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Literature For Adolescents: Gold or Dross?

Literature for adolescents is difficult to define: like the concept of adolescence itself, its boundaries are fuzzy and continually shifting. Furthermore, reading is such a personal and idiosyncratic activity that it can never be adequately categorized by chronological age or period of psychological development. Some young adolescents will read traditional children's literature and adolescent literature, while their older counterparts may occasionally or even frequently favor the latest adult bestseller. The books I intend to speak of in this paper are the works of fiction written specifically for young people ranging in age from about twelve to seventeen years.[1]

The chief differences between adolescent and adult novels are in theme and point of view. Adolescent novels will generally deal with subjects of interest to that age group: loss of innocence, quest for identity, maturation, and finding one's place in society. Contemporaneity of subject matter, though common, is not essential: the theme may be worked out in the adolescent world of today, in the Roman Britain of Rosemary Sutcliff, or in the visionary territory of Martians or Hobbits.

In point of view, the author of an adolescent book will consciously or unconsciously have an adolescent as the implied reader. As. F.H. Langman says: "An author may write for a single person or a large public or for nobody. But the work itself implies the kind of reader to whom it is addressed".[2] This image of the implied reader will impel writers to focus their writing so that it is within the perceptual range of their young audience. This does not mean that they will write down to their readers; they merely recognize that young people have neither the maturity nor the life experience to understand let alone enjoy extreme technical or psychological complexity. On the whole, however:

> The good novel for the adolescent reader has attributes no different from any good novel. It must be technically masterful. It must present a significant synthesis of human experience. It must be free of Pollyannism and maintain a clear vision of the adolescent as a person of complexity, understanding and dignity.[3]

Though the adolescent novel is now an establised institution, it is a relative newcomer on the literary and educational scene. Sometimes known as "junior novels", or "teenage novels", or "young adult" novels, these books began appearing sporadically in the '30's. Generally saccharine and didactic as they then were, they were seldom taken seriously by reviewers or educators. The term "junior novel" as applied to this new genre was first used for marketing reasons. When Rose Wilder Lane's *Let the Hurricane Roar*[4] was published as an adult book in 1933, it was so popular with young people that Longman's editor decided to market it the following year as a junior book. As the thirties gave way to the forties and fifties, the trickle of adolescent literature became a flood. Now several hundred novels pour from the presses each year, many of which find their way into the school library and some into lists of required reading for English classrooms.

The junior novels had their roots in popular romances and especially in series books. Of the many writers of series novels, by far the most influential was Edward Stratemeyer, who had a hand in producing over one thousand titles. A major survey of reading interests conducted by the American Library Association in 1926, showed that a Stratemeyer title was listed as a favourite of 98 percent of young people polled.[5] Written to a rigid formula, these books represented the characteristics boys and girls most admired: all the stories were full of mystery, excitement and suspense, with the

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youthful protagonist finally triumphant against incredible odds. Though the characters were stereotyped, the plots poorly structured and the life presented bore little resemblance to reality, these books, now generally regarded as sub-literature, opened young people's eyes to the joy of readng and paved the way for the junior novel of the 1930's.[6]

Early Adolescent Novels

Most of the early junior novels were historical. *Let the Hurricane Roar*, mentioned above, was a short graphic story of pioneering days in Dakota. Written by Rose Wilder Lane, daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder of *Little House on the Prairie* fame, the book is a lively unsentimental story of a young couple fighting for survival in the hostile environment of the bleak Dakota plain. Beset by storms, crop failures, and accidents, the two young people steadfastly cling to their fifty-acre homestead and survive. The author manages to turn what could have been a melodramatic story into a loving chronicle about believable people of great courage and character. Another popular writer of the day, Florence Crannell Means published her first book *A Candle in the Mist*[7] in 1931. With considerable insight and candor, the book tells the story of a young orphan boy who travelled with his family to Minnesota in 1871. A later book *Shuttered Windows*[8] (1938) was the first attempt to portray blacks realistically in a novel for adolescents. It tells the story of a 16 year old girl who leaves her Minneapolis home to live with her grandmother in South Carolina. Though the plot is poorly developed and the tone moralistic by today's standards, the blacks are presented as worthwhile, dignified human beings.

An excellent book of historical fiction about the American revolution and about an adolescent's dilemma when circumstances alter his life appeared in 1944. Entitled *Johnny Tremain*[9], the book is a timeless story about a young man who still remains one of the most noteworthy characters in children's fiction. Fourteen-year-old Johnny is a siversmith's apprentice, ambitious for glory and arrogant and overbearing to his fellow workers. When a prank causes a cauldron of molten lead to fall on his right hand, harming it severely in the process, Johnny's career is over. His despair, humiliation, and eventual resignation are graphically drawn and his later participation in the American Revolution is expertly woven into an engrossing tale for which author Esther Forbes received the prestigious Newbery Medal.

Probably the most popular sports writer of the day was John Tunis whose first book *Iron Duke*,[10] about a young football hero from a small town who gets lost in the big world of Harvard, arrived on the market in 1938. Four years later appeared *All American*[11] which examined the problem of a black boy champion barred from a game because of his color, and the reaction of a white student to the ban. To the modern reader, the book is didactic and the characters are not finely drawn. Nevertheless, the theme is carefully handled and the atmosphere of the sports world conveyed with great flair for detail and verisimilitude.

Heralded by the appearance of Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer*[12] in 1942, the junior novel began to take on greater depth and maturity. A classic love story for teenagers, the book is the story of a young Wisconsin girl's seventeenth summer told from the point of view of the heroine herself. The plot is simple. Angie and Jack, two young people from very different backgrounds meet, fall in love, encounter troubles and frustration, and eventually part. Perhaps for the first time in adolescent literature, the teenage scene is honestly depicted with no dire warnings about the evils attendant on smoking or drinking. The nuances of adolescent behavior and the fears and insecurities of the young are drawn with a sure brush. It is neither sentimental nor didactic and the traditional 'happy' ending is eschewed. Though the realism of the book may seem tame to a reader in the '80's, *Seventeenth Summer* is still read and enjoyed by today's adolescents.

Another important novelist still popular today is Mary Stolz, who writes with admirable perception about people of all ages. Her first book *To Tell Your Love* (1950),[13] is a poignant portrait of a girl who waits all summer for a call which never comes and which she finally accepts will never come. A critic of the day Richard Alm praises her for her skill and versatility. In his view her novels were not for the masses but for the rarer more critical adolescent. Her deft powers of characterization, her plausible well-rounded plots, and her unerring perception of adolescent problems and concerns give a special poignancy to her novels.

Throughout the '40's and '50's lesser novelists also focused on genuine adolescent concerns, although the range of adolescent experience examined was still fairly narrow. Families, jobs, dating, and athletics were common themes, but such controversial subjects as drugs, alcohol, illegitimate pregnancy and the like were seldom introduced except to be decried. Many of these books were fairly obviously didactic and the main characters, like their earlier counterparts in series books, were generally too good to be true. The most serious problem facing the characters in books written by Rosamond du Jardin and a host of other popular novelists of the day was whom to date for the senior prom, or whether or not to go steady. All the protagonists in the novels are good, clean hearted, clean limbed, middle class Americans. In the antiseptic settings, sexual dilemmas are never allowed to intrude and difficulties rather readily overcome.

A phenomenon that flourished in the '30's and peaked in the '50's was the career novel. For every vocation (except the least desirable) a publisher was eager to provide young readers with a book about their favourite field. Unquestionably, books about nursing led the group in numbers and popularity. A representative writer in the genre was Helen Boylston whose *Sue Barton* (1936-1950)[14] series ran to seven volumes. In the books, the perfect, self-sacrificing Sue Barton works tirelessly to make others happy and even succeeds in eradicating the deep-rooted problems and frustrations of another teenager almost overnight. Another widely read book was *Peggy Covers The News* (1936)[15] by Emma Bugbee. An inexperienced reporter, Peggy lands a job on a large newspaper, finds even the dullest drudgery exciting, and soon established herself as a great success. In these and other such novels, the profession is over-glamorized, problems are solved with a minimum of effort and the main characters always succeed in their chosen profession.

Good or bad by the early sixties, adolescent novels were immensely popular with young people, if not with their elders. Meanwhile other forces were at work which were to have a tremendous influence on the quality of the novels, their subject matter, and their place in the school.

New Influences and Directions

One of the most contentious issues debated widely since the '30's was the relative merit of intensive versus extensive reading. As school enrollments expanded in the '30's and '40's, teachers were faced with an increasingly diverse clientele. It became more obvious than ever before that there was no hope of ever leading some young people to the classics and the whole idea of the intensive study of a few "great books" came under question. Noted writer and critic Helen Haines went so far as to say:

> Required formulized reading of the classics has forever deprived much great and beautiful literature of the influence it should have had in the later intellectual life of intelligent men and women.[16]

It was frequently suggested that this intensive reading far from encouraging a love of great books could in fact have the opposite effect:

> . . . well meaning English teachers once dissected them (the classics)for us, poked around for the intangible in them, tried to unscrew the inscrutable for us and fixed us for the most part so we shall never open these books again.[17]

As the intensive reading of the "classics" ceased to be regarded as absolutely essential for everyone, the idea began to evolve that the major purpose of reading was to broaden the students' horizons, to expose them to a variety of experiences and viewpoints.

While the discussion about what books children should or should not read continued, researchers were trying to discover what they actually did read.[18] The results of these studies suggested that children liked to read books about people like themselves, books about the real world with all its shadings of good and evil. Richard Carlsen, who did considerable research on reading habits and preferences, concluded that adolescents had to find books they enjoyed reading if they were to continue to read in later life.[19]

It was obvious that they could not enjoy reading modern classics by such writers as Faulkner, D.H. Lawrence, or Nabokov since young people could not be expected to penetrate books which delved into the dark stream of the unconscious and explored the introspective and subjective aspects of human experience. There had to be some good literature to bridge the gap between children's literature and the adult variety.

One book that young people did enjoy was Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.(1951)[20] Although it was aimed at the adult market, the book captured the hearts and minds of adolescents as no other book had ever done before. In the fifties it was widely studied in college courses, though it was not until the mid sixties that it began to be cautiously accepted in the schools. Its use of forbidden words and its frank treatment of the sexual confusions of youth helped pave the way for a more open and honest treatment of the adolescent world. Indeed the voices of many of the protagonists in later adolescent novels bear a remarkable resemblance to the Holden Caulfield monologue.

Meanwhile, the influence of the media, especially television, and the more permissive climate of the sixties were also having their effect. Young people were no longer content with sugar-coated versions of reality but were demanding more frankness and honesty in their reading. Furthemore, since lurid and salacious adult paperbacks were readily available in the corner drugstores, it became increasingly obvious that teenagers could no longer be protected from the realities of the world around them. The time was ripe for change in the field of adolescent literature.

The "New Realism"

The middle sixties ushered in this new "realism" as it came to be called. These novels depicted young people in ordinary situations without censoring their language or glossing over their conduct. Premarital sex, unwed motherhood, abortion, illicit drugs, all these issues and many more found their way into the stories. Of course other books for adolescents were being written as well, but these novels attracted so much attention that people tended to focus on them to the exclusion of all others.

With few exceptions, these new problem novels, as they were also called, have several characteristics in common. They are told from the point of view of a rather precocious adolescent faced with some typical adolescent problem or dilemma. Parents are unsympathetic or incompetent, when they are not banished entirely from the scene leaving the stage to their voluble and often more capable offspring. Instead of the conventional happy endings of previous junior novels, the new books generally end with the protagonist taking a small step forward in maturity or self-understanding. The language is conversational, with few descriptive passages or niceties of style and the setting is a mere backdrop for the action.

Since their appearance on the scene these novels have garnered enthusiastic admireres and vociferous detractors. On the negative side are those who claim that the books are thinly disguised tracts which impart information in a fictionalized disguise. Instead of growing out of the author's

imagination, they are *ad hoc* books focusing on the latest trendy subject. Respected Canadian critic Sheila Egoff[21] claims that young people read them because they are titillated by the excitement and hard core realism and flattered by being led to believe that they too can solve the problems contained in the stories.

On the other hand, proponents of the novels, while conceding that there are many meretricious books in this as in all genres, argue that there are several stories which honestly portray the realities of life, thus helping children to a fuller understanding of human dilemmas and human relationships. They argue that these books do not present a sugar-coated view of life, nor are they devoid of concepts worth pondering. In the best stories, the author is more concerned with developing the main character into a fully credible human being than in propounding some message.

One of the earliest and most prolific exponents of the new realism was Paul Zindel. His first novel *The Pigman*(1966)[22], generally conceded to be his best, has been widely praised by critics and is often the subject of classroom study. In spite of humorous passages, it is a sombre and chastening story about an alienated boy and girl at odds with their parents and bored with school, who befriend a lonely old man call Mr. Pignati (the "Pigman"). Told alternatively by Lorraine and John, the story follows the trio's unlikely friendship to its chilling climax. At the end of the story, the two young protagonists are left to ponder their role in the tragedy. The young person reading the story can see that the disaster results not from malevolent or arbitrary outside forces but from the actions of all three of the characters. Plausible, well structured and well written, *The Pigman* arouses genuine compassion and strengthens our understanding of human nature.

Later books by Mr. Zindel are not so felicitous. *My Darling, My Hamburger*(1969)[23], while immensely popular with teenagers, seems superficial and contrived. The characters, especially the parents, are so thinly drawn that the reader gains little insight into their motivation. The main theme of the book, the illegal abortion performed on Liz, is treated realistically as the sordid and squalid experience that it is though the didactic intent is inescapable. Two later books *Pardon Me You're Stepping On My Eyeball*(1977)[24] and *Confessions of a Teenage Baboon*(1977)[25] are so surrealistic as to border on the grotesque. With few exceptions, the characters are so bizarre and the world portrayed so nightmarish that our credulity is strained. Even the humor is hysterical and frenetic.

In all Zindel's novels the protagonists are bright, literate and neurotic young people who sound very much like Holden Caulfield, and their parents are uncaring or indifferent.

David Rees talks of Zindel this way:

> There is something peculiarly subversive about Zindel's books that appeals to adolescents. Adults, particularly authoritarian figures like policemen are usually portrayed in a bad light and the reader can feel himself happily encapsulated in an immature world in which the young are wronged, misunderstood and generally knocked about.[26]

Among the many writers who depict minority groups are Vera and Bill Cleaver who focus their writings on isolated rural families. Their first story *Where the Lilies Bloom*(1969)[27] is set in the Appalachian backwoods where 14 year-old Mary Call Luther struggles to keep her orphaned sisters and brothers together as a family after the death of their father. Sometimes sad and sometimes hilarious, the book opens the door on the harsh realities of a povery stricken family. Tough, but with a vulnerable streak, Mary Call is a unique character with great dignity and independence and even the minor characters are well delineated. Strong in its evocation of place, and in projecting character through speech, *Where the Lilies Bloom* has a powerful impact on the reader. Like all the Cleaver novels it is rooted in a firm sense of reality. The stage is set, the characters reveal themselves and the plot works itself out to its inevitable climax. No lucky chance, no sudden character reversal is allowed to intrude and dictate the solution. In spite of the harsh circumstances in which the

protagonists are placed, the over-all effect is not depressing. Whether they win or lose, they fight the good fight and leave the young reader with a sense of the indomitable power of the human spirit. The tone of a Cleaver novel is distinctive. The descriptions have the beauty and simplicity of Biblical cadences and the dialogue accurately reflects the setting and the individual character.

The novelist who has created the greatest stir on both sides of the Atlantic is Robert Cormier whose first book for adolescents *The Chocolate War*(1979)[28] is taught widely in college courses and highly praised by critics, although its popularity with adolescents is not quite so high.

On the surface, the novel is a political book about the manipulation and corruption that accompany unbridled power. Another less evident theme is the necessity for the individual to accept compromises in order to survive in today's society. At the beginning of the book, Terry Renault, the young protagonist, wants more than anything to become an admired member of the football team in Trinity High School. In the course of the story he gains the courage to stand up to the corrupt power structure of the school by refusing to participate in a chocolate drive. Archie, the school bully and his gang, "The Vigils," all of whom see Terry as a threat to the power structure, give him a terrifying psychological and physical beating. His spirit is broken and his life is changed forever. To his one friend, Goober, he says:

> They don't want you to do your thing, not unless it happens to be their thing. It's a laugh, Goober, a fake. Don't disturb the universe, Goober, no matter what the posters say.[29]

Terry has surrendered to conformity. Several reviewers condemned Cormier for the extreme pessimism of a story intended for adolescents. In answer to his critics, Cormier himself argued that it is important for people to realize that some of life's problems are not easily resolved, some can never be satisfactorily solved and others are only solved by the utmost efforts of the most capable people in the world.

Cormier's next book *I Am The Cheese* (1977)[30] is even more uncompromising in its message and more adventurous in its structure. It is the story of Adam, a young man whose parents have been "terminated" by agents of a ruthless government because the father had refused to give false testimony. With the help of psychological sessions, the boy recreates his knowledge of the past. Counterpointed against these revelations, is an imaginary bicycle ride Adam takes to see his father. The two streams converge as Adam returns to the mental home where, we learn, he is actually imprisoned and will later be "terminated"too: as a lone human being, he is no match for a corrupt system. Painfully chilling as the theme is, the book is not all unrelieved gloom. The remembered scenes between Adam and his parents, especially his father, are full of love and mutual understanding. As well, the structure of the novel and the quality of the writing are both admirable.

Very different from Robert Cormier is Judy Blume, by far the most popular of all "realistic" novelists and the one most often referred to when the new adolescent novels are being discussed. Based on her popularity with young people, five of her books have won eleven statewide awards and a television program has been based on her novel *Forever* (1976). Her books regularly appear on recommended lists, though a sizeable number of reviewers have also attacked her themes, her stylistic limitations, and her lack of depth.

The themes in Blume's books are the familar problems of growing up - physical development and maturation, sibling rivalry, getting along with parents and peers, adjusting to new conditions and surroundings, and sexual relationships. When her first book for young adolescents, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*[31], hit the shelves in 1970 it was an overnight success. Twelve-year-old Margaret, the protagonist, has two main sources of anxiety: whether she will soon menstruate and what church she should belong to (her father is Jewish and her mother is Christian). A later book

Deenie (1973)[32] is about a pretty teenager whose mother wants her to become a model until it is discovered that the girl has scoliosis and must wear a back brace for a few years. The most controversial of all her books is *Forever*(1976)[33] which deals with a teenage romance leading up to sexual intercourse, unaccompanied by guilt or fears of pregnancy.

Blume's books are all written in an easy uncomplicated style and narrated by the adolescent protagonist. She captures the petty worries and humiliations of young people and their complicated verbal sparrings very well and many of their predicaments are so humorously presented that young readers cannot fail to be amused. For young adolescents, overwhelmed by physiological changes, striving for independence from adults, highly dependent on peer opinion and still uncertain about their own roles, the books offer the consolation that other people are faced with the same difficulties. The young readers tend to identify with the fictional protagonist, their tensions may be somewhat relieved, and they may gain insights into their own situations. On the other hand, the competitiveness and self-absorption of the main characters in the books may intensify the egocentrism which marks the typical young adolescent.

Unlike great literature Blume's books deal only marginally with ethical or moral issues. Because the point of view is that of the ordinary, not very sensitive person, insights are equally limited. Margaret's concern about religion could have provided an opportunity to explore the possible significance of religion in her life. Instead the issue is confind to some chats with God and a few visits to church, where Margaret is more interested in the hats than the service. The subject of racial prejudice is raised twice in *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself* (1977).[34] However the incidents are not integral to the plot, reading rather as set pieces than as genuine explorations of the topic. Readers are told about the subject. They do not experience it.

Visitors to the Blume world enter a suburban, middle-class cocoon from which the poor, the ethnically different and the external "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" are largely excluded. Settings are mere backdrops. "Every home on our street looks the same," says Margaret and her statement could extend to all other homes in the stories, so transferable are the surroundings. The protagonists rather easily learn to cope with the dilemma with which they are confronted, so that one is left with the feeling that no growth has taken place. The rites of passage have been sidestepped.

The black experience and racial differences are also explored in several of the new novels. Earlier books about blacks were either simplistic attempts to enlist sympathy for an oppressed group or typical romances where good, well adjusted blacks were easily assimilated into a white middle-class world. A book that honestly portrays Negro life and shows the conditions giving rise to racial strife is *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968)[35] by Kristin Hunter. The protagonist is Louretta Hawkins who lives with her mother and seven brothers and sisters in a northern ghetto. Lou and her friends meet at an old clubhouse to compose and sing soul music, but a number of other blacks join street gangs and get into trouble with the law, in the person of a brutal white policeman Officer Lafferty. The plot is unconvincing and the black militancy is shown to be more the result of personal failure than social conditions. Still the book is well rooted in the black experience.

Perhaps no one has succeeded better than Mildred Taylor in conveying the realities of racial prejudice. *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry* (1976)[36] follows the agonizing ordeal of an intelligent, well to do, black Mississippi family as they suffer the nasty persecution of white neighbors. The tension is powerfully sustained as the plot builds to its terrifying climax when a young black boy, T.J., is sentenced to death for a crime, for which four white boys are more responsible than he. Taylor's powerful and poetic command of language can be seen in this paragraph where Cassie, the young protagonist, reflects on T.J.'s fate:

> I had never liked T.J., but he had always been there, a part of my life, just like the mud and the rain, and I had thought he always would be. Yet the mud and the rain and the dust would all pass. I knew and understood that. What had happened to T.J. in the night I did not understand, but I knew that it would not pass. And I cried for those things which had happened in the night and would not pass.[37]

Another black writer of great distinction is Paula Fox. Acclaimed widely all over the English speaking world for the sublety and nuance of her language and her understanding of emotionally starved children, Fox's books deal with universal issues rather than the color of the skin. Her greatest book *The Slave Dancer* (1973)[38] is a historical adventure story set in 1840 about black slavery and the humiliations routinely meted out to the unfortunate slaves.

The British Scene

Until recently very few books about adolescent life in Britain today have appeared on the market and those that have been published have received limited distribution, mainly because so few of them are available in paperback form. The best of these books have a depth and maturity not commonly found in their American counterparts; the worst of the genre are dull, plodding and class conscious. The good writers display greater variety in sentence structure and vocabulary and are not afraid of using literary devices and mythological references. On the whole too, the characters in British books are more consistently drawn and more objective and broader in their interests than the characters in American novels. On the other hand, even the best British books can be so overloaded with descriptive detail that the young reader may lose sight of the plot. One could also wish for a light touch of humor on more frequent occasions.

A few noteworthy writers, very different in style and theme, are John Rowe Townsend, Nina Bawden, and Jill Paton Walsh. Of the three, Townsend is the most popular and prolific. *Noah's Castle*(1976)[39] is set in England when runaway inflation threatens the population with starvation. To provide for his family one man buys a huge house, stocks it up, and barricades it against all comers. The ensuing scenes when outsiders fight for the supplies are hauntingly vivid. The basic question posed is: How far does one go to protect one's own? *The Intruder* (1970)[40] is a dramatic story about a 16 year old boy followed by a sinister man who eventually takes command of the family household. Characterization, plot and the remarkable evocation of atmosphere and mood make this a momentous story of high dramatic quality. (It has since been filmed.)

Nina Bawden's best novel for children is probably *Carrie's War* (1973)[41], a story of hushed suspense and emotional complexity. Told by Carrie after she has visited the place years later as an adult with children of her own, the story revolves around the period when she and her brother lived in a Welsh mining town during the London blitz. Bawden is skilled in portraying character through their thoughts and actions and in evoking a sympathetic understanding of widely different people, even those who appear to be rigid and intolerant, like the fanatically religious Mr. Evans.

Jill Paton Walsh is remarkable for her use of the stream of consciousness technique and her deft handling of characters as flawed human beings, not heroes or villains. In *Firewood* (1969)[42] the London blitz of 1940 provides a disorderly background for the homeless adolescents, Bill and Julie, who meet and decide to stay together in an abandoned house. When they are later rescued, working-class Bill realizes that he can never be any more than a friend to Julie because her wealthy family will never allow it. Two other books, *Golden Grove* (1972)[43] and especially its sequel *Unleaving* (1976)[44], are experimental in style moving from past to present, illuminating situations from multiple angles. Both books deal with love and jealousy and selfishness and sacrifice. As the titles *Golden Grove* and *Unleaving* imply, the stories echo the themes of Gerald Manley Hopkins' poem "Margaret"

> Margaret are you grieving over Golden Grove unleaving? . . .[45]

Unleaving is about young Madge, an Oxford University student who spends the summer in a house given to her by her grandmother. A young retarded girl falls (or is pushed) from a cliff and Madge tries to deal with the tragedy. The symbolism of the waves, the dying leaves, and the lighthouse is very reminiscent of Virgina Woolf's books.

Canadian Writers

Canada has produced some fine animal stories, Indian and Eskimo legends and tales of outdoor adventure. Ernest Thompson Seton, for example, is renowned all over the world for his realistic animal stories, just as Farley Mowat is for adventure stories like *Lost in the Barrens* (1973)[46], and James Houston for his fine distillation of the essence of Inuit life. However, Canadian writers and publishers have yet to exploit the teenage market to any great extent, partly, no doubt because of the small market and the availability of popular American paperbacks.

Such books as have appeared are mainly in the traditional adventure story or fantasy genre. One fairly popular new writer for adolescents is Kevin Major whose books are set in today's Newfoundland. His first adolescent novel *Hold Fast* (1978)[47] is a well-crafted, realistic story about 14 year old Michael's struggle to survive in new surroundings after both his parents are killed in a car crash and of his new uncertain feelings for a girl named Brenda. His next book *Far From Shore* (1980)[48] about a family mired in poverty and unemployment and about the sibling rivalry between the 15 year old protagonist and his sister is also realistic and perceptive.

Another new writer, Gordon Korman, has produced several exciting, if not memorable, books, one of which *This Can't Be Happening at MacDonald Hall* (1980)[49] is a hilarious account of the antics of two young boys at a private boarding school. Another writer who has recently written a book for adolescents is James Brown. His *Superbike* (1982)[50] is about a high school boy who prefers biking to studying. The biking scenes are particularly well done and the values upheld in the novel emerge inevitably from the story, not from the didactic outpourings of the author.

A few adolescent novels written from a female perspective have also appeared. *Susie Q* (1978)[51] by Eric Wilson deals with teenage pregnancy with a sensitive awareness of adolescents as people, not a breed apart. *No Way Back* (1978) by Bill Bleeks[52] delves into the lives of two sisters, particularly Susan who finds herself more and more alienated from the narrow life of a small Alberta town. The treatment of the theme is very much like many American novels of its type but the setting is unmistakably Canadian.

Australian Writers

Two Australian novelists whose books have achieved some popularity in North America are Ivan Southall and Patricia Wrightson. Southall's books explore areas of fear and insecurity in the minds of his characters, who are generally intense and humorless, but never shallow. His style is tense and staccato, giving the impression of fast movement under high pressure. One of his most interesting books is *Let the Balloon Go* (1968)[53] about the gallant efforts of a spastic boy to try something for himself unhampered by well-meaning efforts to help him. For young John the 20 foot tree to be scaled is his Everest and the climb is full of excitement. When he reaches the top, he muses triumphantly: "He was strong. He was free. He was a boy like any other boy." The book underlines the need to empathize with the whole person, rather than merely pitying his/her disabilities.

Patricia Wrightson is a stimulating writer who has a gift for dealing with unusual subjects with great skill and humanity. *I Own the Racecourse* (1968)[54] is a poignant but never mawkish story of a 'slow' boy who thinks he has really bought a racecourse with the three dollars he paid to a tramp. Andy the protagonist is a sunny character whose older friends Joe and Mike look out for him and

agree with him until they fear that his delusions have gone too far. In writing that is energetic and evocative, the strong storyline works to a satisfying conclusion. The book makes the reader rethink his/her view of 'slow' or 'retarded' and raises the question of whether deception, even for the best reasons, is desirable.

Science Fiction

Today's adolescents often have more affinity with the future than with the past. In our rapidly changing world, science fiction can provide them with a sense of perspective and give them a feeling of continuity, a feeling that the universe will follow some pattern. Robert Heinlein calls this genre speculative fiction in which the author takes as his first postulate the real world as we know it. The result can be extremely fantastic in content but it is not fantasy. It is legitimate and often tightly reasoned speculation about the possibilities of the real world. The major difference between science fiction and fantasy is that science fiction suggests real hypotheses about the universe, but fantasy leads us to imaginary mythological places and uses the other world to explore the familar.

The best science fiction writers have not felt compelled to write specifically for young adults, but since science fiction for children differs very little from that written for adults, young people read books by Arthur Clarke, Ray Bradbury and Isaac Asimov as well as books written for themselves.

With few exceptions, the early books of science fiction were poor, with the emphasis on the weird, the grotesque, and the macabre. However, after World War II this literature became more mature as it turned away from green men and three-eyed monsters to become more and more concerned with human questions. Evidence of the new respectability of the genre was the fact that the prestigious Modern Languages Association established a science fiction newsletter in 1959.

One of the earliest writers of this improved science fiction was Robert Heinlein, whose first book *Rocket Ship Galileo* (1952)[55], was an instant hit with young readers. It told the story of a scientist and three young children who went to the moon in a do-it-yourself rocket ship. A later book, *Stranger in a Strange Land* (1961)[56], though not written specifically for adolescents, became a cult book with young readers. It tells the story of a young man from Mars who arrives on Earth and finds the new planet strange and confusing. The characters in the book are well-drawn, suspense is maintained at a high pitch and the whole story seems reasonable and factual.

Modern writers like John Christopher are more philosophic in their approach. In his books, Christopher's main preoccupation is with freedom versus authority. His themes suggest that the acceptance of authority is sometimes easy, and freedon, though desirable, demands more from us. His *White Mountain Trilogy* (1948-1968)[57] is a compelling narrative about an alien race which has reduced mankind to slavery. Man's struggle for freedom eventually succeeds, but the new world collapses because of internal conflicts. The sober, realistic ending is a warning that we must always be vigilant against tyranny.

Sylvia Engdahl's books are more for the general audience than for science fiction fans. Eschewing esoteric creatures and alien terrain, she examines the question of man's place in the universe. Her best books *Enchantress from the Stars* (1970)[58] and *The Far Side of Evil* (1971)[59] raise questions about our own identity and our place in the universe.

Canadian author Monica Hughes has written several important books sometimes labelled science fiction and sometimes fantasy. One of her finer stories is *Keeper of the Isis Light* (1980)[60] where the scientific elements are so well integrated into the story as to seem completely plausible. Young Olwen is the Keeper of the Light on Isis, an outpost in space far removed from an overcrowded Earth. Her only companion is her guardian who provides for her needs and insists that she always

wear a protective suit. (We learn later on in the story that Olwen's metabolism has been manipulated by her guardian to enable her to work in an alien environment and she now looks reptilian). Into this outpost comes a party of settlers and Olwen becomes involved with Mark, one of their number, who finally persuades her to remove the suit. When she realizes that Mark is horrified at her appearance, Olwen sadly decides to go back to the high hills far away from the settlers, where she continues to keep the light to warn the settlers of impending storms. Hughes handles the tension with great discipline and she make the final resolution completely believable.

Fantasy

Psychologists have always emphasized the importance of facing ones fears and even going out to meet them. Many young people enjoy fantasy because they like to dream, to cross the fringes of reality, to enter into a strange world where good and evil are readily identifiable. Most fantasies are quests, in which a young person travels on a long and perilous journey infested with evil creatures and beset by apparently insurmountable obstacles. However, once the ground rules of the magical world have been established it has its own logic which must be observed if the story is to be successful.

Many of the best fantasies are British. Probably the novel most popular with teenagers was Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* though it was intended for an adult audience. Another fine British writer, but one who writes exclusively for a young audience, is Ursula Le Guin. There is magic in her books but it is never the main interest. All of them deal with problems of maturing and acceptance of responsibility and other themes that realistic novels deal with. Her *Earthsea Trilogy* is set in a magical world peopled by magical people but the parallels between Earthsea and our world are inescapable. In the first of these books, *A Wizard of Earthsea* (1968)[61], the hero Ged fails to remember the relationship between one act and another. At the end of the story, he discovers that the shadow which is pursuing him and which he has tried to evade for so long is in himself. He grows up when he accepts himself as he is, the good with the bad. This novel like all the others is strongly critical of the fact that people should do things, just because they are able to do them. In *Earthsea* for example, an arid quest for immortality leads the people to lose all their powers.

Alan Garner, another English author, more popular in Great Britian than in North America, has written several fantasies, the most popular being *The Owl Service* (1967)[62] which is based on a Welsh legend from the *Mabinogion* and re-enacted in a modern setting. A gripping mystery, it embroils three young people, Gwyn, a poor Welsh boy, and Alison and Roger, a middle class brother and sister in a succession of weird events. The conflict is more powerful because the danger comes from inside the characters, not from external forces.

Though his books are inspired by Welsh legends, Lloyd Alexander is an American writer whose stories tell in an undidactic way about the dreams of youth and the realities of growing up. In these fantasies, evil is not readily overcome, but it can be vanquished by unending struggle. The hero of his five-volume *Prydain* (1964)[68] series is Taran, a lowly assistant pig-keeper who eventually becomes King of Prydain. Taran is a reckless, hotheaded boy who very gradually becomes wise and responsible. Princess Elowny, whom he woos and wins, is independent and attractive, though somewhat predictable. There are many journeys, ambushes, bewitchings, imprisonments and escapes in Alexander's carefully created mythical world. At the end of the series, in typical American fashion, the young pig-keeper without ties of ancestry, and with a wife who renounces them, enters a new world and turns his face to the future not to the past.

Historical Fiction

Although there are some excellent historical novels for adolescents, particularly from England,

the historical novel is not particularly popular in North America. Pre-eminent among novelists working in the genre are Rosemary Sutcliff and Leon Garfield. Sutcliff's books are set in ancient and Roman Britain,recreated with meticulous accuracy. Her stories have the epic sweep and plangent rhythms of a writer who cares deeply about her subject and about the art of writing itself. All her young protagonists are believable human beings, not the cardboard characters sometimes roaming the pages of the "costume" and "gadzooks" type of historical novel which have given the whole genre a bad name. One of her most popular books is *The Lantern Bearers* (1964)[64], a spellbinding adventure about Britain in the fifth century. The protagonist is Aquila, whose sister marries one of the foreign invaders. Smoothly written, fast-paced and brilliantly vivid, the book shows the gradual merging of people from many groups to one cohesive nation.

A far different writer is Leon Garfield whose exuberant chronicles of 18th century England teem with earthy vigor and lusty humor. Over his sweeping canvasses swarm a motley variety of characters: orphans, actors, thieves, prostitutes, soldiers, clergymen and blackmailers with a prodigality of invention reminiscent of Smollett or Dickens. His fast paced narrative, his ability to create one sentence sketches of his characters, and the enormous vitality of his stories keep young readers enthralled. One of his best books is *Black Jack* (1969)[65], about a highway man saved from the hands of the hangman by secreting a silver tube in this mouth. He encounters the young boy Bartholomew whom he forces to accompany him. In spite of a melodramatic plot, *Black Jack* is an engrossing story.

Conclusion

With the proliferation of adolescent literature the matter of reviewing and selecting appropriate books for schools and libraries becomes of ever-increasing importance. Although several journals and a handful of books deal with the subject, no consistent reviewing standards have yet been agreed upon. Are these books to be reviewed in the total context of literature or should other standards of criticism prevail?

Those manning the barricades for literary excellence argue that a good book is a good book and it should be reviewed solely on its artistic qualities, without any reference to its possible readership. Others maintain that potential reader interest is of fundamental importance, that if literary excellence were to be the sole criterion for choosing a book many young people might make haste to the nearest drugstore for more congenial reading or stop reading entirely. Bibliotherapy or the treatment of emotional problems through the use of literature is another reviewing focus. Proponents of bibliotherapy argue that the reading of suitable books enables young people to see that others have similar problems and thus the reading can provide a catharsis or release. The danger in using this approach to reviewing is that the book may be judged not on its worth as literature but on whether or not it treats an adolescent problem. It must also be admitted that some novelists allow the therapeutic message to overwhelm the literature. Such books as *Are You in the House Alone?* (1976)[66] by Richard Peck and *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit* (1974)[67] by Paula Danziger are typical examples of books so overwhelmed by their own good intentions that they manipulate readers into accepting a specific course of action.

There is no simple answer to this reviewing dilemma. For the reviewer of adolescent literature questions of style, structure, technical subtlety, power of characterization, and thematic values are obviously applicable. On the other hand, some account must be taken of the book's potential popularity with the young reader. As long as the intelligent, honest reviewer is clear that popularity is not a critical term and the audience is made aware of the frame of reference being used, no deception is being practiced.

In the long run, questions of enduring literary excellence are the province of the critic, not the reviewer. Reviewing evaluates for the time being; criticism deals in perspective and places the book

in its broader context (although criticism can't be kept completely out of reviewing). Reviewer *par excellence* Virgina Woolf once said that a reviewer's task was partly to inform the public, partly to criticize the book and partly to advertise its existence. Good reviewing *and* good criticism will raise the standards of book selection and, in all likelihood, improve the quality of the adolescent literature in the future.

Notes

[1] Given the voluminous body of adolescent literature, the author will discuss only the books that seem particularly illustrative of the point being made. Other authors which could add to the discussion but, because of practical constraints, must be omitted are: Lousie Fitzhugh, Virginia Hamilton, Isabelle Holland, S.E. Hinton, M.E. Kerr, Norma Klein, Elaine Koningsburg, Katherine Paterson, Richard Peck and Robert Newton Peck.

[2] F.H. Langman, "The Idea of the Reader in Literary Criticism", *British Journal of Aesthetics*, (January 1967), p. 85.

[3] D.L. Burton, "The Novel for the Adolescent", *English Journal*, 44, (May 1955), p. 272.

[4] Rose Wilder Lane, *Let the Hurricane Roar*, (New York: Longmans, Green, 1933).

[5] *Children's Reading Interests*, (Chicago: American Library Association, 1926).

[6] The following books discuss questions pertaining to adolescent literature:

G. Robert Carlsen, *Books and the Teenage Reader*, (New York: Harper & Row), 1967, 1971, 1980.

Kenneth L. Donelson and Aileen Pace Nilsen, *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, (Glenview Illinois: Scott, Lonesman, 1980).

David Rees, *The Marble in the Water*, (Boston: Honn Book Inc., 1980).

John Rowe Townsend, *A Sense of Story*, (London: Longman, 1971).

Jana Varlejs, ed., *Young Adult Literature in the Seventies*, (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1978).

[7] Florence Crannell Means, *A Candle in the Mist*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1931).

[8] *Shuttered Windows*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1930).

[9] Esther Forbes, *Johnny Tremain*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1944).

[10] John Tunis, *All American*, (New York: Harcourt Bruce, 1942).

[11] *Iron Duke*, (New York: Harcourt Bruce, 1938).

[12] Maureen Daly, *Seventeenth Summer*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1942).

[13] Mary Stolz, *To Tell Your Love*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1950).

[14] Helen Boylston, *Sue Barton, Staff Nurse*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1952).
, *Sue Barton, Student Nurse*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1936).

[15] Emma Bugbee, *Peggy Covers The News*, (New York: Dodd, Meed, 1936).

[16] Helen E. Haines, "Adventures in Reading for Young People", *ALA Bulletin*, 24 (1930), p. 513.

[17] Lloyd Shaw, "Touching the Intangible", *Wilson Library Bulletin*, 10 (1935), p. 110.

[18] See for example:

Ethel L. Cornell, "The Voluntary Reading of High School Pupils", *ALA Bulletin*, 35 (May 1941), pp. 295-300.

George W. Norvell, *The Reading Interests of Young People*, (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1950). See also the Revised edition *The Reading Interests of Young People*, Lansing: Michigan State University, 1973).

Stephen Dunning, "The Most Popular Junior Novels", *Junior Libraries*, 5 (December 15, 1959), pp. 7-9.

Paul A. Witty, "A Study of Pupil Interests, Grades 9, 10, 11, and 12", *Education*, 82 (1961), pp. 100-110.

[19] G. Richard Carlsen, "The Right Size", *Top of the News*, 23 (November 1966), pp. 55-62.

[20] J.D. Salinger, *Catcher in the Rye*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951).

[21] Sheila Egoff, "Mary Hill Arbuthnot Honor Lecture: Beyond the Garden Wall", *Top of the News*, 35 (Spring 1979), pp. 257-271.

[22] Paul Zindel, *The Pigman* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968).

[23] Paul Zindel, *My Darling, My Hamburger*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1969).

[24] Paul Zindel, *Pardon Me You're Stepping on my Eyeball*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

[25] Paul Zindel, *Confessions of a Teenage Baboon*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1977).

[26] David Rees, *The Marble in the Water*, (Boston: Horn Book Inc., 1979), p. 15.

[27] Vera and Bill Cleaver, *Where the Lilies Bloom*, (New York: J.P. Lipincott, 1969).

[28] Robert Cormier, *The Chocolate War*, (New York: Pantheon, 1979).

[29] Robert Cormier, *The Chocolate War*, p. 248.

[30] Robert Cormier, *I Am the Cheese*, (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

[31] Judy Blume, *Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret*, (New York: Bradbury, 1970).

[32] Blume, *Deenie*, (New York: Bradbury, 1973).

[33] Blume, *Forever*, (New York: Bradbury, 1976).

[34] Blume, *Starring Sally J. Freedman as Herself*, (New York: Bradbury, 1977).

[35] Kristin Hunter, *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou*, (New York: Szebinen's Sons, 1968).

[36] Mildred Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, (New York: Dial Press, 1976).

[37] Taylor, *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry*, p. 278.

[38] Paula Fox, *The Slave Dancer*, (New York: Bradbury, 1973).

[39] John Rowe Townsend, *Noah's Castle*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1976).

[40] Rowe, *The Intruder*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1970).

[41] Nina Bawden, *Carrie's War*, (London: Gollancz, 1973).

[42] Jill Paton Walsh, *Firewood*, (London: Macmillan, 1969).

[43] Paton, *Golden Grove*, (London: Macmillan, 1972).

[44] Paton, *Unleaving*, (London: Macmillan, 1976).

[45] Gerard Manley Hopkins, "Margaret" in *Golden Treasury*, p. 392.

[46] Farley Mowat, *Lost in the Barrens*, (Toronto: McClelland & Steward, 1973).

[47] Kevin Major, *Hold Fast*, (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1978).

[48] Major, *Far From Shore*, (Toronto: Clarke, Irwin, 1980).

[49] Gordon Korman, *This Can't Be Happening at Macdonald Hall*, (Richmond, Ontario: Scholastic Tab, 1980).

[50] James Brown, *Superbike*, (Richmond Hill, Ontario: Scholastic Tab, 1982).

[51] Eric Wilson, *Susie Q* (Richmond, Ontario: Scholastic Tab, 1978).

[52] Bill Bleeks, *No Way Back*, (Richmond, Ontario: Scholastic Tab, 1978).

[53] Ivan Southall, *Let the Balloon Go*, (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1968).

[54] Patricia Wrightson, *I Own the Racecourse*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1968).

[55] Robert Heinlein, *Rocket Ship Galileo*, (New York, Scribner, 1952).

[56] Robert Heinlein, *Stranger in a Strange Land*, (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

[57] John Christopher, *The White Mountains, The City of Gold and Lead, The Pool of Fire*, (London: Macmillan, 1967-1968).

[58] Sylvia Engdahl, *Enchantress from the Stars*, (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

[59] Engdohl, *The Far Side of Evil*, (New York: Atheneum, 1971).

[60] Monica Hughes, *The Keeper of the Isis Light*, (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1980).

[61] Ursula Le Guin, *A Wizard of Earthsea, The Tombs of Atuan, The Farthest Shore*, (London: Atheneum, 1968-1972).

[62] Alan Garner, *The Owl Service*, (London: Walck, 1967).

[63] Lloyd Alexander, *The Book of Three, The Black Cauldron, The Castle of Llyr, Taran Wanderer, The High King*, (New York: Holt Rinehart, 1965-1968).

[64] Rosemary Sutcliff, *The Lantern Bearers*, (London: Henry Z Walck, 1964).

[65] Leon Garfield, *Black Jack*, (London: Pantheon, 1969).

[66] Richard Peck, *Are You in the House Alone?* (New York: Viking, 1976).

[67] Paula Danziger, *The Cat Ate My Gymsuit*, (New York: Dell, 1974).