134). It is very soon after they attend a Judas Priest concert together, where Talley gets violently ill from drinking and is nearly crushed by the heavy metal crowd, that she articulates her perception that David doesn't really care what happens to her. "All he cares about, Priest. Not me, she thought" (164). A few days earlier Talley thinks about David, and realizes:

> He felt superior to her and most people. She supposed he was. When she was with him, she loved him a lot. But when she was alone in her house in The Neighborhood, she knew he was wrong. (147)

This passage indicates the split Talley feels between her self at home, where she feels good, and her self with David, where she is beginning to feel very bad. Her realization that David is an abusive jerk is not an

easy one for her to come to, but she does realize he is "wrong." Not just wrong for her, but wrong. Talley's struggle to detach emotionally from David is embodied by a passage late in the novel. David again asserts his control and tells her "as long as you are in my house at your own free will, you belong to *me*!" Talley thinks to herself, "I belong to myself" but doesn't yet say it aloud (176). This exchange mimics the power structure of heterosexual romance and reveals male anxiety over feminism and female independence. There are many such moments in this novel that illustrate Talley's self-determination and her ability to take good care of herself.

The differences in the way *A White Romance* and *Dreamland* portray sexual desire are key to the linkage between desire and abuse in these narratives. In *Dreamland*, female sexual desire is depicted as an all-consuming, inexplicable force that leads to tragedy and could result in battery. In *A White Romance*, desire is powerful, yes, but not shown to cause an abusive relationship. In fact, much like other nontraditional YA romances, *A White Romance* shows that a romantic attachment can lead to self-differentiation for a heroine without being the only important aspect of her life. These literary features of YA romances challenge traditional conceptions of what it means to be female and provide a way for young women to imagine possibilities other than traditional romance and marriage. The YA romances that I deem anti-romance, those that depict battering and sexual violence, also serve an important function for young readers. They let young women know the unfortunate truth that the world of dating and romance is also a world of potential violence and harm. They also refuse to let young men off the hook.

Refusing to capitulate to the standard happy romance ending reveals a romance novel that transgresses prescribed gender expectations. Portraying teenage protagonists as individuated at the close of a romantic narrative shows female readers that it is not necessary to be attached to a male to be okay. But, still, subtext in these novels lets readers know that society seems to dictate that having a partner is better than not having one at all. As Angie's friend Margie (from *Seventeenth Summer*) explains in describing why she continues her relationship with Fitz, a boy she really doesn't like much, "Yeah, you kind of get used to having a boy around" (268). Despite the occasional reminder of the

importance of heterosexual attachment, many YA romance novels resist the standard happy ending and replace it with a more ambiguous, realistic, feminist conclusion. These ambiguous conclusions mark feminist romance novels as quite different from their more traditional counterparts. And usually the differences these more progressive novels share are not limited to the endings but reflect more substantive differences in character, tone, and narrative structure. These differences make them not just more realistic but offer readers a way to envision a world where a woman's worth is not solely based on her attachment to a worthy male. As Virginia Schaefer Carroll explains, these kinds of endings leave open "the frightening possibility that perhaps a romantic relationship cannot satisfy all the needs of a young woman" (17).

Notes

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2. Linda Christian-Smith, *Becoming a Woman through Romance* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 2, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

3. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Waking Sleeping Beauty* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1997), 84, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

4. Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 61, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

5. Anna Lee Stensland, "Images of Women in Adolescent Literature," *English Journal* 73 (1984): 68–72.

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7. Maureen Daly, *Seventeenth Summer* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1942; Simon Pulse, 1985), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

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10. Wendy Smith, "An Earlier Start on Romance," *Publishers Weekly* (November 1981): 58–61.

11. Virginia Schaefer Carroll, "Re-Reading the Romance of *Seventeenth Summer*," *Children's Literature Association Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (1996): 13–19, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

12. Joanne Brown and Nancy St. Clair, *Declarations of Independence: Empowered Girls in Young Adult Literature* 1990–2001 (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 23.

13. Paul Zindel, *I Never Loved Your Mind* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 131, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

14. M. T. Anderson, *Burger Wuss* (Cambridge, Mass.: Candlewick Press, 1999; Candlewick, 2008), 21, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

15. Jacqueline Woodson, *If You Come Softly* (New York: Puffin Books, 1998; Puffin, 2006), 179, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

16. Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984).

17. Judy Blume, *Forever* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1975; Simon Pulse, 2007), 36, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

18. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 88, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

19. Norma Klein, *Love Is One of the Choices* (New York: Dial, 1978; Fawcett Books, 1987).

20. Hila Colman, *Girl Meets Boy* (New York: Scholastic, 1982), 13, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

21. Sarah Dessen, *Dreamland* (New York: Penguin, 2000; Puffin, 2004), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

22. Chris Lynch, *Inexcusable* (New York: Atheneum, 2005; Atheneum, 2007), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

23. Virginia Hamilton, *A White Romance* (New York: Philomel Books, 1987; Sandpiper, 1989), hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

CHAPTER FIVE

Series Fiction and Chick Lit
From Nancy Drew to Gossip Girl

Series fiction (also known as formula fiction) refers to a number of books based on a similar plot, focus, or set of characters, written by one or many authors, following the same formula, and published sequentially. "Chick lit" is a variation that draws more from the television series *Sex and the City* than it does from Nancy Drew. Despite their popularity and prominent place in the YA section in bookstores and libraries, series and chick lit books receive mostly negative critical attention. Even YA critic and feminist scholar Jack Zipes initially reacted with horror when his ten-year-old daughter began to obsessively read the YA romance series *Sweet Valley Twins*.[1] In his history of YA literature, for example, Michael Cart barely mentions series books except to offer reassurance to "anxious parents that kids won't settle for a steady diet of the lighter fare."[2] His assessment that series books are less serious than stand-alone novels is common among YA critics. Librarian Judith Saltman expresses concern that, when reading series books, "There is no need for the child's intelligence or imagination to stretch into engagement or empathy with a three-dimensional character. Children can simply project themselves into the empty mirror of these characters in true wish fulfillment."[3]

Many critics assume that all series fiction books, especially chick lit, are vacuous. They seem unwilling to concede that quality series

books exist. Naomi Wolf skewered chick lit in an article for the *New York Times*, describing it as offering "the perks of the adult world not as escapist fantasy but in a creepily photorealistic way." Wolf laments that none of these titles function the way the "great reads of adolescence" do by critiquing "the corrupt or banal adult world."[4] But I would argue, as does critic Patty Campbell, that these and other chick lit titles do just that. In an article in *Horn Book* magazine, Campbell argues that YA chick lit offers a "kick in the pants to adult values,"[5] an idea I found confirmed by my own readings and by teen readers themselves.

What makes series fiction unique is twofold. First, series are best-selling commercial products. Their popularity is astounding; some titles, such as Gossip Girl, The Clique, The A-List, and The Baby Sitters Club, sell millions of copies each month. In fact, its vast popularity has prompted many YA librarians to create entire sections devoted solely to series fiction. Second, some series depict characters over longer periods of time and thus can portray their growth and change more realistically than many stand-alone novels can. Series fiction is also popular because the novels provide continuity and predictability for young readers whose lives are often in adolescent turmoil. Some of them provide much-needed feminist alternatives by portraying the lives of young women and men in transition.

Series books also reveal the ongoing cultural emphasis on the standard of beauty forced on young women. They depict issues such as anorexia and bulimia, exposing body-image problems, and the dangers of abusive relationships, exposing the issue of violence against women. Series books also provide alternative perspectives of sex and sex roles for young women through multiple narrators and protagonists.

YA series fiction began when The Bobbsey Twins, The Nancy Drew Mysteries, and The Hardy Boys were published in the early twentieth century. Series have continued to be extremely popular throughout the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries. Besides romance and television show knockoffs, there are horror, fantasy, Christian, historical fiction, mystery, and adventure series. According to Linda K. Christian-Smith in *Becoming a Woman through Romance*, the biggest boom in the YA series market began in the 1980s when publishers noticed that romance titles were extremely popular with young readers. Scholastic Books developed the first teenage romance series, Wildfire, and

the publishing trend has continued with dozens of YA romance series. Christian-Smith argues that the teen romance series are particularly market-driven novels:

> Teen romances are examples of "packaged" books, where each aspect of the books' development has been carefully supervised by a cadre of public-relations firms and marketing experts.[6]

Christian-Smith analyzes the gender messages within these novels and correlates many of the conservative messages within the books to the backlash against feminism that pervaded the 1980s. However, she does not distinguish between stand-alone romance novels and series fiction. The cultural messages contained within these two types of novels might be similar, but the differences in presentation are significant.

Series fiction shares many of the qualities of other subsets discussed in previous chapters, such as first-person narration, an adolescent protagonist, and depictions of romance and sexuality. But because of their unique narrative structure, series books extend depictions of romance, sexuality, and body image over a period of time. For example, in Phyllis Reynolds Naylor's Alice books, protagonist Alice goes through adolescence during the life span of the books. Thus the author is able to show how she and her two friends deal with puberty, boys, body image, sex, and gender roles over a period of years.

The series I examine in this chapter perpetuate an emphasis on appearance and lookism. By depicting a particular standard of beauty as the norm, these novels continue an obsession with body image and beauty that has pervaded our culture for decades. In addition to perpetuating an unrealistic standard of beauty, series fiction focuses on young female sexuality as a defining force for adolescent women. By explicitly and sometimes subtly explaining sex and sex roles through characters' experiences, series fiction disseminates cultural messages about sex roles. While information about sex and sex roles is usually provided by a mother figure, in these series an absent mother trope requires another way to provide alternate sources of information. As characters grow up, the sexual information becomes more frank, and readers can learn along with the characters with which they identify. These novels present information about sex and gender roles through

alternative models and sustained narratives, as well as through a focus on female sexual development.

In contrast to single-volume books and along with the unusual form and narrative possibilities they present, series books make a unique contribution to the construction of female sexuality and femininity because of the way this YA subset depicts the lives of adolescent characters in transition. Where a single-volume novel might portray a conflict or issue such as sexuality, dating, or body image and resolve it in 200 pages, YA series fiction depicts the lives of young women in a narrative form that more realistically mimics the process of "real" time. A few series depict the lives of adolescent female characters over an extended period of time, sometimes even years, rather than just a few weeks or months.

The YA series books I discuss here are, in these general ways, representative of series fiction: they are popular and available in most libraries, and they contain some romantic content. I focus on these series because they transcend the confines of the format. Admittedly, many YA series succumb to poor writing, cardboard characterization, and stereotyping, but those I examine create complex characters and narratives and more realistic situations. In contrast to many YA series, these books have depth—and they challenge rather than reinforce stereotypes. By depicting adolescent characters in transition, and because of their broader time frame, these series illustrate options and alternatives that many stand-alone fictions do not or cannot.

In this chapter, I examine four YA series that depict female characters in varying stages of adolescence. The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories began in 1930 and pioneered a strong female character who challenged authority and became a role model for young women throughout the twentieth century. The very first Nancy Drew Mystery, *The Secret of the Old Clock*, was the initial volume in what became a landmark series in young adult literature. This mother of all series fiction creates an important feminist icon in Nancy Drew, a young, assertive, and smart woman who often outsmarts criminals and the police. Teenaged Nancy zooms around in her blue roadster while she solves crimes and redefines femininity. I begin with the Nancy Drew series because the character's creation is a feminist milestone in YA fiction.

While Nancy Drew is an idealized, seemingly fully formed young woman, Alice enacts much of what many young women experience in their formative years. Begun in 1989 (and continuing to this day) with *The Agony of Alice*, the Phyllis Reynolds Naylor series focuses on Alice's development from the age of twelve through eighteen and consists of seventeen titles plus three "prequels" (so far) that follow the life of protagonist Alice over several years. Through Alice's experiences, readers can see one young woman's social and sexual development over time. The first book takes place as she begins sixth grade, and subsequent novels take her through middle school and high school. The Alice series is often challenged in school and public libraries, most likely due to some sexual content and to their frequent placement in the children's room rather than the YA section in libraries.

While the Alice books use the first-person format to provide the uniquely personal and subjective perspective of one young woman, Ann Martin's California Diaries series offers an unusual nonlinear perspective on adolescent experience. Published from 1997 to 2000, it features five protagonists, four female and one male, who are revealed through individual diaries that present each character's perspective of shared events. The varying points of view present alternative perspectives; rather than being limited to one protagonist's point of view, readers have five to choose from, thus allowing more opportunities for identification.

The Gossip Girl series is the most recent, beginning with two titles published in 2002 and ten more to date, plus a prequel. The omniscient narrator in Gossip Girl serves a similar purpose to the multiple narrators of California Diaries. By providing insight into multiple protagonists, the author gives the reader the opportunity to identify with more than one perspective. The Gossip Girl series is the most recent of those I analyze and is described on the back cover as *Sex and the City* for the teenage set. With depictions of female sexual assertion and resistance to gender stereotyping, the Gossip Girl books present a truly contemporary picture of adolescent life, including explicit sex. From Nancy Drew to Gossip Girl, each of these series provides unique depictions of the process of adolescence for females.

Reading series fiction replicates a traditional monogamous romantic relationship. Some critics suggest that the sameness found in series fiction

is comforting for teens. Librarian and series expert Silk Makowski asserts that teens want "the same type of experience night after night, week after week, month after month—a series with good continuity lets them know they are going to get it every time they pick up a new installment."[7] Her wording reinforces the sexual nature of series fiction. She says they are "going to get it" and equates reading series with activities performed "night after night, week after week." The repetitive, predictable features of these novels reinforce cultural standards about sexual and romantic relationships in particular and relationships in general. Continuity, familiarity, and long-term attachment are all qualities the dominant culture wants young people to seek; the repetitive sameness of the series book functions to reinforce these qualities.

Criticism of series fiction tends to focus on the quality of the novels, and many critics assert that series fiction contains substandard writing and predictable plots. But YA series' sameness and repetitiveness are what make it a "safe" genre. Once a series is established, it is unlikely that the components will change, so when librarians or parents read one novel from a series they are reassured that the rest of the series will be identical. This predictability contributes to the fairy-tale-like function of contemporary series fiction. And like many childhood fairy tales, the repetition, familiarity, and predictability of series novels reinforce whatever cultural messages are depicted within the novels. In a life phase such as adolescence, which is ruled by change, series fiction is literary Xanax—an antianxiety form of reading.

While series fiction might alleviate anxiety, it also needs to provide narrative tension. Series books, like fairy tales, engage young readers with intriguing stories that lead up to a satisfying conclusion. But unlike fairy tales, the conclusion might not come until the last book. In her analysis of fairy tales, Marcia Lieberman focuses on the impact these stories have on children:

> Not only do children find out what happens to the various princes, princesses, wood-cutters, witches and children of their favorite tales, but they also learn behavioral and associational patterns, value systems, and how to predict the consequences of specific acts or circumstances. Among other things, these tales present a picture of sexual roles, behavior and psychology, and a way of predicting outcome or fate according to

> sex, which is important because of the intense interest that children take in "endings"; they always want to know how things will "turn out."[8]

Lieberman's analysis can also be applied to YA fiction, including series books. Series fiction presents depictions of sexual roles that model how to be and what to do for young readers, but more importantly series fiction draws readers in and holds them captive by creating a narrative similar to that of the fairy tale. Series fiction does not offer definitive closure; rather, each novel provides the promise of finding out how things "turn out" in each successive book in the series. By postponing definitive closure in an individual volume of a series and promising the potential of a more definitive ending as the series continues, these novels function as transitional fairy tales for adolescents. Also like fairy tales, series books contain powerful literary tropes: absent mothers, rescuing males, and the ever-present standard of beauty.

Like other YA literature, series fiction emphasizes physical beauty as an important female trait. The social convention that beauty is a young girl's most valuable asset is a common theme in YA fiction, and one that takes on special significance in series fiction. In series fiction beauty or attractiveness is the default for looks; in other words, unless a character is described as *not* beautiful, characters are all good-looking. This trope resembles one discussed earlier in chapter 1, where thinness was the default for weight. The only distinctions are between the degrees of beauty: is she beautiful, or merely attractive? Obsession or preoccupation with physical appearance is a common feature of YA fiction; however, physical beauty takes on greater significance in series books since virtually no main characters are unattractive. Characters still obsess and worry about their looks, but much of that worry seems fruitless and unnecessary since readers are told repeatedly how the characters look:

> Elizabeth, with her long dark hair and lashes, her gorgeous skin, broke the silence first. "I'm *fat*" she said in dismay. "*Look* at me!" (*The Grooming of Alice*)[9]

> Nancy Drew, neatly dressed in a blue traveling suit, her golden hair bound snugly beneath a modish little hat . . . (*The Mystery of the Ivory Charm*)[10]

> Nate was better looking than ever. The moss-green sweater had turned his eyes a dark, sparkling green, and his wavy brown hair was streaked with golden blond from his summer on the ocean. (*Gossip Girl*)[11]

As it is in single-volume novels, lookism is alive and well in young adult series fiction. It is not limited to the male gaze but extends to female self-assessment as well as the assessment of males deemed worthy of attention.

The depictions of physical appearance in series fiction sets up a pattern of the "code of beautification" by describing characters and then having other characters assess their appearance. Occasionally these assessments challenge "lookism" by depicting some discomfort the assessor has with accepting the standard of beauty. In Christopher Pike's *Chain Letter* (1986), the protagonist agonizes over her looks versus her friend Brenda's:

> If it was difficult to judge Brenda's appearance, it was impossible to be objective about her own. Her black hair was long, curly and unmanageable—contrasting nicely with her fair complexion. Throughout her freshman years, she had worried about her small breasts, but since Natassja Kinski had become a big star and the guys had flipped over the curve of her hips—Alison figured she could have doubled for her from the neck down—the concern had diminished. Her face was another story: nobody looked like her. She couldn't make up her mind whether that was good or bad. Her dark eyes were big and round and she had a wide mouth, but the rest of the ingredients were at odds with each other: a button nose, a firm jaw, a low forehead, thick eyebrows—it was amazing that nature had salvaged a human face out of the collection. Quite often, however, complete strangers would stop her in stores to tell her she was beautiful.[12]

This passage reveals the level of attention and detail given to depicting physical appearance. The focus on physical appearance in novels read primarily by young women reinforces the culturally prescribed standard of beauty that so many young women find compelling and disturbing. *Ophelia Speaks*, a compilation of young women's writing in response to *Reviving Ophelia*, reveals that the obsession with looks is pervasive and ongoing. Editor Sara Shandler reveals the importance of looks to young

women by beginning her book with "The Body under Assault," a section devoted entirely to body-image issues. Shandler writes:

> . . . nearly twenty girls sent me essays specifically blaming the media for their poor body image. Countless others mentioned its negative effects on their self-confidence.[13]

Ophelia Speaks is a revealing glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of young women in formation; their continuing worry over looks and weight embodies our culture's preoccupation with the bodies of young females. YA series books tend to reinforce this preoccupation, and the frequency with which authors have young and female characters perform physical self-assessment does more than just reflect a culture obsessed with female beauty; it reinforces the importance of beauty as a vital attribute linked to future success in life.

In series fiction such as Gossip Girl, The Clique, and The A-List, competition among female characters is not set up as a polarized binary between beauty and ugliness but rather plays out the tension between what is considered merely attractive and downright beautiful. In bookstores, YA sections often devote entire shelves to series chick lit. The most popular series are Gossip Girl (which has recently been made into a successful television show), The Clique, and The A-List. One of the most intriguing features of these series is their covers: Gossip Girl titles depict young women who are slender, white, and display their bodies provocatively. What is odd is that their faces are usually cut off above the mouth—functionally cutting off the tops of their heads.

This emphasis on a very particular Western, white kind of beauty is an even more insidious form of "lookism," a divisive distinction that causes more competition between females. When competition becomes this esoteric, beauty becomes even more unattainable for most young women who already feel immense cultural pressure to conform to the standard of beauty. Young women know that all too often they are judged based on how they look, not who they are. According to Mary Pipher, problems of self-esteem can be linked directly to the quest for physical beauty:

> Beauty is the defining characteristic for American women. It's the necessary and often sufficient condition for social success. It is important

> for women of all ages, but the pressure to be beautiful is most intense in early adolescence. Girls worry about their clothes, makeup, skin and hair. But most of all, they worry about their weight. Peers place an enormous value on thinness.[14]

Throughout the novels, characters vacillate between succumbing to cultural pressure to be thin and beautiful and resisting the sexual double standard. The epitome of the standard of beauty is to simply *be* beautiful, but working toward that goal is often the choice of characters in series fiction. In *Gossip Girl*, Serena embodies the standard; she does nothing to attain or work for her looks. Blair maintains her thinness through bulimia and is depicted buying makeup and fashion in order to create her image. Blair's bulimia exposes the social pressure to be thin. Bulimia is an eating disorder where the sufferer binges with food, then purges through vomiting or laxatives. In Gossip Girl, Blair hides her bulimia from her friends and family, but it is exposed to the reader. Much like the heavier characters I discussed in chapter 1, Blair has issues with her weight that mark her as sexually powerless. Although Blair is not fat, her constant binge eating and purging are linked to her inability to be sexually satisfied. She eats but cannot allow herself to be full, so she vomits. She wants to have sex but is unable to consummate her desires. In one scene, Nate is watching Blair eat:

> Nate couldn't help noticing how intensely Blair was wielding her steak knife. She cut the meat into huge hunks and gnawed on them ferociously. It made him wonder if she'd be that intense in bed . . . he'd always been the more aggressive one. . . . But tonight Blair seemed impatient, *hungrier*. (9; italics in original)

Blair's hunger for sex is mirrored by her hunger for food; she is satisfied by neither.

Blair's eating disorder reflects her powerlessness to control her body. This depiction of bulimia does not glamorize the disorder—it exposes how Blair feels unable to feed her hunger because of her fear that she might become fat. Blair's preoccupation with her weight and looks contrasts with Serena, who seems to give her appearance no thought at all.

Serena's good looks are the standard of beauty in the Gossip Girl books. She is described by the anonymous narrator as "the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be" (17) and as having:

> The kind of smile you might try to imitate, posing in the bathroom mirror like an idiot. The magnetic, delicious, "you can't stop looking at me, can you?" smile supermodels spend years perfecting. Well, Serena smiled that way without even trying. (16)

In this passage the narrator sets Serena up as a kind of goddess, an attribute that is later reinforced through a description of her given by Nate, who watches Serena frolic in a fountain next to a statue of Venus de Milo. He models the male gaze as he assesses her looks: "It wasn't difficult to see who the real goddess was. Venus looked like a lumpy pile of marble compared to Serena" (27). In series fiction, young women's status as beauties causes them to be objects of intense scrutiny.

The interaction between ultrabeautiful Serena and just plain beautiful Blair in Gossip Girl exposes the intense social pressure to be beautiful and competition between girls and causes these two friends to become enemies. While Blair is described as being very attractive, she resents and begins to hate her best friend, Serena, who is depicted as having goddess-like beauty. Competition between friends, over boys and social status, is common among adolescent girls. In *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, Rosalind Wiseman argues that looks are increasingly a priority to young girls, and that competition between adolescent girls often centers on "looks, style . . . things girls think they need to secure a place in the life raft."[15] Throughout the Gossip Girl series, Blair and her friends torment Serena and try to assassinate her character by spreading rumors about her. In these novels the goal is to be stunningly beautiful.

Blair's efforts to improve her looks are contrasted with another character whose failure to conform to the standard of beauty attracts negative attention. Vanessa, who is described as "the only girl in the school who had a nearly shaved head, wore black turtlenecks everyday, [and] read Tolstoy's *War and Peace* over and over like it was the bible" (54),

auditions Serena for her student film. Even though Serena is just right for the part, Vanessa casts another girl because she is afraid Serena will take away the guy she (Vanessa) likes. In order to compete, Vanessa also succumbs to the standard of beauty. Through the use of makeup and other accoutrements of femininity, Vanessa becomes an example of what Linda Christian-Smith identifies as the "code of beautification" that underlies romance novels. Vanessa trades in her white T-shirts and black Doc Marten boots for a dress and lipstick in order to get the attention of Dan, who sees her sitting on a bar stool: "in her black cat dress . . . her lips were painted red . . . her skin was so pale it gleamed" (217). Once Vanessa has used the proper feminine attire, she is able to finally get Dan's romantic attention. As Christian-Smith asserts about romance fiction, "beauty is the ticket to romantic success, power and prestige" (43), an idea that is aptly illustrated by Vanessa's makeover. The code of beautification pervades series fiction and endorses the link between the standard of beauty and success in romance.

The young women of the Gossip Girl series seem to be the epitome of teenage privilege; they have money, good looks, boyfriends, and minimal parental supervision. Cicely Von Ziegesar's depiction of adolescent turmoil challenges beliefs about wealth and privilege by depicting characters whose struggles with boys, body image, and sex could be those of many young women. Von Ziegesar transcends the average YA series paradigm by portraying important social issues such as eating disorders, the standard of beauty, and the sexual double standard.

The pressure to be thin pervades YA fiction, as we have seen, and in more recent novels this pressure is embodied by a character with an eating disorder. In Ann Martin's California Diaries series, the problem of an eating disorder is viewed from the perspective of five different characters, providing multiple viewpoints. Anorexia and the pressure to be thin are a continuing problem for Maggie, and in her very first diary readers are introduced to her perfectionist tendencies and overbearing father. After her band wins second place in a Battle of the Bands contest, Maggie reveals her achievement to her father:

> "Second place," I said.
>
> Dad raised his eyebrows. "Second place," he repeated with a nod. Then he stared out the window.

> I felt a wave of relief. He seemed kind of impressed.
>
> But I know Dad. And I could tell from his voice that he would have been happier if I'd said first place.
>
> Which made me feel a small knot in my stomach. Because now, looking back at the performance, I knew I agreed with him. I'd have been happier too.[16]

These passages toward the end of Maggie's first diary set the reader up for her later battles with self-esteem, anorexia, and her father's expectations. This multivoiced narrative strategy provides differing viewpoints of five teenage characters. Readers are gradually introduced to Maggie's anorexia, in a process similar to the way that Maggie comes to understand her own problem. Readers experience not only Maggie's suffering but also her good friend Amalia's concern. Providing Amalia's perspective exposes the impact eating disorders have on friends of the victim. Her compassionate response also provides a more sympathetic portrayal of Maggie. Amalia notices Maggie's increasing emaciation and does some research into eating disorders on the Internet. She takes notes on what she finds:

> Anorexia is not only a problem. It's an attempt to solve a perceived problem, even though the "solution" becomes a worse problem. Anorexics feel that their lives are out of control. By not eating, they're establishing control—over their bodies. Anorexics feel unheard and misunderstood. If you try to change their outlook, even by giving them pep talks, they may feel "talked at." Empathy works best.[17]

Amalia's perspective on Maggie's anorexia deepens over the course of all fifteen books in the series, and her ability to help Maggie deal with her eating disorder seems almost superheroic considering her own struggle with an abusive boyfriend. But her perspective on Maggie's anorexia exposes the problem as a disease and a reflection of the social pressure to be thin. Eating disorders are about control of the body, and abusive boyfriends are about men's control of women.

The abuse narrative in *California Diaries* is presented in a somewhat mediated form; Amalia volunteers at a women's shelter and learns about how women often become victims of domestic battery through the lives of the people she works with. In contrast to the depictions of

abuse in single-volume novels that focus on a battered female, these perspectives provide some narrative distance. For example, readers learn about Amalia's possessive boyfriend, James, through her own diary as she conveys her increasing awareness that his behavior marks him as potentially abusive. The parallel stories of a woman in the shelter and Amalia herself slowly converge until both reach a turning point. The woman in the shelter leaves town with a new identity, and Amalia breaks up with James. James's abusive behavior is foreshadowed as he and Amalia are walking through some woods and come across several turtles sunning themselves. As she watches in horror, his tendency toward violence is revealed when "James throws a rock at one of them, and it quickly pulls back its head. James throws another rock. He thinks this is funny. I am starting to feel edgy."[18] The reaction of the turtle to the oncoming rock foreshadows Amalia's reaction to James's oppressive, controlling behavior.

In some diary entries, Amalia writes about herself in the third person, figuratively ducking her head to create some distance between her feelings and her experiences. In one such entry, she works out some of her conflicting feelings about James:

> See, Amalia's pretty confused too. She likes James a lot. She thinks he's cute. She loves the way he plays guitar. She wants to go out with him and get to know him more. But James does a few things she wishes he wouldn't do. Like assume she's his girlfriend. And get mad at her for talking to other guys. And be suspicious of her for the most harmless, innocent things. (Jan. 5)

In much the same way that Amalia is able to help her friend Maggie come to terms with her anorexia, she helps herself eventually understand that James's behavior is dangerous. But Amalia does not realize right away that she is in danger. Martin depicts the process that Amalia goes through as one that can take some time, and her relationship with James doesn't come to an end until the next installment of her diary in book 9. In this volume of the California Diaries, James continues to pursue Amalia by calling her and leaving her notes, even after she has broken up with him. James finally seems to give up, and then Amalia sees him with a girl she has just met:

> I think her name is Cheryl. The guy she's with is James. After all this time, all the notes and weird behavior, he's finally found somebody else. I'm relieved. I'm also horrified. Cheryl doesn't deserve the treatment I got. I want to run to her. Warn her away. But I know how James would react to that. I figure I'll catch her alone sometime. (Oct. 10)

Amalia's reaction to Cheryl illustrates that she has learned that James's abusive behavior was not her fault, and her intention to warn Cheryl shows that she recognizes her responsibility to extend her knowledge to others. These fictional abuse narratives function similarly for readers; through Amalia's experiences, readers can learn that abuse is not the fault of the victim and that they too have power in helping others.

By depicting issues that affect young women, such as physical abuse and eating disorders, Martin conveys the complexity of the issues through multiple perspectives. But more importantly, she allows readers to become comfortable with a character before she labels them "anorexic" or "victim of abuse." This lengthy time span in the series, plus the various points of view she presents, all make California Diaries an unusual example of YA series fiction.

In these series novels, the multiplicity of perspectives and options provided by friends also provides the reader with various alternatives to the cultural pressure to be "feminine." In the Alice series, protagonist Alice and her two friends Pamela and Elizabeth provide various perspectives on growing up and gender roles. Pamela and Elizabeth depict opposing views of femininity. Each provides alternative choices for readers. Pamela is depicted as a bit wild and perhaps too adventurous, while Elizabeth is portrayed as almost the opposite. Elizabeth's prudish behavior seems to be given more approval in the novel in contrast to Pamela's explorations, since Pamela's adventures are often criticized by adults and also depicted as dangerous.

That Elizabeth and Pamela exist to provide Alice (and readers) with counterbalancing ideas is apparent, and their sexual development functions alternately as a warning and a beacon for Alice and for readers. Pamela's adventurousness is the warning against what might happen if a young woman goes too far; Elizabeth's fear of sexuality is a preferable option as long as she ultimately joins the dominant culture and gets married. Pamela is the wild one whose mother threatens to cut off her

long hair if she kisses anyone before she's sixteen. Elizabeth can barely even discuss sex and has a hard time adjusting to the physical changes adolescence brings to young females. But these two friends help Alice to understand the roles of sexuality. Pamela's sexual willingness, as evidenced by her potentially dangerous sexual encounter with an older man on a train trip, marks her as a sexual type that Alice is not to emulate.

The Alice books provide the most explicit discussion of sexual roles I have found in series fiction. Series such as Gossip Girl, The A List, The Clique, and California Diaries depict sex and portray sexual activity as just another aspect of adolescent life. The Alice and California Diaries series allow characters to experience sex, but do not discuss it overtly in the novel. Sex is present but remains unexamined in the narrative. The Alice novels explore ideas about sex roles through the experiences of the protagonist and her discussions with adults and her friends about sex. Alice learns about sex and sex roles by asking questions and observing her older brother and father in their romantic relationships. She also uses available female role models, such as her English teacher and her female cousin, since her mother has been dead since she was very young.

Since Alice is the protagonist of the series and the narratives are from her point of view, readers readily identify with her character. Alice is an "everywoman" of sorts, whose adolescent experiences can resonate with young readers. Throughout the books, as Alice, Pamela, and Elizabeth grow up and mature, Naylor reveals more about the cultural influences that shape each girl. For example, part of Elizabeth's reluctance to accept sexuality is shown to be the result of a family "friend" who molested her when she was very young. And Pamela's willingness to embrace her sexuality is depicted as being a result of her parents' separation and the absence of her mother. By using these stereotypes to illustrate two potential responses to sex-role options, author Naylor exposes the complexities of sexuality for young women.

Equally revealing is the recurring theme of the absent mother (or the motherless daughter) in series fiction, where the father often represents paternalism, and the novels themselves serve as "stand-in" mothers who dispense cultural and social information about femininity and sexuality. In this particular way, these series function as adolescent fairy

tales by providing repetitive stories of enchantment and imagination that question the developmentally crucial mother-daughter relationship. The lack of a maternal figure provides the characters a certain freedom from the constraints a mother might normally provide in terms of transmitting gender-role information. As Carolyn Heilbrun argues, the absence of a mother figure has major impact on young female characters' freedom from constraint:

> Even more important than the roadster, Nancy Drew has no mother, no female mentor from the patriarchy to tell her to cool it, be nice, let the boys win, don't say what you mean. Mothers have long been and were, in Nancy Drew's day and before, those who prepare their daughters to take their proper place in the patriarchy.[19]

These series novels act as stand-in mothers, transmitting cultural information that sometimes challenges oppressive gender roles for young women.

In some cases, as with Nancy Drew and Alice, a father replaces the absent mother in terms of introduction to the dominant culture. These particular father-daughter pairings reinforce patriarchal power and, embedded within the power structure, insensitivity toward female sexuality. For example, Alice's father can't even verbalize his observation that she might need to start wearing a bra. He is an archetype of a somewhat bumbling, insensitive male unaccustomed to dealing with the ways and needs of young women. In a 1999 interview, Naylor reveals how Alice reflects her own experience with a mother:

> I was thinking how I loved my own mother very much, but she was not the glamorous, self-confident woman I longed to be. So I was always observing grown women, adopting the smile of one, copying the walk of another, the clothes of a third. And one of the things you learn as a writer is that whatever happened to you probably happened to others as well. Having her mother dead certainly helped the plot, but I had no idea how much humor it would add to have her bring her questions to her dad and older brother, Lester, who don't know diddly about bringing up a girl. (1586)

While Alice's questions to her father and brother might indeed be humorous, they also expose the cultural conceit that men cannot transmit

the appropriate information about femininity to daughters the way that a woman can.

> Of course, there are some things we don't talk about at all. Like how to buy a bra. Not even Dad can talk about that. At the beginning of June, he noticed that my breasts made points in my tee shirts, so he said, "Al, don't you think you should be wearing something under that shirt?" I went upstairs and put on a second tee shirt over the first, and all summer long I wore two shirts at a time just to hide my points. All because I didn't know how to buy a bra.[20]

Eventually Alice gets her bra, but her struggle to accept her growing breasts is made all the more difficult by her father's lack of sensitivity. Buying a first bra is often an anxiety-producing event for young women. As Amy Bowles-Reyer points out about Judy Blume, "girls have the right to decide when they want to start wearing a bra or learning about menstruation. If girls are educated about the medical facts and the emotional experiences, then they are able to have confidence in themselves and their bodies."[21] I would add that Alice's struggles to learn the rules of being a girl are compounded by her motherless status, but the feminist message in the novels is that women can help each other. Alice seeks out other females for advice when her father can't help her.

Seeking out other women for assistance is a feminist tradition and illustrates the power of female bonding. In *Alice on the Outside*, when Alice realizes she wants to know what sex is like, she decides to ask her cousin Carol instead of another female friend:

> I couldn't think of another person I could ask. I'd be too embarrassed to ask Marilyn Rawley, Lester's girlfriend. Ditto Miss Summers. And I sure wasn't going to ask Aunt Sally, because if she told me once that getting your period was like a moth becoming a butterfly, she'd probably say that sexual intercourse was like a deer getting antlers or something.[22]

In another contrast that illustrates her options and those of her friends, Alice reveals that Elizabeth's mother told Elizabeth that "sex between a husband and wife is beautiful" (9). Alice states that "beautiful doesn't do anything for me," meaning that she feels the explanation inad-

equate. By her rejection of Elizabeth's mother's metaphoric description of sex, Alice articulates her need for more realistic and practical information. The tendency of Elizabeth's mother to describe sex with veiled euphemisms partly reveals why Elizabeth is so squeamish about sex; her mother has never really discussed it with her. Alice's decisions about where to go for information reveal her growing awareness of the varying options she has in terms of advice and information. When she asks her brother about sex, he is generally helpful, but just as often tells her to go soak her head. When Lester responds to Alice and jokingly refuses to answer questions, he mirrors the general discomfort some grown-ups show when adolescents ask about sex. Alice's persistence is the voice of young girls everywhere who just want more information.

When Alice finally asks her cousin Carol about sex, the answers she receives reveal not only the practical information Alice wants but also more subtle messages about female sex roles in general. Alice has read somewhere that the average woman "has sexual intercourse 3,948 times in her life," and she wants to know what she's getting herself into (22). Alice asks her cousin bluntly, "Carol, what does intercourse feel like for a woman?" after asserting that she knows "what goes where" (24). Carol responds to her query by revealing:

> Well, for some women it hurts a little the first time. Maybe the first couple of times. After that it doesn't. It feels pretty good, actually. It's exciting to feel yourself opening up for a man, and nice to have him kissing you. (24)

Despite the heterocentrism inherent in her description, Carol gives Alice her subjective perception of what intercourse is like. The discussion continues, with more questions and answers about orgasm, oral sex, and varying sexual positions, until finally Carol falls asleep and Alice has the information she wants. And since they can't seem to get similar information from their parents, Elizabeth and Pamela are recipients of Alice's new knowledge, illustrating the importance of female friendships in series books. Alice's sharing what she now knows with her friends helps to demystify sex, for Pamela and Elizabeth and for readers.

The descriptions of sex in the *Alice* books, and in many YA novels, provide needed and necessary information about sex for young readers.

These descriptions might lack erotic appeal, but if they were any more erotic they would most certainly be challenged more often. The presentation of information is more practical than titillating but still garners negative comments from critics who see the clinical detail as didactic. Roberta Seelinger Trites argues of *Forever* that "it is hard to think of a book being sexually liberating when it has such a heavy-handed ideological agenda and when it is so dispassionate in depicting female *jouissance*."[23] Her criticism could easily be applied to Alice's discussions with her cousin about sex—but I would argue that the information presented does not need to be passionate to be effective. Any practical information about sex is better than the veiled, metaphoric, and euphemistic drivel that many adolescents get from the culture at large. As Alice says, perhaps reflecting what many young girls feel, "All we know is what we see in the movies, and the movies make it look as though a man and a woman are having a fit together" (25). Alice's quest for practical information about sex reveals young adults' need for more information about sex, not less.

Nancy Drew's desire for solving mysteries can be read as a desire to solve the mystery of sex. The young sleuth's quest for knowledge is more covert than Alice's, but their familial circumstances are similar. Nancy Drew is a young woman whose mother has died, leaving her "handsome" lawyer father, Carson Drew, to raise her. She and her father have a housekeeper, whose role as chief cook and bottle washer and occasional comfort-giver fulfills some functions that would normally be provided by a mother. Each novel begins with Nancy being introduced to her audience, revealing her motherless status and her closeness to her father. As critic Lee Zacharias points out in his article "Nancy Drew, Ballbuster," Nancy's relationship with Dad is "not incestuous by act, but it does have sexual implications."[24] Zacharias is right. Though Nancy and her father can in no way be construed to be physically intimate, their close bond reveals Nancy's attachment to masculine power. Nancy is ultimately loyal to her father—to patriarchy—but that loyalty allows her the freedom to be attached to heterosexuality without having to consummate her attachment. So Nancy's father solidifies her place in the patriarchal structure without sexualizing it.

Nancy and her loyal readers are free to enjoy ambivalence about sex and femininity as it is embodied by the contrasting figures of Bess and

George, Nancy's two good friends (and cousins) who embody opposing sex roles. Much like the contrasting figures of Pamela and Elizabeth in the Alice novels, Bess and George represent opposing female roles. Bess is the helpless female; she eats too much and relies on others to do her thinking. George, as the masculine name suggests, portrays the quintessential tomboy who eschews the trappings of femininity in favor of more serviceable clothing. As Bobbie Ann Mason aptly suggests, Bess and George represent Nancy's ambivalence about gender roles. Mason argues that they are "mirrors of Nancy's two halves, demonstrating the extreme options open to females—tomboy and fluff-head."[25] In a telling passage from *The Secret in the Old Attic*, the interaction between Bess and George reveals their roles:

> "Old lace is valuable," declared Bess . . . "Oh," she sighed, "we girls should wear more lace. In olden times ladies appreciated its lure! The great ladies of the Court knew its power!"
>
> "Yes," said George with a grimace. "You know who first thought of lace, don't you? Fishermen. The first lace was a fish net, made to lure food from the sea!"
>
> "George, you're disgustingly unromantic," said her cousin.[26]

This passage embodies the duality present between expectations of femininity and the "lure" of masculinity to George. One of the appeals of Nancy Drew's adventures is that she seems to blend these two opposites effortlessly. Nancy takes charge without seeming bossy, yet she can blend into social functions with grace and poise. She is at home in the rough-and-tumble world of crime as well as the afternoon tea party. Thus Nancy embodies the best of both worlds, which is part of why she appeals so strongly to readers. Nancy can still be feminine and know how to dress and hold a teacup, but if a criminal crashes the party she can wrestle him to the ground. Nancy appropriates the power and assertion that most men take for granted and solves every mystery she comes across.

Despite the lack of overt sex in the Nancy Drew Mysteries, these tales are replete with messages about gender and sexuality for young women. Nancy Drew's domestic life is made up of Nancy, her father, and her boyfriend, Ned Nickerson, a kind of romantic/sexual triangle that pervades each installment of the series. But while the emotion

between Nancy and her father is present in every interaction between the two, there is rarely any emotion or romantic interaction between Nancy and Ned. Bobbie Ann Mason analyzes Nancy and other female detectives in her book *The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide* and argues:

> Mysteries are a substitute for sex, since sex is the greatest mystery of all for adolescents. The Nancy Drew books cleverly (and no doubt unintentionally) conceal sexual fascination, especially since Nancy is frequently embarrassed by Ned's attentions. (63)

So while Nancy's attachment to her father as the primary male figure in her life might not be unusual, her preferring him to Ned resists the archetype of the teenager growing apart from her family. Nancy is growing, yes, but not apart from the traditional family structure. She resists moving out of her known family structure into the unknown and frightening world of adult sexuality. Bobbie Ann Mason asserts:

> The girl sleuth's quest, then, is not really for the unknown, but for the known, for the familiar. No thugs and smugglers can dwell in their grungy hideouts on canned beans for long when a girl sleuth is around. Solving a mystery, in girls' books, is actually the fictional equivalent of baking a cake, piecing together a quilt or jigsaw puzzle, sewing a fine seam or spring-cleaning. (61)

Thus Nancy's quest in the mystery stories is for familiarity, sameness, much as readers of series fiction seek repetition. Nancy's adventures enable her to be assertive, adventurous, brave, and bold, yet always return to her safe existence at home with her father. As Mason describes it, in Nancy's world "adventure is the superstructure, domesticity the bedrock" (60). This interpretation translates into a perfect prescription for safe adventure in gender-bending; Nancy can drive around in her roadster and act like a boy, but she always resists Ned's affections and comes home to Daddy and her role as substitute wife. In essence, Nancy's transgressions are outside the domestic sphere; as long as she returns home to her duties, she is free to have an occasional outside adventure.

Nancy's ownership of a blue convertible roadster is a distinct mark of sexual freedom, especially when one realizes she is only sixteen

years old. In the original novels begun in 1930, Nancy's age was sixteen. Later, when the books were reissued in the 1950s and 1960s, her age was changed to eighteen. The books were also abridged in length and content. Later incarnations of Nancy Drew focused on romance rather than adventure, perhaps reflecting the growing popularity of the YA romance. Car ownership enables her mobility, a key element needed to attain freedom from parental supervision and constraint, and Nancy zooms off in her roadster many times in each story. In chapter 4, I discussed the car as a symbol of sexual activity and a driver's license as permission to have sex; indeed, Nancy has both license and car. She is a calm and capable driver and never gets a speeding ticket. This vehicular restraint mirrors Nancy's sexual restraint; she knows she has the capability of speeding (i.e., sexual activity), but she never uses it. Nancy confines her gender-bending activities to solving mysteries outside the domestic sphere. Within the domestic sphere, however, she is monogamously devoted to her father and remains chaste.

Louann Reid and Ruth Kline argue that series books deserve respect just as the young people who read them deserve respect.[27] I would add that since series books are among the most popular with adolescent readers, their popularity alone deems them worthy of discussion and analysis. With her presupposition that series fiction lacks inherent "quality," Judith Saltman believes that that "the more time a child spends in the formula genres, the more difficult it is for that child to make the transition from bland style to more complex grammar, syntax and vocabulary."[28] Somehow, the very characteristics that make these books so appealing to young readers are what cause critics, teachers, and parents so much concern. But as YA authority Patty Campbell asserts, "Even at its worst, chick lit is *fun*." Close examination of series fiction reveals that these novels can provide valuable reading experiences, as well as just plain fun.

Notes

1. Jack Zipes, *Sticks and Stones* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

2. Michael Cart, *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 102.

3. Judith Saltman, "Groaning Under the Weight of Series Books," in *Young Adult Literature: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Jeffrey S. Copeland (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 108.

4. Naomi Wolf, "Young Adult Fiction: Wild Things," *New York Times*, 12 March 2006.

5. Patty Campbell, "The *Lit* of Chick Lit," *Horn Book Magazine* (July/August 2006).

6. Linda K. Christian-Smith, *Becoming a Woman through Romance* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 14, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

7. Silk Makowski, *Serious About Series: Evaluations and Annotations of Teen Fiction in Paperback Series* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 4, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

8. Marcia R. Lieberman, "'Some Day My Prince Will Come' Female Acculturation Through the Fairy Tale," *College English* 34, no. 3 (December 1972): 383–95.

9. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *The Grooming of Alice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 1, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

10. Carolyn Keene, *The Mystery of the Ivory Charm* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1936), 1, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

11. Cecily Von Ziegesar, *Gossip Girl* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002), 10, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

12. Christopher Pike, *Chain Letter* (New York: HarperTeen, 1986), 6.

13. Sara Shandler, *Ophelia Speaks* (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 4.

14. Mary Pipher, *Reviving Ophelia* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1994), 183.

15. Rosalind Wiseman, *Queen Bees and Wannabes* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2002), 114.

16. Ann M. Martin, *Maggie: California Diaries #3* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), Wednesday, 1:07 a.m., hereafter cited parenthetically in text. Note: The California Diaries books have no page numbers, so citations are by date of diary entry.

17. Ann M. Martin, *Amalia: California Diaries #9* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), Friday 9/25, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

18. Ann M. Martin, *Amalia: California Diaries #4* (New York: Scholastic, 1997), 1/6, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

19. Carolyn Heilbrun, "Nancy Drew: A Moment in Feminist History," in *Rediscovering Nancy Drew*, ed. Carolyn Stewart Dyer and Nancy Tillman Romalov (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 18.

20. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *The Agony of Alice* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1985), 7, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

21. Amy Bowles-Reyer, "Becoming a Woman in the 1970s: Female Adolescent Sexual Identity and Popular Literature," in *Growing Up Girls: Popular Culture and the Construction of Identity*, ed. Sharon Mazzarella and Norma Pecora (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 21–46.

22. Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, *Alice on the Outside* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 9, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

23. Roberta Seelinger Trites, *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2000), 92.

24. Lee Zacharias, "Nancy Drew, Ballbuster," *Journal of Popular Culture* 9 (1976): 1029.

25. Bobbie Ann Mason, *The Girl Sleuth: A Feminist Guide* (Westbury, N.Y.: The Feminist Press, 1975), 56, hereafter cited parenthetically in text.

26. Carolyn Keene, *The Secret in the Old Attic* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1944), 136.

27. Louann Reid and Ruth K. J. Cline, "Our Repressed Reading Addictions: Teachers and Young Adult Series Books," in *Young Adult Literature: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Jeffrey S. Copeland (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

28. Saltman, Judith. "Groaning under the Weight of Series Books," in *Young Adult Literature: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Jeffrey S. Copeland. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 110.

Conclusion

> Girls can imagine futures for each other, with outrageous careers and a string of extraordinary lovers, because it is easier to be generous to another than to yourself, but imagining greatness for a friend makes it thinkable for yourself.
>
> —Natalie Angier, *Woman: an Intimate Geography*[1]

YA literature provides a unique and compelling window into the lives of adolescents. These works, more than those in any other genre, depict adolescent characters in formation and provide a literary space where they can read about themselves. In a culture that continues to view teenagers as marginalized beings, fiction about young people recognizes that adolescence is a time of turmoil and change. Instead of forcing teens to read books about adults, YA literature helps them to experience, enjoy, and possibly even revel in their adolescence. By studying and analyzing the books that teens actually read, literary scholars, educators, librarians, and parents can understand why teens read the books they do.

Adolescence is a confusing and often disturbing life phase, especially for girls. Young women and, increasingly, young men are faced with enormous pressure from all types of media to look and be a certain

way in order to be accepted. Cultural pressure from the media directs females to be thin, beautiful, and sexually desirable, but not sexually active. Coming to terms with sexuality in our consumer culture is especially problematic for young women, who are told that they can do and be anything but are still restricted by oppressive double standards.

YA literature provides unique opportunities for young women to see themselves portrayed in fiction and imagine themselves as strong, capable, and leaning toward adulthood. The depictions of female sexuality and femininity in YA fiction provide alternative visions of what it means to be a female adolescent in contemporary American culture. These alternative visions include portrayals of young women as powerful, in control, and independent, as well as sexually assertive, confident, and adventurous. Through these alternative visions, YA literature reveals tensions that surround female sexuality, such as body image, teen pregnancy, sexual activity, and sexual orientation. In a cultural moment when girls are seeing themselves represented more often than ever before in television, films, and—finally—in professional sports, many images in popular media continue to objectify young female bodies. Young women are bombarded with conflicting messages every day, and they need help to understand and resist cultural pressure.

Popular culture is often viewed as an area of negotiation between dominant and opposing cultural elements. As Linda Christian-Smith points out, "Popular culture . . . exploits the many ideological strains that exist within society and represents the continuing struggle over women's place in the world."[2] YA fiction is a unique form of popular culture consumed primarily by adolescents, and thus informs their perception of themselves and the world. Especially for young women, the construction of a female identity in these texts is a powerful representation of both dominant and opposing gender ideologies.

Within the genre of YA literature lies a feminist continuum of resistance to the discourse of the dominant culture. The thread of feminist writing in YA literature is one of many strands on a continuum between repression and liberation. There is the recuperative strand, which depicts and exposes gender biases, stereotypical gender roles for women, and patriarchal constraints on female independence. This strand encourages individual self-reflection and suggests that building self-esteem is helpful in the face of overwhelming cultural influence.

The strand of resistance, which depicts resistance to both individual acts of repression and patriarchal oppression, also portrays the structures of patriarchal institutions and exposes them for the harmful structures they are. Very often these two strands exist simultaneously within individual texts. *Learning Curves* analyzes complex cultural messages embedded in YA fiction and reveals these books as both cheerleaders for the status quo and sources of resistance.

Feminist theory and criticism helps illuminate how YA literature participates in the social construction of a female identity. Feminist scholars have a long and vital history of valuing and appreciating marginalized works; YA fiction provides another opportunity for such studies. I hope this book will encourage women's studies scholars to include these books in courses that discuss female development, gender roles, and sexual orientation.

Scholars in education have long recognized the importance of YA literature as a genre worthy of study and critical attention. While many studies of the genre focus on content or literary evaluation, my hope is that my work demonstrates the value of feminist analyses of YA literature. I would also like to see educators use more YA novels that have previously been neglected, such as series books, romances, and lesbian novels.

Learning Curves: Body Image and Female Sexuality in Young Adult Fiction is a project in service of Natalie Angier's hopeful vision of a world in which "girls can imagine futures for each other."

Notes

1. Natalie Angier, *Woman: An Intimate Geography* (New York: Anchor Books, 1999).

2. Linda K. Christian-Smith, *Becoming a Woman through Romance* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

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