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How to make a girl: female sexuality in young adult literature

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HOW TO MAKE A GIRL:
FEMALE SEXUALITY
IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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in

The Department of English

By
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Dedicated to my mother and feminist inspiration, Ann Carol Younger.
Acknowledgments

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Abstract

Young Adult literature is an important source of information for young readers, and this genre makes a distinct contribution to the cultural and social construction of femininity and female sexuality in its pages. *How to Make a Girl: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* analyzes representations of female sexuality in more than fifty texts. By examining these texts in relation to each other and in terms of historical development, this project creates a literary history of female sexuality in Young Adult fictions. By depicting young women in varying stages of adolescence and young adulthood, these fictional texts offer unique representations of young female characters.

Since adolescence is a life stage that usually includes a growing awareness of sexuality, this genre is replete with issues, images, and ideas connected to sexuality. By analyzing themes and tropes such as body image, lesbianism, pregnancy, and romance, and their relationship(s) to female sexuality, this study reveals the participation of Young Adult literature in the social construction of femininity and female sexuality. Examining these texts with a feminist perspective reveals the complexities of these representations. Each chapter focuses on the various functions of these tropes, such as an imbedded link between body image and sexual responsibility, a critique of compulsory heterosexuality, pregnancy as impetus for separation from the traditional family unit and the idea of romance as a transitional stage for young women. While many texts reinforce traditional gender roles for young women, many more texts challenge received ideas and provide alternative visions of what it means to be young and female in patriarchal culture.
**Introduction**

An important source of direct and indirect cultural information for young readers, Young Adult literature portrays adolescents negotiating the social and sexual standards of the dominant culture. Often defined as what is specifically published for teenagers, Young Adult literature encompasses books written about young adults and teenagers, while Adolescent literature includes anything that same group freely chooses to read. Studying Young Adult literature reveals the genre as uniquely subject to social supervision and censorship, and situates these texts in a marginal cultural position that resembles the life stage it seeks to describe.

Young Adult fiction deserves critical recognition, and should be studied separately from children’s texts, since each genre focuses on a unique stage of life. In existence since 1949, Young Adult fiction has become a distinct body of literature with a rapidly developing canon. The genre has its own traditions such as first-person narration and a focus on adolescent protagonists. Because of its focus on adolescents in formation, the genre also centers on sexuality and sexual development, particularly female sexuality. Because of this locus, Young Adult literature is a prominent site of the construction/representation of teenage female sexuality.

Because of its focus on adolescent characters, Young Adult fiction (unlike other genres) provides a vast range of representations of adolescent girls as sexual beings. 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 (21). Her statement applies as well to Young Adult literature. Examining
more than fifty Young Adult texts in relation to each other and over fifty years, this project creates a literary history of female sexuality in Young Adult fiction.

Despite its continuing popularity among readers and educators, until recently Young Adult Literature has received scant attention from literary critics. According to Caroline Hunt in “Young Adult Literature Evades the Theorists,” “from 1980-1995 . . . not a single major theorist in the field deals with young adult literature as something separate from literature for younger children.” (5). Occasionally examined in journals that focus on Children’s Literature, Young Adult Literature is a distinct and separate genre that merits scholarly attention.

What little critical writing that exists comes mostly from scholars in education, psychology and library science. These scholars, such as Amy Bowles-Reyer and Michael Cart, have made major contributions by recognizing the significance and influence of this genre. Bowles-Reyer’s dissertation (1998) examines the influence of 1970’s era feminism on Young Adult texts, and Michael Cart’s history of Young Adult literature (1996) is an informative and concise overview. Both of these studies situate and classify Young Adult fictions according to social era or decade, a useful and necessary categorization. Another groundbreaking work is Roberta Seelinger Trites’ *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Adolescent Literature* (2000), which examines 20th century texts through a Foucauldian lens. Her work examines common themes found in Young Adult texts and analyzes how the narratives uphold or subvert institutional, social and individual power. Trites’ 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 patriarchal culture in which a sexual double standard persists. One
sharply focused study, Linda Christian-Smith’s *Becoming a Woman Through Romance*,
examines Young Adult romance novels from a political-feminist perspective. Christian-
Smith’s study reveals the extreme popularity of teen romances in the 1980’s, which 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 Young Adult literature. My dissertation joins this community by examining
the importance and prevalence of female sexuality in a genre that focuses on the life stage
of adolescence.

This study will examine Young Adult literature from a feminist perspective. The
feminist lens that I use is unique; and reflects an awareness that there is no single unified
feminist theory but many theories, each based on unique perspectives and positions. 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 informs this
study as well. I read and cherished many of the texts in this project when I was an
adolescent. I have also continued to read and value Young Adult texts throughout my
adult life. While I am aware that the perspective I bring to these texts 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.

Alongside utilizing a feminist rubric, I define my critical lens as one that
interrogates (and values) the female experience in patriarchal culture. I recognize that
these texts, published at differing social spaces throughout the 20th century, reflect
different social milieus and mores. Thus, I utilize feminist techniques that take into account these eras. Much valuable feminist work has a recuperative focus; that is the idea that texts are examined with the aim of reclaiming and re-visioning female roles from a masculinist, patriarchal and sexist milieu. This study includes recuperative ideas, but moves beyond reclaiming to the idea of transcendence. By transcendence I mean that while it is vitally important to recognize where women and girls have been oppressed and marginalized, it is equally valuable to posit another realm in which women are re-imagining their lives not simply in response to oppression, but beyond it. Recognizing and naming the structures of patriarchy and the myriad ways in which they have harmed women (and men) is a vital function of any feminist critical perspective. But the possibilities for change must include some idea of new structures and anti-structures; new ways in which the world can be made to resemble something more like an egalitarian society.

My dissertation aims to recognize texts within Young Adult fiction that approach and achieve ideas beyond patriarchal oppression. More specifically, while I do examine texts with a recuperative function in mind, I also analyze texts that suggest feminist re-imaginings of existing patriarchal structures. Even more specifically in terms of female sexuality, this project seeks to examine and reveal the ways in which oppressive patriarchal structures have converged to create a definition of femininity and female sexuality that is in many ways antithetical to women’s reality. Of course, there is no single, unified reality for women, even in patriarchy. By examining Young Adult fictions, I expose how cultural assumptions and social constraints are reinforced through representations of young women. I also reveal that many texts reject cultural constraints,
and move beyond patriarchy to re-imagine futures for young women in ways that resist and reject traditional and regressive ideas of femininity and sexuality.

My vision of female sexuality involves choice, freedom and liberation. By choice I mean the idea that each young women should be able to choose when and how she becomes sexual, and with whom. By freedom I mean the opportunity to have access to information, social and family support of whatever decisions she makes. And most importantly, by freedom I mean freedom from sexual coercion of any kind, and freedom from sexual and physical abuse. And finally, by liberation I mean the idea that each individual should be able to enjoy sexuality without social or public recrimination or punishment. Young women should not be subject to a double standard, and should be able to freely express themselves sexually without fear of reprisal.

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. 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. (1)

It is during this “intersection” between childhood and adulthood that the importance of sex and gender roles becomes visible to the growing young woman. 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 patriarchal culture, this process is especially difficult for girls.

In a culture which 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” (7). The constant social and cultural pressure exerted on young women to appear sexual yet not be sexual is at the very least confusing and at worst, 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 20th and early 21st centuries. Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* and Joan Jacobs Brumberg’s *The Body Project* each 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*, Lynn Ponton asserts that “sexuality is a vital aspect of teens’ lives” (2). 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 have 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. (3)
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 is “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. Ponton also points out that what is needed 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. Young Adult literature is a powerful locus of self-formation for teens; and, for some, it may be their only source of information about sex.

Young Adult fictions are only one source of direct and indirect cultural information about sex, gender and sexuality. But, as Young Adult critic Joyce Litton points out, “Graphic novels on sexuality are necessary because America’s parents are often reluctant to provide their children with adequate information and guidance” (181). Young Adult texts 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 contents of these fictions are more than didactic; the subtext of adolescent literature creates a history of late 20th century gender roles and sexuality. The innocent teen romances of the early 1940’s and 1950’s aptly depict the oppressive sexual double standards of that era, such as compulsory virginity and chaste kisses. Then, in the more progressive 1960’s and 1970’s, 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 message and meaning. Within each historical period Young Adult literature exists that overtly challenges conventional social values. There are also texts that unreservedly uphold them. The exceptions are those fictions that complicate issues of representation by exposing social ideologies and questioning their validity. By examining selected Young Adult texts for their sexual content, situating them within their social era, and analyzing their discursive qualities, this project seeks to reveal a continuum of complex literary resistance to the oppressive value systems of patriarchal culture.

In American patriarchal culture, female sexuality and femininity are prominent sites of power struggles. Young Adult Literature reflects and reinforces the formation of a female identity; by studying these texts closely, I reveal and analyze the gendered dynamics at work in these fictions. Feminist literary studies have focused on traditional literature, but should be revised to include these historically marginalized Young Adult novels.

My dissertation reveals that Young Adult literature belongs to a continuum of feminist writing. Young Adult fiction focuses on young, mostly female protagonists, which has placed this literature at the margins of literary culture. But these texts have literary merit, and by studying them closely feminist scholars will unearth themes similar to those in other genres. Feminist literary critics have created an important historical precedent of examining previously marginalized genres and texts. It is within that tradition that I reclaim Young Adult literature as a genre important for feminist critical study.
This dissertation expands the field of women’s studies to include Young Adult and Adolescent Literature. By analyzing Young Adult texts as primarily women’s productions, Women’s Studies scholars continue the recuperative tradition of studying and valorizing under-appreciated works by women. My dissertation also reveals the connections between Young Adult literature and women’s studies in topics such as female sexual development, gender roles and alternative sexualities.

This project aims to contribute to the field of education where decisions about which books should be taught or recommended are made. Parent groups and others concerned with controversial content (often a code phrase for sexual content) frequently challenge many of the texts examined in this project. Often, when texts include even the most cursory sexual reference, parents and others vehemently object and request that the “offending” books be removed from school library shelves. My dissertation challenges educators to reconsider the criteria that they use in selecting books for young readers. By focusing on the issue of female sexuality, this dissertation draws attention to the ways that teachers can reinforce or challenge potentially damaging ideas about young women through literature.

This dissertation addresses themes relevant to the construction of female sexuality and femininity. Rather than discuss texts in historical progression by focusing on each decade, in each chapter I analyze thematically linked texts published throughout the history of Young Adult literature. I begin by analyzing what may be the most pervasive issue confronting contemporary young women in adolescence: body image. This chapter leads the study because body image issues inform almost every Young Adult text 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 Young Adult literature. Chapter Two focuses on the pregnant female body. This section analyzes a subset of Young Adult literature known as the pregnancy problem novel; in this chapter I examine and analyze representations of reproductive issues such as pregnancy and abortion. Chapter Three analyzes Young Adult novels that depict lesbianism. Chapter Four focuses on romance as an important literary trope present in many Young Adult fictions. Finally, Chapter Five focuses on the oft-maligned subset of series fiction. While each chapter deals with a distinct subset of Young Adult literature, each chapter has a thematic focus. Many texts contain overlap themes; for example, Connie Porter’s *Imani All Mine* portrays a teen pregnancy but also emphasizes body image.

Chapter One, “Pleasure, Pain and the Power of Being Thin,” traces the historical progression of body image and weight issues in texts that overtly connect female sexuality to body image. In the early years of Young Adult fictions body image was an imbedded literary trope, while in contemporary texts issues of anorexia, obesity and dieting become more apparent. Earlier texts such as *Forever* and *Breaking Up* contain body image issues, but only through a subtext in which a character’s sexual confidence is linked to her thinness and vice versa. In more contemporary texts such as *Life in the Fat Lane, Imani All Mine* and *Name Me Nobody*, weight and body image issues are crucial aspects of the narrative. In all of these fictions thinness is linked to agency, and obesity to a lack of power and control. Characters who are thin are powerful, in control, and use sexual restraint, while heavier characters are shown to be passive, promiscuous and have little control over their sexuality. Mary Pipher and Susan Bordo help explain that this conflation of sexual power with perceived body image reflects the pervasive cultural
paradigm that negates those who are heavy or fat and valorizes ultra-thinness for young women. Many of these texts simultaneously reinforce conservative sexual standards. In these fictions the construction of female sexuality and social standards of appropriate sexual behavior are inextricably bound up with body image, thus reinforcing the imposition of traditional, restrictive and prohibitive sexual constraints on young women. This chapter examines these portrayals of young women and analyzes how the idea of body image is linked to sexual authority.

Chapter Two, “Do the Right Thing: Pregnancy and Reproductive Rights,” investigates the functions of pregnancy and reproductive issues in Young Adult texts. Having emerged from the so-called “problem” novel of the 1970’s, the pregnancy novel has become a subset in Young Adult literature. Since a focus on pregnancy assumes an interest in female sexuality, these texts reveal pregnancy functioning in myriad ways including didactic warnings (primarily directed at young women) against sexual activity. Adrienne Rich and Andrea Dworkin help illustrate how these texts reinforce compulsory heterosexuality. Many pregnancy novels, such as My Darling, My Hamburger and Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones are Bildungsromane, enabling the protagonists to enact self-differentiation and the difficult transition to adulthood. In many of these texts, such as Someone Like You, Just Like Ice Cream and What Kind of Love a pregnancy functions as a marker for sexual and social power or powerlessness. When a young girl becomes pregnant in these fictions, issues of control, reproductive rights, and responsibility are raised through depictions of visits to Planned Parenthood and doctors. Adults are shown to wield power over teenagers, males use power over females and doctors attempt to use power over patients. Despite the seemingly positive slant a Bildungsroman might have,
most Young Adult pregnancy novels reinforce the cultural taboo against teenage pregnancy. In almost each one of these texts a visible pregnancy serves as a functional scarlet letter, marking the young woman as a negatively sexual being. Punishment for sexuality abounds in Young Adult fictions, and nowhere is this punishment more apparent than in the pregnancy novel.

Lesbian Young Adult fiction also deserves attention as an important subset of the genre. In chapter Three, “Rubyfruit Junglegym: Lesbian Young Adult Novels,” I analyze lesbian Young Adult novels in which one theme predominates, that of an imbedded critique of compulsory heterosexuality. Within these fictions, such as Annie On My Mind, Crush, and Hey, Dollface the authors and characters reveal flaws of heterosexuality and potential male predators. Drawing on Andrea Dworkin and Adrienne Rich, I examine this critique of heterosexuality that extends to create a critique of heterosexual sex. This critique allows the characters and readers the possibility of re-imagining what sex is, both for lesbians and heterosexuals. These texts also reveal how heterosexuality has been culturally centered on male pleasure. These lesbian Young Adult novels provide an opportunity for young women to focus and center on female pleasure while re-imagining the place of female sexuality in patriarchal culture. These books also mediate the potentially controversial subject of lesbianism. A narrative device depicting the pivotal moment when a protagonist learns about her mother/friend/relative’s lesbianism provides a way for readers to confront a mediated perspective of lesbian sexual orientation.

Chapter Four, “Discourses of Power: Young Adult Romance Novels,” reveals that the atypical Young Adult romance defies the myth that a heroine is solely defined by her relationship to a young man. Drawing on Janice Radway and Linda Christian Smith, I
examine the pivotal role that romance texts play in Young Adult literature. Many Young Adult texts contain elements of romance, and in this way the history of the Young Adult romance parallels the history of the genre. For example, Michael Cart argues that the romance *Seventeenth Summer* was the very first Young Adult text. These fictions, including *Forever, I Never Loved Your Mind* and *Love is One of the Choices* reconstitute young women as sexual beings by exploring and emphasizing female sexual pleasure through the auspices of a romance narrative. These texts illustrate that female sexual desire exists and is powerful. Their depictions of female characters resist the cultural contradiction that young women should appear sexual, yet not actively engage in sexual activity. Analyzing these fictions reveals that some of these Young Adult texts warn young women against the physical dangers of heterosexual romantic interaction. Two novels in particular, *Dreamland* and *A White Romance*, depict the problems of physical and emotional battering. Of course, many early Young Adult romance novels reinforce the traditional idea that romance should be the primary focus in a young woman’s life, but more recent texts reposition romance so that it can be seen as a transitional stage for young women.

Chapter Five, “Series Fictions Grow Up: From Nancy Drew to Gossip Girl” analyzes the depiction of female sexuality in series fictions, one of the most popular subsets of Young Adult literature. Series fiction can be said to have given birth to Young Adult literature with texts such as the *Nancy Drew Mysteries* and the *Hardy Boys*. These fictions engage young readers by constructing consistent and predictable characters, settings and plots. Although wildly divergent in terms of quality, consistency and subject matter, all Young Adult series fiction provides the surface reassurance of continuity,
repetition, and familiarity. The comforting sameness of series fiction reassures young readers whose lives are often in adolescent turmoil. For young women, adolescence is often a time of strain on the mother-daughter relationship. Series fictions rehearse this issue by continually absenting mothers, or depicting them as neglectful, hurtful, or abusive. This chapter analyzes this recurring theme of the absent mother in series fiction, where the father often represents patriarchy, and the texts themselves serve as “stand-in” mothers who dispense cultural and social information. Drawing upon Carolyn Heilbrun, I analyze how the absent mother engenders the transmission of information focused on femininity and sexuality. Additionally, series fictions replicate the fairy-tale-like insistence on beauty as a primary marker of female value. In this last chapter, utilizing Linda Christian-Smith, I examine how the standard of beauty and body image functions in these texts.

These fictions occupy an area of negotiation between dominant and opposing cultural elements. By portraying the lives of adolescents, Young Adult fictions provide a unique literary space where cultural tensions centering on young female bodies are revealed. By depicting young women in formation, these texts reveal, question and challenge received ideas about female sexuality and femininity.

End Notes

1 Hendrickson’s article embodies the way that (until recently, at least) Young Adult literature was conflated with children’s literature. It is only in the last decade that Young Adult fiction has become a separate area of study. Her article aptly analyzes Seventeenth Summer and Forever in terms of representations of sexuality.

2 Amy Bowles-Reyer’s dissertation is a study of Young Adult texts from a very specific era, the 1970’s. She uses close reading and ethnography in order to ascertain the influence that second wave feminism had on the Young Adult texts, and readers of those
texts, of that era. Bowles-Reyer has also published an article on the same topic, which I refer to in Chapter Five.

3 Michael Cart’s *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*, is one of the only book length studies to attempt a history of the genre. I consider Cart’s text to be an important and very useful overview, although his focus leaves out what I would consider some very crucial issues such as: sexism, body image, and compulsory heterosexuality.

4 Most agree that childhood was first recognized as a separate state in Victorian England, and that adolescence is a uniquely American invention. Some believe adolescence began to be used as a descriptive term after the Civil War, but the field of Psychology officially sanctioned the existence of adolescence in 1904 with the publication of G. Stanley Hall’s *Adolescence: Its Psychology*.

5 One recent example explicitly embodies the dual messages that surround teenage female sexuality. In August of 2001, J.C. Penney Company aired a television commercial that advertised low-rise jeans. This advertisement shows a teenage girl trying on a pair of the jeans only to be interrupted by her mother who admonishes her, “You’re not going to school dressed like that, are you?” The woman then adjusts the girl’s jeans by pulling them even lower on her hips. Very soon after the commercial first airs on television, J.C. Penney discontinues showing the advertisement. Apparently J.C. Penney’s decision to stop using the controversial advertisement was prompted by complaints made directly to the retailer as well as on radio talk shows. The significance of the commercial (and its subsequent cancellation) is not simply its inversion of the stereotypical maternal response to revealing clothing; it is that the commercial itself challenges our perceptions of teenage sexuality, mothering, and “appropriate” clothing. Not only does this television advertisement reveal the complexity behind how western culture views teenage sexuality; it deliberately uses that complexity to disrupt stereotypical representations. The ad itself argues against a clear and simple reading of the image; by turning expectations upside down, it deconstructs a cultural taboo against promoting teenage sexuality.
Chapter 1
Pleasure, Pain and the Power of Being Thin

Although feminism has made significant advances for young women, girls’ lives are still adversely affected by negative body images. An influential source of negative body image is Young Adult literature, in which harmful representations of body image weaken otherwise positive portrayals of young women. Many Young Adult texts mirror the positive aspects feminism has made for young women, yet some texts continue to perpetuate an unrealistic “ideal” physical appearance. Young Adult fiction, a prominent marketing category, is directed towards and primarily read by teenage girls. The only genre that portrays and is consumed by a young and primarily female readership, Young Adult literature deserves feminist critical attention, especially for its representations of young female bodies.

While many fictional texts marketed for young adults address sexuality, not many address the intersection of sexuality and body image. Even within the books that portray both subjects, many texts that are liberating in terms of sexuality are regressive in terms of body image. Spanning the years 1975 to 1999, the texts that I examine in this chapter portray female sexual experience and connect sexuality to body image. These Young Adult fictions reflect the changing social mores of 1975-1999, years in which women questioned cultural standards of beauty along with repressive sexual stereotypes. One important cultural change that took place between 1975 and 1999 is an increasing awareness of body image issues; these fictions reflect that growing awareness. For example, Judy Blume’s Forever (1975) contains an ultra-thin protagonist, who by early 21st century standards might appear anorexic, but who in 1975 seemed to be just a normal
teen concerned with her weight. While Blume’s depiction of Katherine’s weight might have seemed harmless in 1975, as the years went by authors (and readers) became more aware of body image issues, and many Young Adult texts clearly reflect this knowledge. In *Forever*, the weight issue is deeply imbedded and barely acknowledged; but in later texts 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 these texts weight and sexuality are inextricably linked.

A touchstone for the many contemporary debates on teenage sexuality, Young Adult fictions frequently depict female sexuality as a threatening force for young adults. For young females in a patriarchal society, sexuality (particularly sexual desire) is often represented by educators, parents and authors as a primitive, taboo drive that must be regulated. As documented by Peggy Orenstein in *Schoolgirls*, Mary Pipher’s *Reviving Ophelia* and Joan Jacobs Brumberg’s *The Body Project*, coming to terms with sexuality “in a society that treats women’s bodies in a sexually brutal and commercially rapacious way” is a prevalent and pervasive struggle for young women. This struggle may be one of the reasons so many girls turn to Young Adult fiction. Unlike other genres, Young Adult fiction provides multitudinous representations of young girls as sexual beings. More subtly, these texts reveal that young female bodies are an important site of cultural contestation. Young Adult fiction reflects the social anxiety about controlling these bodies.

Because these texts reflect the social anxiety about female bodies, texts that are popular among young adults are often censored or challenged by librarians, teachers and parents. Many of the books considered controversial contain frank and graphic portrayals
of sexuality, and some of the works most often challenged continue to be vastly popular in the critical canon of Young Adult 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 and vilified for her controversial and explicit texts. In his book *From Romance to Realism: Fifty Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*, Michael Cart argues that many texts which “were receiving scorn and disapproval from adult reviewers” were often the very books that were the most popular with young adult readers (67). Whether a Young Adult text is labeled critically acclaimed or “popular” often depends upon who is reading the book and whether it contains controversial subject matter. In his 1985 article “Reconsidering Judy Blume’s *Forever*,” critic John Gough explains that *Forever* remains a very popular text in part because teens can “find themselves truthfully presented, undistorted, not *in extremis*—just ordinary life and its awful emotions” (35). 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” (35). For example, critic David Rees labels *Forever* “amazingly trivial” and “second rate,” and dismisses the novel as being without literary merit (173). Despite critical scorn, the continuing popularity of *Forever* reveals its importance to young female readers. Much like *Forever*, each of the texts I examine in this chapter can be considered a “popular” Young Adult fiction; and many were written by award winning, critically acclaimed authors.

Young Adult fiction reflects girls’ lives back to them, and this literature contains many representations of young women that reinforce negative body image stereotypes. In this chapter I examine several of these portrayals, especially ones that are linked to
sexuality, to demonstrate how they valorize the contemporary ultra-thin standard of beauty. One ultra-thin character is Katherine in Judy Blume’s vastly popular *bildungsroman, Forever*. First published in 1975, *Forever* remarkably contains graphic, female-centered depictions of teenage sexuality. Subtitled “A moving story of the end of innocence,” the novel focuses on the protagonist’s loss of her virginity and her subsequent discovery of sexual power and pleasure. Yet imbedded in this otherwise empowering text is an underlying theme of obsession with weight and body image. Two texts by Norma Klein, *It’s OK If You Don’t Love Me* (1977) and *Breaking Up* (1980), portray young female protagonists learning about sex and love. Both texts 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 their power from their looks—they are in control, powerful and responsible—and ultra thin. Susan Terris’ 1987 novel *Nell’s Quilt* portrays a young woman who gains control of her life only after she starves herself into near anorexia. Judith Ortiz Cofer’s 1995 *An Island Like You* also links female sexuality, body image and class. Cofer portrays young girls growing into their bodies and awareness of their sexuality; in addition her characters struggle with ethnicity and face assimilation. *Life in the Fat Lane* (1998) by Cherie Bennett graphically shows one beauty queen’s battle with her weight and her sense of self as a sexual being. In Connie Porter’s 1999’s *Imani All Mine*, protagonist Tasha has a baby at age 15, 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* by Lois Ann Yamanaka, also published in 1999, protagonist Emi-Lou diets secretly and tries to come to terms with her sexuality and her body image.
Far from simply upholding or subverting cultural expectations, portrayals of an ethnically diverse group of young girls and women reveal the difficulty many authors have with resisting the contemporary standard of beauty. Often these authors capitulate to damaging ideas about weight, attractiveness and body image. Characters who do not “fit” a hyper-thin European ideal appear as marginalized and negative characters. In a revealing intersection of sexuality and body image, heavy characters behave sexually promiscuously, passively and as if they are powerless, while in marked contrast thin characters act responsibly and appear to be powerful. These representations of sexuality and body image complicate issues of spectatorship and female pleasure. In these Young Adult texts the 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 described by Laura Mulvey refers to film, its mechanism appears in literary texts. When the texts under scrutiny use visual imagery to describe and qualify female bodies, identifying the gaze as anti-feminist is crucial. In many Young Adult texts, readers are encouraged, even directed to examine characters from the perspective of a judgmental voyeur. Characters (and readers) internalize the gaze that reinforces female objectification. The gaze is defined by many feminists as an embodiment of “the idea that women are objectified and this is connected with the experience of being looked at” (Evans, 17). These social constructions of young women’s bodies become accepted norms, and mirror “intimate and minute elements of the construction of space, time, desire, embodiment” as Susan Bordo explains in *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body* (27). As Bordo argues, the source of oppression does not arise from “physical restraint and coercion . . . but through individual self-surveillance and self-
correction to norms” (27). Young Adult fiction provides a site that encourages young women’s self-surveillance of their bodies, and in these fictions a pattern arises connecting female sexuality and body image. Promiscuous sexual activity, criticized and vilified, is 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 Young Adult texts; they reinforce negative ideas about body image, and signal the reader to “read” a fat character as sexually suspect.

While these Young Adult texts treat female sexuality frankly and openly, the novels also contain damaging, stereotypical ideas about the standard of beauty and body image. These authors may still be struggling with the idea that portraying sexuality is acceptable only when the characters fit 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 delineated, white is assumed. In these texts, an unacknowledged assumption about weight functions similarly: unless the weight of a character is specifically mentioned the reader will most likely assume the character is thin. If a character is presented and no reference is made to her weight, the reader assumes a “normal,” read “thin” weight. Only if the character is considered abnormal, i.e. fat or chubby, is her weight mentioned at all. Women and girls who are heavy are always identified as such. This pattern is not new, but reflects a continuing marginalization of those who might be considered fat. Even in diverse and otherwise progressive texts, 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 industry, many young women and even children suffer from eating disorders. In a 1986 study of almost five hundred schoolgirls, 81% of ten-year-olds reported that they had dieted at least once (Mellin, Scully & Irwin). 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% of the female respondents thought they were too fat (Garner 32). 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” (Garner 32). 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 sooth itself and to find what works, how to gather personal and sexual power. Dieting becomes a proxy for power . . . (224)

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, young women impacted by social pressure to be thin are not just White girls, but increasingly include young women from other ethnic groups as well. Many ethnicities and cultures such as African American and Latino are assumed to accept and even desire bigger women, while 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 which have shown that the Western standard is becoming the norm.  

In a survey conducted by *Essence* magazine in 1994, the results from over 2000 respondents indicates that African American women have the same risk for eating disorders as their White counterparts. Pre-adolescent Black women also suffer from body image problems. In her 1996 study of 2,379 nine and ten year old girls, approximately half White and half Black, Ruth Striegel-Moore found that 40% reported that they were trying to lose weight. 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 upwards of 90% of those who have eating disorders are women is rarely commented upon. And eating disorders are not the only problem. It is not surprising that the diet industry rakes in approximately 40 billion dollars a year. (National Eating Disorders Association). The effects of negative body image are pervasive, and in a 1980 study researchers found that girls are much more influenced and ultimately more vulnerable to cultural standards of ideal body image than boys are (Wooley & Wooley). A 1990 American Association of
University Women study showed that negative body image increases the risk of suicide for girls, but not boys. With these facts in mind, it is vital that we analyze the areas in our culture, such as some Young Adult fictions, which promote negative body image.

Many researchers have noticed the problems young women have with the increasingly emaciated 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 and promotes positive change for young women and acknowledges that “girls are terrified of being fat” (184). 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 on 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” (184). When later she writes, “Looks do matter. Girls who are chubby or plain do miss much of the American Dream” (185), Pipher reinforces how powerful cultural messages can be. She criticizes “lookism” in her book, and the problem she describes has an influential source-the books young women read.

In many Young Adult fictions, 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 texts 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 from thin to fat signals readers 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 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. (9)

Here, Sybil’s promiscuity is directly linked to her weight. In stark contrast to Sybil, readers meet slender, smart and in control Katherine. In the text we are told that Katherine is 5 foot six and weighs 109 pounds (20). This weight seemed anorexic to me, so I entered Katherine’s weight into a web site that calculates Body Mass Index (BMI), which is the current standard for determining healthy weight. Katherine’s BMI would be 17.3, which is considered dangerously underweight or starving. Nonetheless, Katherine doesn’t seem to worry about her weight, but overhears her father reminding her mother (who we are told 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 her attractiveness is based upon her non-flabby thighs. This scene motivates readers to internalize social ideas about standards of beauty; even at her already ultra-thin size Katherine enacts self-criticism.

Confident, assertive and responsible, thin characters in Young Adult fictions do more than simply display themselves as models of appropriate body type. More often than not, characters perform body assessments on themselves. In Norma Klein’s novel *Breaking Up*, 16 year old Alison Rose contemplates her image in the mirror 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.’ (58)

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 Young Adult fictions. 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 a crucial exception: she replicates the cultural ideal of ultra thinness as a necessary component to self-confidence.
In another example of sexual assertion, Norma Klein’s *It’s OK If You Don’t Love Me* 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, enjoys sex and only has sex with her boyfriend. During their first time having intercourse, he orgasms 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 non-skinny 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. In another example of a character turning the judgmental gaze upon herself, 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. (60)

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. Tasha accepts that the pain of self-mutilation is less important than looking good. By portraying Tasha’s incessant attention to them, Porter exposes these regressive ideas about beauty and weight.
*Imani All Mine*’s 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 shown to be a passive recipient. When she has her first orgasm (ever) with Peanut, he tells her “Tonight, I made you a woman” (1999, 147). Tasha doesn’t reply, but looks at Peanut and see 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 *Forever* the character of Sybil, who has multiple sexual partners and is portrayed by Blume as flawed because she is fat, reinforces the threat of non-thinness for readers. The explicit connection between Sybil’s body size and her perceived promiscuity suggests 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 text her voracious appetite for food translates into an appetite for sex. Ironically, while Sybil is shown to be promiscuous 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.

Young Adult literature tends to valorize monogamy over multiple sexual partners, reinforcing social constraints on sexual freedom. In *Forever*, Katherine’s appetite for sex is moderate and regulated; she only has sex with 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 herself 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” (Weidt, 37). While Sybil’s sexual activity is perceived as reckless and dangerous, Katherine’s sexual activity, notably with one male who is her boyfriend, is shown to be perfectly acceptable and even desirable for a young girl.

Often considered a radical text, *Forever’s* portrayal of sexual freedom has provoked decades of controversy. Katherine’s sexual explorations, and her notable pleasure at her first and subsequent orgasms, are part of what make *Forever* a controversial book. Parents and others have complained about the book’s sexual content, but no critic has acknowledged the regressive portrayals of body image in this text. In *Disturbing the Universe*, Roberta Seelinger Trites, a well-known critic of Young Adult and Children’s fiction, comments on the importance of sexuality in *Forever*, but does not acknowledge the importance of body image in the text. Trites’ discussion does reveal the longevity and profound effect of *Forever* on its readers. In a chapter entitled “Sex and Power,” Trites analyzes *Forever* through the lens of Foucauldian theory and ideas 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” to teenagers (88). She acknowledges that *Forever* shows Katherine’s desire for sex as natural, but does not comment on the significance of Katherine’s weight to 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; but I see it as a liberating depiction of female sexual assertion and pleasure, but only for thin young women. The link between weight and sexual authority reveals how the cultural bias against being fat remains a powerful force.

One of the most reprinted texts in Young Adult fiction, when young women read *Forever* they see that sexual activity can be fulfilling, pleasurable and safe. But they are also shown that in order to experience positive sexual activity they must conform to an impossible standard of beauty, or they will end up like Sybil: lonely, promiscuous, desperate and pregnant. Sybil may be smart, (she is accepted into several Ivy-League universities) but she is still fat, unhappy and not in control of her body or her sexuality. The ongoing popularity of *Forever* over the last twenty-five years attests to its power as a pivotal work of fiction. As much as the portrayal of sexuality subverts gender bias in this text, Blume reinforces negative messages about body image for young women in *Forever*.

The cultural ideal of thinness reveals that fat is not the only offender; secondary sexual characteristics like breasts cause suspicion as well. In a culture where the ultra-
thin, 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. (50)

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 physically developed breasts, and receives attention she wanted 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:

\[
\ldots \text{some girls who aren’t sexually active at all are presumed to be so}
\text{because of their physique. When everyone else in the class is wearing}
\text{training bras, the girl with breasts becomes an object of sexual scrutiny.} \ldots
\text{A girl with visible breasts becomes sexualized because she possesses a}
\text{constant physical reminder of her sexual potential. (8)}
\]

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
using harsh terms such as “gross,” and explains that:

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

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 fiction a lean, thin body is also the goal. But control of the female body and sexuality is at the source of Nell’s actions.

Using starvation to suspend the onset of sexual maturity complicates the meaning of being thin for young women. For many young women controlling intake of food provides a sense of power. But that sense of power is false, since deliberately reducing one’s body size usually diminishes physical strength as well. In a remarkable portrait of self-starvation, the protagonist of Nell’s Quilt (1987) starves herself in order to deter her upcoming marriage to a man she barely knows. In this historical novel by Susan Terris, Nell rebels against an arranged marriage in this fiction set in 1899 rural America; and readers are drawn into her struggle for autonomy, self-definition and personal choice. The choice that 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 may find Nell’s struggle for self-preservation “enthralling,” the author’s depiction of her strength as coming from her newly acquired thinness is appalling. 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 in 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 emphasis on the importance of the leanness of young female bodies reinforces the idea that lean is preferable to voluptuous. Just like Alison in *Breaking Up*, in “Beauty Lessons” Sandra’s lean and athletic body is continually valorized, ostensibly as a way to make Sandra feel acceptable compared to her more physically developed peers. Like Katherine in *Forever*, who sees that being lean or thin is the only safe and powerful way to attract and, more importantly, keep male attention, Sandra’s lean body shows she is still in control of her sexuality. She is still safe from being considered a sexual object by men, since Cofer implies that developing female bodies inevitably
attract male attention. This idea corresponds to certain studies that assert that anorexic females may become anorexic partially in order to avoid becoming a sexually mature woman, thus avoiding being considered a sexual object.\textsuperscript{12}

The “Beauty Lessons” Sandra learns serve the same purpose as the lesson imbedded in \textit{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 “Beauty Lessons.” 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, her false eyelashes and false teeth. By showing Sandra’s horror at her aunt’s natural appearance, Cofer valorizes youthful women’s appearance. Sandra learns the lesson that girls learn early in Western society; looks are all important. Towards the end of the story, Sandra spells out the lesson for her readers:

\begin{quote}
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 \textit{A}’s in any of the above, but I am gonna go ahead and give myself a \textit{P} for potential. Maybe I’ll bloom. (51)
\end{quote}

Sandra’s gaze at herself in her mirror reflects lookism as it exists in Western society, and her self-assessment provides another example of the internalization of lookism. In the previous passage Sandra has accepted and incorporated social standards about beauty and
looks. A self-critical gaze is a pervasive presence in Young Adult texts and is often linked directly to issues of body image in young women. Her “look” into her mirror is just one example of the damaging aspect of lookism and the gaze in some Young Adult Literature.

Weightism, or judging characters by their weight, is transferred to the reader in these texts as well. When we read that Tasha sees herself as fat, and are told repeatedly that Sybil is fat, we as readers find ourselves visualizing them negatively. We objectify these young women as flawed sexual objects. In *Imani All Mine*, for example, the reader must rely upon protagonist Tasha’s perception of her size, since her weight is never specifically given. Throughout this narrative, Tasha expresses uneasiness with her body size and shape. Tasha 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. (49)

Tasha blames herself for even thinking that someone might be attracted to a girl who looks like her. It can be read that on the night of her rape Tasha is literally “hobbled” by her too-small skates, and figuratively hobbled by her socially influenced self-perception.
Both Sybil and Tasha are portrayed as passive sexual targets because of their size. Sybil, however, 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 her 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 little to reassure Tasha or the reader; his attraction to Tasha 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.

Much as the stories of *An Island Like You*, cultural differences in standards of beauty are amplified in *Name Me Nobody* (1999) by Lois Ann Yamanaka. In this novel, weightism and lookism appear in the protagonist, her family and her peers. Like Tasha who never really attains control of her own body, Emi-Lou’s body and who has the power to control are the focus of this novel. The protagonist, ninth grader Emi-Lou, is alternately 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. Emi-Lou believes she’s losing her best friend Von 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. (102)

Here Emi-Lou internalizes the voices she hears every day; she chastises 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 really 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, negative body image issues pervade these Young Adult fictions. 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. The female body is all-important to Lara in *Life in the Fat Lane*; Lara is a beauty queen who endures a sudden, inexplicable weight gain. Cherie Bennett’s 1998 novel examines a young woman’s response to a drastic change in her body as Lara goes from ultra thin to ultra heavy. A white southern belle, Lara is a multiple beauty pageant winner. The book centers on
Lara’s unexpected 100 plus pound weight gain. (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 of each chapter being enumerated 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. Enumerating the chapters is clever, because the titles expose and reinforce the female obsession with weight and numbers. These chapter headings also draw the reader into the obsession, forcing readers to turn each page with dread. “How fat will she get?” we worry. With each pound she gains, Lara becomes less of a person and more of a sideshow freak, a development that reflects the dominant view of weight in much of Young Adult fiction.

At the end of the novel Lara begins to lose weight as inexplicably as she had previously gained it. In this book Lara comes to terms with her increased weight, but when she begins to lose weight it seems as if the author just can’t bear to let her heroine, and her readers, suffer any longer. Having her heroine lose weight reveals that the author capitulates to the regressive stereotypes that she previously skewers. In many ways the readers may 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 has a daughter inherit 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 consumed with 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 his wife won’t get fat thighs. In contrast, Lara’s parents are portrayed as a typical dysfunctional family. 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 read as an example of what can happen if you rely only upon looks for your self-esteem; what remains once you lose them?

Women relying upon physical beauty for self-esteem are not a new phenomenon. 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 Young Adult fictions the level of awareness of weight issues is no longer simply an imbedded 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 upon by not only the characters themselves, but by the narrators. In other words, in more recent texts body image and weight issues are clearly depicted or are even aspects of conflict within the plot. In older texts, weight issues are submerged in character descriptions, but not addressed as being a “problem.” The authors portray characters that literally embody the struggles of young women who
must try to conform in a society that condemns them for not being thin. In these more recent books awareness of body image issues pervades the texts; more importantly these 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, Young Adult fictions 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 dissertation about Young Adult fiction. But this chapter on popular Young Adult fiction reveals one critical pattern, that of the intersection of weight and sexuality. Critics, teachers and readers should carefully examine these deeply imbedded ideas about the connection between female sexuality and body image.

These Young Adult fictions provide compelling examples of how female bodies continue to be a site of cultural contestation. It is not just magazines, television and films that perpetuate and reinforce the standard of beauty; popular Young Adult literature is an area of popular culture that for at least twenty-five years has often perpetuated an unrealistic beauty ideal. Close examination of Young Adult literature reveals more than just stories for and about young girls; it reveals negative messages that parents and teachers should discuss with adolescents.

End Notes

1 The advances that second and third wave feminism have helped achieve for women of all ages, but especially young women, are too numerous to list here. But among these achievements include easier access to reproductive services including birth control and legal abortion, an increased focus on girls in primary and secondary education and the
passage of Title IX (which gives females equal access to funding for sports in public schools).

2 In this dissertation liberating will refer to portrayals of female sexuality that give primacy to female sexual pleasure and gratification and that show female characters who can initiate and engage in sexual activity outside of marriage without being considered “sluts.”

3 By regressive I mean portrayals that uphold a standard of beauty that is impossible for most females to achieve. Also, I consider regressive any portrayal of a female who is not pencil thin who is then shown to have a “problem.” In this context, regressive means any attitude about the female body that takes for granted that thin is the only option, and therefore, any other body size is unacceptable.

4 In her book *The Body Project*, Joan Jacobs Brumberg examines how social and cultural pressures that focus on the female body impact the lives of young women and girls.

5 Challenging a text is a process usually initiated by parents, parent groups, civic associations and even librarians. The challenge involves questioning the appropriateness of a text, usually because of perceived objectionable content. Challenged books are often removed from school library shelves, or only checked out to students who have explicit parental permission. Judy Blume is frequently cited as the most often challenged Young Adult author.

6 The male gaze, as described by Laura Mulvey in her 1975 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” is based on psychoanalytic theory and espouses the idea that in film males are the ones doing the looking and females are the primarily sexual objects of their gaze. In this article, I use the term “gaze” to indicate the idea of objectifying female characters’ bodies as sexual objects under scrutiny, whether the looker is male or female.

7 The definition of promiscuous has changed and, some might argue, mutated over the years. In the 1950’s if a girl engaged in any sexual activity whatsoever she was labeled a slut. During the sexual revolution of the 1960’s the double standard relaxed somewhat, but girls who “fooled around” were often labeled sluts and easy. During the 1980’s and 1990’s, the backlash against feminism promoted abstinence and, as coined by Wendy Shalit, the *Return to Modesty* was really nothing new at all but just a regression to the old double standard of female sexual oppression and male sexual freedom.

8 Ruth Striegel-Moore’s 1997 article in *Developmental Psychopathology of Eating Disorders* shows that young Black girls’ dissatisfaction with their body image increases with age at almost the same rate as Caucasian girls. However, other studies show that Black girls report less dissatisfaction with body image than do Caucasians.

9 Some of the many books that have focused on body image and young girls in particular are *Reviving Ophelia, The Body Project, The Beauty Myth* and *Unbearable Weight.*
Surprisingly, issues of body image in Young Adult fiction have received almost no critical attention. There is no book-length critical text which specifically focuses on body image in the Young Adult genre, and very few articles address the issue more than cursorily. Brenda Daly’s 1989 article analyzes humor in the Young Adult romance novel, and acknowledges body image as an important aspect of the lives of young women. Daly argues that the general lack of humor in these fictions is connected to the lack of appetite which young female protagonists must have. She asserts that “heroines must pretend to have exceedingly small appetites, whether for food or sex” (1989, 50). Daly aptly notes that in these romance texts young women “who lack social and economic power, are punished for self-assertion, physical or verbal” (1989, 52), which also aptly describes Sybil in *Forever*, who is punished for her sexual appetites. In the 6th edition of *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, a sourcebook for teachers and librarians, body image is mentioned only briefly in a section entitled “Body and Self.” The authors note that “It is almost obligatory in realistic fiction for young protagonists to express dissatisfaction with their appearance” (Nilsen and Donelson 2001, 135), and then go on to mention books which address the development of secondary sex characteristics. Issues of weight are not addressed. Even veteran Young Adult critic Michael Cart neglects body image in his critical history *From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature*. Cart addresses other important issues such as sex, abortion, sexual orientation and violence, but body image issues are not analyzed; he does not even acknowledge they exist.

*Forever* has been in print continually since its original publication in 1975, and has been published in eight languages.

According to the ANRED (Anorexia Nervosa and Related Eating Disorders) web site, many anorexic females “use the behaviors to avoid sexuality.” In other words, controlling weight is controlling growth and development, and thus helps avoid becoming a sexual being.
Chapter 2
Do the Right Thing: Pregnancy and Reproductive Rights

Teenage sexuality is a common theme in Young Adult fiction. The previous chapter explored the link between body image and female sexuality; this chapter analyzes body image issues as they relate to teenage pregnancy and its representations. By examining the ways in which pregnancy problem novels depict sexuality and possible consequences, yet another facet of female sexuality is illuminated. Many Young Adult books punish those characters that engage in sexual activity, although a few authors attempt to understand and accept young adults’ sexuality. However prevalent punishment for sex is, 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 almost always portrayed as abnormal or dangerous. In Young Adult fiction females are punished in myriad ways for being sexual, and frequently the punishment takes the form of an unplanned, unwanted pregnancy. Pregnancy serves a dual purpose in these texts: as a visible mark that the young woman has engaged in sexual activity, and by disrupting ideal body image by making her fat.

Pregnancy problem novels constitute a significant subset of the genre. These texts warn, preach and involve their readers in the plight of a usually sexually inexperienced young girl who becomes pregnant. While many teachers, librarians and parents understandably anticipate that Young Adult fiction will be literature that teaches, the pregnancy novel is expected to provide reliable information about sexuality, reproductive issues, pregnancy and birth. Because these fictions depict a pressing social issue, and one
that is often seen as a moral crisis, the texts are frequently examined to see if they contain the “right” 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” (96). The authors assert that they hope their 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 authors 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 may be laudable; in fact Young Adult fiction may be the primary source of reproductive information for many young women. Analysis of Young Adult literature 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 fictions 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 these fictions may provide, this chapter looks beyond the informational content of these texts. The subtext reveals the way these pregnancy narratives function to reinforce, subvert or disrupt traditional values and expectations about female sexuality.

Admittedly most of these fictions are didactic; they warn and proselytize through negative depictions of teenage pregnancy and sexual activity. But there are a few works
of Young Adult fiction that complicate the issue through representations which challenge regressive ideas about young women and their sexuality. Much of Young Adult literature confronts female sexuality, and pregnancy novels continue the trend in the genre by providing graphic depictions that contribute to the construction of women’s sexuality in our culture. Almost three decades of Young Adult texts, beginning with the first Young Adult pregnancy novel published in 1966 and continuing to 1999, depict teenage pregnancy and reveal a continuing cultural interest with adolescent pregnant bodies. This chapter analyzes depictions of adolescent pregnancy and reveals how these narratives both mostly reinforce, but occasionally challenge, cultural institutions that wield power over young female bodies.

Adolescent females are among the most powerless in our culture; while their bodies are continually looked at and desired, ultimately young women have little control of their lives. If a young woman becomes pregnant, her status changes. Thus, teenage pregnancy functions as marker for the transition from adolescence to adulthood. One study indicates that when young women have difficulty detaching from their mothers, or their childhood, a pregnancy may serve as impetus to enable separation.¹ It’s Not What You Expect by Norma Klein has the unwanted pregnancy of a secondary character function as a transition to adulthood for both the young woman who gets pregnant, and the young girl who learns of the pregnancy. In What Kind of Love the protagonist has a very naïve view of romance and her life, and her unplanned pregnancy signifies her unexpected transition to adulthood. In Annie’s Baby, 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 Someone Like You pregnancy functions
primarily as a warning and a punishment, but also mirrors a subtext about becoming an adult. Scarlett gets pregnant, grows up, and sets an example for her best friend Halley, but only as a result of her unplanned pregnancy.

In these texts pregnancy functions as a trope designed to raise awareness of reproductive issues. Birth control, abortion and fetal rights all come to light in these texts, and all of these texts reflect the cultural zeitgeist of the time in which they were produced. *My Darling, My Hamburger* 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” (6). 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 suggestion 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 towards adoption. In *Just Like Ice Cream*, for example, reproductive issues abound. In this Reagan-era text, 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” (91), taking away any tenuous sense of agency and power she has. Not all
of these fictions reinforce regressive 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 in which the Roe vs. Wade decision legalizing abortion was handed down, *It’s Not What You Expect* envisions a society in which abortion providers will be 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. The novel *No More Saturday Nights* (1988) looks at teenage pregnancy from the perspective of the father.

In these texts teen pregnancy also functions as reinforcement of 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 a heterosexual marriage is still a marginalized being in Young Adult fiction. In one way or another, almost all of the Young Adult fictions I examine 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 scrutinizes traditional family structures with her portrayal of a young man who chooses to adopt his birth child. While pregnancy does not function in this text as a warning or punishment, in so many of these fictions punishment is the pre-eminent ideology.

Punishment for sexuality is often more severe when the young woman in questions 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 texts 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 texts, 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 text is portrayed as coming from a large (i.e. poor, uneducated) family that lives on the “other” side of town, thus labeling her as a less fortunate, i.e. poor, 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.

However widespread the social problem of pregnant teens may be, the issue is exaggerated in the news media. If you were to believe the nightly news reports and newspaper headlines on the subject of teenagers and sex, you might think that teenagers are becoming pregnant in high numbers or that they are at the same time embracing the idea of abstinence or the virginity pledge movement. Neither of these extremes is wholly accurate. While many teens engage in sexual activity, the incidence of unplanned teenage pregnancies has been steadily declining in the United States.\(^2\) Since abortion became legal in 1973, the data on teenage pregnancies has been well documented. For young women under the age of fourteen, total pregnancies (which include births, abortions and miscarriages) have been in decline since the middle of the 1980s. The figures for women aged 15-19 are similar; overall pregnancies increased from the late 1970s through the 1980s, but take a marked decline after the late 1980s.\(^3\) In the 1980s the ultra-conservative Reagan administration negatively influenced educational and governmental bodies by limiting access to reproductive information for all women. Funding for
women’s clinics was drastically reduced, and any agency that received federal funds was not allowed to provide information about abortion. In spite of these limitations, privately-funded family planning groups such as Planned Parenthood managed to disseminate information. 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 extensive, practical sex education in the school system. That resistance, along with a general squeamishness in the face of 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. 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, extensive sex education helps to reduce the rate of unwanted teen pregnancy. In a 1991 study of contraceptive use by teenagers, the Alan Guttmacher Institute reports that a sexually active teenager who does not use birth control has a 90% chance of becoming pregnant within one year. Increased use of condoms may be in part responsible for the decline in teen pregnancy. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, teenage women’s contraceptive use increased substantially in the 1980s. During this decade teenage women’s use of condoms rose from 48% to 65%, and by 1995 use at first intercourse reached 78%. The idea that increased access to birth control promotes promiscuity, an idea unsurprisingly promoted by many conservative groups, has been discounted by recent studies which show that the
impact of responsible sex education helps teens make informed choices about sex. Additionally, sex education helps prevent unwanted pregnancy. Another recent Alan Guttmacher Institute study reinforces the idea that access to reliable reproductive information assists teens in behaving sexually responsibly. This study “points to the ways the United States could further decrease teenage pregnancy and STD rates.”5 Despite a recent trend towards 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 Young Adult fiction may be a reaction to the existence of the very real social problem in the United States.6

The pregnancy problem novel in Young Adult fiction centers on an unplanned teenage pregnancy. With rare exceptions, these novels portray a sexually inexperienced 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 resulting in 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 the short story “Extension Four,” Rob Thomas portrays a young woman performing her high school service learning component at a local pregnancy “help” line, which is really a thinly veiled anti-choice organization. This 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. (64)

In this story the first person narrative both validates and skewers 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, and he repeatedly shows 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 will come into the clinic. Additionally, this statement reinforces her class prejudice as she reveals that she believes “. . . it’s not like my friends are the ones getting knocked up (69). This short story reveals the stereotypes that surround teen sexuality and pregnancy, and eventually the protagonist quits working for the anti-choice help line. Yet, Thomas portrays abortion as an incorrect choice by valorizing keeping an unplanned pregnancy or adoption over abortion.7 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. This position
reinforces the dominant culture’s view of pregnancy as sacred and more important that the life or wishes of the mother.

In most cases, the pregnancy problem novel is typified by first-person narration, a common narrative choice that pervades Young Adult literature. This personal perspective, as discussed in other chapters, validates the protagonist’s subjective experience of her situation. Many Young Adult novels share the feature of a common narrative voice; many are in diary form, validating a personal, subjective form of writing. The novels and stories are usually written in first person, another narrative form that valorizes and gives weight to individual expression. However, in many of these fictions the narrative simply parrots the views of the dominant culture rather than exploring the many possibilities of young female experience. Especially in regressive 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 themselves to young, female readers. But the transformation that takes place, from naïve young girl to experienced mature young woman, almost always reflects the virtues and values of traditional gender roles.

Traditional roles for young women, (both implied and explicitly stated) include school, extra-curricular activities, and eventual marriage and children. These expected traditional roles do not include having babies as a teenager. The predominantly conservative social forces in the lives of many young women include parents, teachers, and political leaders who never approve of sex outside of heterosexual marriage, abortion as a solution to pregnancy or the idea that sexual pleasure can come from anything but intercourse. The experiences that these young fictional characters have, and their
response to these events, are mostly fictionalized representations of the patriarchal, repressive 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 (a rare occurrence in Young Adult fiction) signifies a transition to adulthood and creating a new family. Giving the baby up for adoption seems the preferred 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.

In many of these texts a young woman may get pregnant after only engaging in intercourse on one occasion. Fictional first-sex pregnancy reinforces the typical warning against unprotected sex; i.e. it only takes one time to get pregnant. Teenage pregnancy can be read as a warning that to engage in sexuality is potentially dangerous; and is almost always a punishment for sexual activity. In these texts 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.” The earliest text (published pre-Roe vs. Wade), the popular 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 warns readers about premarital sex and reinforces the sanctity of traditional marriage. The pregnancy results in the death of the premature baby, but their 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 of value even if it was initially entered into solely because of the unplanned pregnancy. But this novel does more than just reinforce heterosexual marriage; by having their baby die, it punishes July and Bo Jo for having sex and vilifies sex outside of 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 the text of No More Saturday Nights. In Norma Klein’s 1988 novel the protagonist is a young high school senior who decides to raise his son after his girlfriend decides to “sell” the baby to an infertile couple. While Klein does a fine job of skewering the concept of the neo-conservative traditional family, her portrayal of the young woman is less than kind. Cheryl is described again and again as a “social climber” and as being from a poor family. Tim, the father, is the son of a college professor and 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 climb 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
text that positions 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 20th century. So while her ex-boyfriend goes off to college, Cheryl uses
whatever options she has in order to survive.

In the world of Young Adult literature sexual activity almost always leads directly
to pregnancy; so often it is how sexual desire is to be avoided that is most powerfully
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 does a
remarkable job of capturing the angst of teenage lust. In *My Darling, My Hamburger*,
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 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 in that she has these feelings, too. In other texts, 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—he may as well say that the female has a greater responsibility than the male. Liz is used as an explicit example of transgressive behavior and what will befall a young woman if she gives in to sexual desire.

In My Darling, My Hamburger, 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 brush with 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 text is Liz. Zindel most assuredly uses Liz as a graphic example of how not to behave when confronted with the desire to engage in sex. In many ways, this text depicts Maggie’s avoidance of any sexual feeling as eminently preferable to Liz’s more realistic struggle to quench hers. Liz’s unplanned pregnancy in My Darling, My Hamburger depicts pregnancy as a punishment for sexual activity and for 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 text reads more like a 1950’s novel where sex was 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. (8)

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 of 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 lead 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 Reagan-era text. In this novel protagonist Julie is seduced into sex by her transparently manipulative boyfriend who persuades her that sex is “just like ice cream” (18). 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 text, but focuses instead
on the pain that can be involved. The focus on pain is telling in this text-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 “But, 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 uses what many young males utilize 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 post-coital 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 heterosexual marriage.

In essence, Johnson punishes Julie for being gullible and for having sex, and warns readers that men will take advantage of young women simply 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 of marriage is wrong, sex is not pleasurable for women, and if you have sex outside of 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 the 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 lots 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 threat that having sex is a momentous and profound event—one best saved for marriage. *Just Like Ice Cream* utilizes 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. (228)

In her essay Rich reveals the social institutions that enable cultural control of women. *Just Like Ice Cream* uses religion in particular to reign in the sexual explorations of Julie, who ultimate succumbs and dutifully recites the party line at the close of the text. 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 fictions themselves; reviewers participate, too. An anonymous reviewer in *Publisher’s 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 portrays a romance gone bad, where a talented musician protagonist becomes involved in a sexual relationship which ends up in unwanted pregnancy. This text begins with an unsubtle metaphor for male
invasion of female space. The novel 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 were 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 text. Valerie’s sexual activity, unlike 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)

Despite her pain, Valerie’s sexual desire is clearly linked to eventual pain in this passage, reminding readers that desire is bad and only results in pain. Her first sex, like much of the first sex in these texts, happens without planning 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 for the protagonist, an option she ultimately rejects. Again and again in Young Adult fictions sex is portrayed as painful, dangerous and unfulfilling for women.

Many pregnancy problem novels are (probably inadvertently) in accordance with Dworkin’s argument that intercourse is an instrument of male domination. The depictions of intercourse in most of these texts 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. (120)

By depicting intercourse as domination, and as mostly (and sometimes completely) unpleasant for women, these Young Adult texts 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 Young Adult text does depict a pregnancy as a result of a rape, the text is less of a critique of male violence and more of a depiction of the “problematic” young woman who is raped. In Young Adult 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), subtitled *The Diary of Anonymous, a Pregnant Teenager* is the creation of Beatrice Sparks who is well known for writing *Go Ask Alice*, a popular anti-drug novel of the 1970s. Although her “boyfriend” rapes Annie, reviewers of this novel neglect the abuse sub-plot 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 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 web site, Sparks’ “books are mainly written from case histories,” which reveals that they are by and large patchwork literary constructions, not genuine diaries.8

In Annie’s Baby, Sparks presents the diary of Annie, a young woman who gets pregnant and is also physically and emotionally abused by her boyfriend. In this text, the unplanned pregnancy functions to warn readers against the dangers of premarital sex as well as low self-esteem, since in the narrative Annie’s low self-esteem is shown to make her more vulnerable to her abusive boyfriend. In a brief review in Adolescence, the unnamed 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. (720)

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 text. 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.

In another attempt to influence her readers, Sparks provides misleading information at the end of the novel on birth control and birth rates. She incorrectly asserts that “among those fourteen or younger the birth rate is increasing,” (240). In the most recent study of U.S. teens done by the nonpartisan Alan Guttmacher Institute, the birth rate has decreased almost 10% since the 1980s. 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 ignores the fact that more and more women are choosing to have children outside of marriage. She continues to marginalize women who have children outside of marriage by calling them “unwed mothers,” a term which harkens back to the 1950s. While Annie’s Baby is indeed a compelling fiction, and might prompt young readers to be wary of male violence, the imbedded and blatant messages it provides about sexual activity make it a regressive text. 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’ ideology notwithstanding, her attempt to use misleading statistics amounts to scare tactics. Her reinforcement of traditional gender and sexual roles for women not only excludes lesbians and gays, but 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 text are the perils of sexual activity for teens. In *Someone Like You* it is not just young women who are punished; young men are also duly chastised. In this fiction, 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. Her boyfriend impregnates Scarlett during their first time having intercourse. That same evening, as Michael drives away from Scarlett, he is killed in a motorcycle accident. As a result of one act of sexual intercourse, Dessen’s readers are presented with one dead boyfriend and one 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 to her best friend Halley, who gets involved in a relationship with a boy she describes as being “. . . a Boy with a Reputation” (31). 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 (he mows her family’s lawn to save Halley from the task, really seems to listen to her, and otherwise treats her with respect) boyfriend to Halley, then rather suddenly begins to pressure her to have sex. Dessen portrays Macon as quirky, but
thoughtful and generous towards 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 imminent 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 of marriage are compared to reckless, i.e. unlicensed, drivers. This novel 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; and Halley, who has not yet engaged in sexual intercourse, is warned of her danger by a car crash with her boyfriend 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 depictions of these controversial topics, these fictions attempt to 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. The texts mark the appropriate time and place for having children, literally and metaphorically. What changes in the years
from 1968 to 1999 (the years these texts span) is that in the 1960s abortion was not yet legal, and the social mores of the 1950s were just beginning to recede. Young Adult texts 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 a fit topic for fiction. Even so, an unwanted teen pregnancy in the 1960s was almost as likely to end in an illegal abortion as it was to be carried to term.

However, the fear of an illegal abortion is tangibly present in many Young Adult fictions 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, texts reflect this new fact. While most Young Adult texts do not endorse abortion, a few recognize that legal abortion is an option for their protagonists who become pregnant. It is a rare Young Adult 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 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 that 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 she 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 that of the ultra-conservative belief about sex education; that you don’t need education if you’re not going to engage in sex. Additionally, many conservatives believe that sex education promotes and endorses sexual activity, yet studies have shown that the opposite is true. 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 text 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 of marriage is also wrong.

By depicting conservative sexual values as the only correct options, this text 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 *Publisher’s Weekly* endorses the religious aspect of the text 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 Young Adult fiction seems to present options to its readers, some options are not portrayed as being viable at all, but are shown as distinctly good or bad choices.

By depicting sexual and reproductive options as more complex, Norma Klein’s *It’s Not What You Expect* treats readers with more respect than other more didactic texts. In this novel, published just after 1973’s Roe vs. 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 that 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 pre-marital sexual activity, Klein still privileges the relationship between Ralph and Sara Lee since they are in love and plan to marry some day. Their relationship, while not yet a state-sanctioned marriage, is one that fits into the dominant culture’s idea of a traditional relationship since Ralph and Sara Lee plan to marry and eventually have children. The way the aftermath of the abortion is described by the narrator reassures the reader that an abortion 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. (113)
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 undergo an abortion and go on with her life and her relationship. The circumstances surrounding the abortion illustrate a decidedly pro-choice attitude.

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

*It’s Not What You Expect* is an exception in Young Adult fiction, but shows the potential of these works to make a positive impact on readers. Norma Klein wrote many Young Adult novels about adolescents learning about sexuality, and seemed to favor, as Joyce Litton argues, “non-punitive attitudes” (186) towards 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 texts nor the more liberal “provide adequate models for dealing with the main problems—although Blume and Klein come a lot closer” (187). Litton asserts her
belief “that in the age of AIDS and teen pregnancies, adults should encourage teens to
delay sexual activity until they are more mature” (187). Litton’s assertion reveals that it
may be 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 fictions, 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 of her. Rarely do authors (or narrators) consider
abortion as a viable choice in an unwanted pregnancy, even though statistically abortion
is often the actual choice of many young women who become pregnant.10 Also, when 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 in Young Adult fiction. 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” (81). I would add that if that woman happens to be a young adult rather
than a legally of age adult, her status as a 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 fate is of secondary importance in this novel. Scarlett 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 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 Young Adult fictions 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 texts valorize 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, Young Adult texts reveal the ongoing cultural obsession with female teenage bodies and reproductive issues. This chapter reveals that despite a tendency towards reinforcing the dominant culture’s ideology about teen pregnancy, these Young Adult texts also contain
challenges to stereotypes. The feminist continuum present in Young Adult literature continues to voice alternatives to oppressive and damaging ideas about young women and their sexual lives.

End Notes

1 A 1996 study entitled Teenagers Under Pressure, done by EDK Associates for Seventeen Magazine and the Ms. Foundation for Women indicated there are many reasons why a young woman may become pregnant—self differentiation is one of them.

2 According to a 1999 study by the non-partisan Alan Guttmacher Institute, the overall U.S. teenage pregnancy rate declined 17% between 1990 and 1996, from 117 pregnancies per 1,000 women aged 15-19 to 97 per 1,000.


4 According to Alan Guttmacher Institute’s 1994 report Sex and America’s Teenagers, teenage pregnancy rates in the US are twice as high as in England and Canada, and nine times as high as in the Netherlands and Japan.

5 This important study entitled “Teenage Sexual and Reproductive Behavior in Developed Countries: Can More Progress Be Made?” reveals important facts about how we can help teens to be more sexually responsible. The study shows that teens in the U.S. are much less likely to use birth control than their European counterparts. Researchers believe that lack of easy and affordable access to reproductive health care is a disastrous impediment for American teens. The study asserts that the lack of acceptance of teenage sexual relationships, as well as the lack of clearly stated expectations about responsible sexual behavior, are strong contributing factors to the still high teen birth rate in the United States. The countries where teen birth rates are lower provide affordable and private access to reproductive health care and extensive sex education. The researchers believe that “strong public support for helping youth to become responsible adults” provides incentives to delay childbearing.

6 The many public libraries I visited, in both Louisiana and California, all had a copy of at least one of the “classic” pregnancy problem novels listed as being available to check out. Most had My Darling, My Hamburger and Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones.

7 Author Rob Thomas kindly answered an email I sent him that included some comments and thoughts I had about his stories. About “Extension Four,” he argues: “On a personal level, I'm pro-choice, but I'm not writing stories with the intention of selling kids on my political beliefs. I'm not really trying to get anything across to young women (regarding
their beliefs about abortion/adoption pregnancy) in the story. The story is about a closed-minded girl whose beliefs about her birth mother and a pregnant teen girl at school change. That story is more about racism and elitism than it is about teen sexuality.”

8 Although Beatrice Sparks’ books are billed as being “edited” by her, they all contain very similar conservative social agendas. On another web site I found a review of Sparks’ book Jay’s Journal, which purported to be the journal of a troubled teen that committed suicide. The review was posted on the Association for Mormon Letters web site and this reviewer questions the books’ representations:

   It tells the story of a young man named Alden Barrett, who committed suicide in 1971. Barrett kept a journal, and after his death, his parents shared a copy of the journal with a writer named Beatrice Sparks. She then used some entries from the journal to produce a book called Jay's Journal, which became a national best-seller. But Jay's Journal used approximately 25 entries from Barrett's journal, and fleshed them out with some 60 other entries, which either came from other kids' stories (Sparks' version) or were made up by Sparks (the Barrett family's version). At any rate, Jay's Journal describes someone who was involved with devil worship and the occult, which Alden Barrett was not. <http://www.aml-online.org>

Sparks’ books all promote conservative social agendas, and whether she has created most of them out of whole cloth remains to be discovered. It is fairly apparent that she has an extremely strong influence on the contents of the “diaries.”

9 Another study from the Alan Guttmacher Institute entitled “Teenage Sexual and Reproductive Behavior in Developed Countries: Can More Progress Be Made?” reveals important facts about how we can help teens to be more sexually responsible. This study shows that “in countries where youth receive social support, full information and positive messages about sexuality and sexual relationships, and have easy access to sexual and reproductive health services, they achieve healthier outcomes and lower rates of pregnancy, childbearing abortion and STD’s.” The countries where teen birth rates are lower provide affordable and private access to reproductive health care and extensive sex education. The researchers believe that “strong public support for helping youth to become responsible adults” provides incentives to delay childbearing.

10 According to the Alan Guttmacher Institute’s 1999 report Teenage Pregnancy: Overall Trends and State by State Information, “Nearly 4 in 10 teen pregnancies (excluding those that ended in miscarriages) are terminated by abortion. There were about 274,000 abortions among teens in 1996.” They also report that “Since 1980, abortion rates among sexually experienced teens have declined steadily, because fewer teens are becoming pregnant.” (5)
Chapter 3
Rubyfruit Junglegym: Lesbian Young Adult Fiction

As I have demonstrated in the previous chapters on body image and pregnancy, Young Adult literature portrays female sexuality in ways that contribute to the construction of what it means to be young and female in contemporary western culture. Like pregnancy, sexual orientation appears in a distinct subset of Young Adult literature. Young Adult texts that depict lesbianism usually focus almost exclusively on lesbian sexual orientation as a topic or plot device. This chapter focuses on the contribution Young Adult lesbian literature makes to the construction of female sexuality as well as cultural expectations of young women’s femininity.

As controversial as the teen pregnancy novel, the lesbian Young Adult novel is less discussed. Despite a lack of scholarly attention, Young Adult fictions that depict lesbianism are now so numerous as to be a recognized subset of Young Adult literature. In her annotated bibliography of gay and lesbian Young Adult fiction entitled Lesbian and Gay Voices, 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. Few critics have examined lesbian Young Adult fictions and 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 Young Adult novel apart from novels which depict male homosexuality, especially since the lesbian novel has particular features that deserve scrutiny apart from issues of sexual orientation.
In our patriarchal culture male homosexuality receives more attention than lesbianism. Christine Jenkins confirms the imbalance present in Young Adult fictions, revealing that “the ‘gender gap’ continues with three books featuring gay males for every one featuring lesbian characters" (300). This chapter will focus on the Young Adult lesbian novel to correct the imbalance. In her study of feminist children’s and Young Adult novels *Waking Sleeping Beauty*, 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 Young Adult lesbian novel, the 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. (92)

Trites views lesbian Young Adult novels as an aspect of a larger theme in feminist Young Adult 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 lesbian texts, Young Adult lesbian novels also provide alternatives to the cultural paradigms of heterocentrism, male-centered sexuality and male dominance.

Lesbian Young Adult 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. These
fictions reveal the experience of heterosexuality as predatory and coercive, especially for young women. Lesbianism appears as a positive alternative. A few lesbian Young Adult texts 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 Young Adult novel provides readers with alternative visions of female sexuality in a heterosexist culture; these texts allow young women the space to re-imagine 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 Young Adult novel criticizes those social paradigms.


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

Almost all of these lesbian Young Adult novels criticize compulsory heterosexuality through authors 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 re-imagining what better sex is, both for lesbians and heterosexuals. The lesbian Young Adult text depicts female sexual pleasure as a critique of male-centered heterosexist culture by portraying female sexual pleasure as cooperative and mutual. While sexual pleasure is not the focus of every lesbian Young Adult text, some focus on understanding sexual orientation through the mediation of a secondary character.

Mediated narrative perspectives perform an important function in these texts. In the lesbian Young Adult novel, 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. This narrative device reinforces the idea that lesbianism may be too controversial to be represented by a main character. These fictions inform and reinforce cultural stereotypes about lesbianism and about female sexuality through their depictions of young female characters. In some texts lesbians are depicted as stereotypically hostile towards men and as 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 Young Adult novel mirrors an American social cultural progression from minimal acknowledgement to some acceptance of bisexuality, homosexuality and lesbianism. As second wave feminism and the civil rights movements converged and grew in the 1960’s and 70’s, sexual orientation became an issue that was addressed. Young Adult fiction historian Michael Cart identifies the first Young Adult novel to address homosexuality as John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There: It Better Be Worth the Trip*, published in 1969. However, Donovan’s book portrays its gay male protagonist’s sexual orientation as a tragic flaw in a pattern typical of early Young Adult homosexual/lesbian texts.

Another text also published in 1969 portrays lesbianism positively. *Patience and Sarah*, the first lesbian Young Adult novel published in the United States, is also one of the most popular and often cited lesbian Young Adult texts. For example, both the protagonists and their teachers in the Young Adult lesbian 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 for a Young Adult audience, *Patience and Sarah* has become widely read (as evidenced by placement on bookstore shelves and inclusion in Young Adult sections in libraries) by a young adult audience. Patience and Sarah’s optimism is not unusual; the Young Adult lesbian novel has been more positive from its inception.

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 of 
Pediatrics* asserted that gay students receive more violent threats than straight students 
do. Gay bashing and other violent crimes continue to be perpetrated against gays and 
lesbians.\(^5\) Teenage suicide is a public health crisis, and certain studies show that up one-
third of all teen suicides are of homosexual kids.\(^6\) Adolescence is a difficult time for most 
people, and for lesbians it can be even more difficult. These texts also provide a place for 
much needed education about lesbianism, since fiction may be the only source of 
information young readers have.

In the texts I discuss there is a main character who is a lesbian, and the depiction 
of lesbianism as a “normal” sexuality. Representations of sexual orientations other than 
heterosexuality are increasing in Young Adult fiction. Critic Michael Cart affirms the 
importance of overt portrayals of lesbianism in Young Adult literature. He believes:

> It is not enough simply to publish a book because it deals with gay themes 
or depicts gay characters. The book also needs to be honest and candid in 
their treatment of the subject. (230)

Despite the positive functions of these texts, Young Adult fictions that depict lesbianism 
are the most often challenged and “banned” books in schools and public libraries to this 
day.\(^7\) 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 texts to be made less 
accessible to readers.\(^8\)
Lesbian and Gay Young Adult novels deserve separate scrutiny from the wider category of Young Adult problem novels. While some critics continue to place lesbian and gay Young Adult texts in the problem novel category, these texts depict issues of sexuality and sexual orientation, and are not really equivalent to pregnancy or divorce problem novels that truly depict a “problem.” The inclusion of lesbian Young Adult texts in the problem novel category may reflect the culturally conservative view that lesbianism is a problem rather than an orientation. In a 1994 article in the *ALAN Review* Nancy St. Clair analyzes popular Young Adult texts that portray lesbianism, including these texts in the category of realistic problem novels that flourished in the 1960’s. While her discussion of the problem novel is informative, she explains their inclusion in the category by asserting that adolescents in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s were less ready to read about issues of sexual orientation. As do many other Young Adult critics, St. Clair includes issues of lesbianism alongside other so-called “problem” issues such as pregnancy, abortion, divorce, drug use and death. But this inclusion of lesbianism in such a negatively oriented category is problematic. Admittedly western culture still has difficulty accepting that adolescents are sexual beings at all, much less accepting sexualities other than state sanctioned heterosexuality. But to automatically proclaim lesbianism as a problem to be solved simply reinforces cultural stereotypes and does not fairly represent lesbian sexuality.

Some Young Adult books depict the ideals of gay pride, but most land somewhere in between these two extremes. In an attempt to classify lesbian Young Adult fiction, Lisa Miya Jervis published an annotated bibliography of lesbian texts. Jervis asserts that most lesbian Young Adult 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 the complexity of these texts. Jervis argues that some of these texts, 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 Young Adult fictions offer more than just the two extremes of compulsory heterosexuality and gay pride.

Young Adult 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 either to be cured 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 judgement from the author. These categories, while descriptive, are simply too reductive. Nancy St. Clair tries to fit the works she discusses into similar categories. She proclaims that lesbian Young Adult novels fall into three groups: books that depict lesbianism as a “tragic flaw,” books in which the “representation of adolescent lesbianism became increasingly complex and decreasingly moralistic,” and lastly books which “gay characters and gay issues are often depicted sympathetically” (6). More recently, another critic has categorized these fictions. In “Unshelter Me: The Emerging Fictional Adolescent Lesbian,” Vanessa Wayne Lee also creates three categories for the Young Adult lesbian novel. Her categories are: texts which “position lesbianism as a threat or problem,” followed by texts which focus on the “formation of lesbian identities,” and lastly those texts which “interrogate received wisdom about lesbianism
and lesbian identity” (152). As we can see critics have tried to categorize these works, many of the resulting categories focus on whether lesbianism is portrayed more or less either negatively or positively. But whatever categories fit the purposes of particular arguments, the most useful way to analyze these fictions is to recognize the lesbian Young Adult novel as a subset apart from problem novels and distinct from Gay Young Adult novels. In other words, regardless of content or perspective, the lesbian Young Adult novel is its own category.  

Lesbian Young Adult novels are almost always, as many Young Adult texts in general are, fictions about formation and growth. The lesbian Young Adult novel, like other Young Adult texts, functions as a kind of bildungsroman. These novels of development reconfigure what it means to be female in a patriarchal and heteronormative culture. Thus, Young Adult 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 1969-89*. 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 text places men firmly at the margins of the story. (15)

Indeed, many Young Adult 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 Young Adult novels must be regarded in a different light than adult lesbian fiction, and in fact for Young Adult lesbian fiction new criteria should be considered.

Any history of the lesbian Young Adult novel should include early portrayals of gay and lesbian characters in other Young Adult texts, as these depictions are important precursors to the full-fledged lesbian Young Adult text. For example, within Judy Blume’s groundbreaking novel *Forever* is a stereotypical portrayal of a young gay male character, which reveals its heterosexism. A gay character in *Forever*, Artie, goes through a tumultuous struggle as he and his family come to terms with his sexual orientation. Artie attempts suicide, an experience that mirrors an unfortunate trend in many Young Adult texts. Artie tries unsuccessfully to convince his parents that he should be able to attend art school rather than study a general college curriculum. Eventually Artie’s suicide attempt fails, and he is shipped off to a psychiatric hospital. Blume’s depiction of Artie’s conflict is stereotypical, but is not markedly different from many early Young Adult texts that portray lesbianism as a problem rather than just another sexual orientation.

A few Young Adult lesbian texts, such as *Crush* and *A Stone Gone Mad*, depict lesbianism as a problem that must be overcome; but these depictions complicate the issue by also showing that that problem lies with a homophobic society. Both of these books portray the process of self-discovery as a painful struggle for young lesbian women. Jane Futcher’s 1981 novel *Crush* tells the story of Jinx and Lexie, who fall in love while they both attend a private girls’ prep school. 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 that young women may have 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 the struggle for acceptance is not overwhelming, but simply another life process.

Unlike Jinx, Emily, the protagonist of A Stone Gone Mad, takes many years to accept her lesbianism. In A Stone Gone Mad, Emily is discovered (by her father) making love with an older female friend, and she is summarily sent to boarding school. From the time of her father’s punishment until she is past thirty, Emily fights, hides and then
finally acknowledges her lesbianism. These two portrayals depict the painful aspects of being lesbian in a homophobic society, but they also re-imagine what sex is for women. While the descriptions of sexual intimacy in *Crush* are minimal, in *A Stone Gone Mad* Emily’s first (and only) encounter with Mattie reveals that female sexual desire can be powerful:

‘Oh, God! Her mouth was between Emily’s legs. What if I smell? She forgot smells, images overwhelmed her: bright red flowers, bends of a lake, a king riding a white stallion behind the hill, glints of a record needle in the sun. Emily had been near crying. Now what? She pushed Mattie to the side, put her arms around Mattie’s neck, covered her body with Mattie’s, did this recklessly, impulsively . . . She would never feel this abandonment, this everlastingness again. And she was glad she was feeling it . . . (35)

Emily’s pleasure, however powerful it is, is short lived as her father soon discovers the two young women and literally tears them apart. Despite the pain and social censure depicted in this novel, the images and descriptions of Emily’s happiness when she is with a woman reveal the beauty and power of female sexual desire. *A Stone Gone Mad* ultimately overcomes the “problem novel” label with strong characters, believable and compelling narratives and vibrant depictions of female sexual desire.

Another way that authors of lesbian Young Adult fiction resist the label of problem novel is by presenting lesbianism through the voice of another character. Rather than a narrative that focuses on the lesbian’s self-acceptance, these narratives present a lesbian who has already accepted her sexual orientation, and a protagonist who just learns of her friend/relative’s lesbianism. This approach allows readers to engage with and discover lesbianism through the eyes of a heterosexual character. This narrative strategy
allows the protagonist and her readers to approach the topic of lesbianism indirectly. Some of these mediated texts revolve around a protagonist’s perception of her lesbian mother, sister or friend. For example, *Deliver Us From Evie* is written from the perspective of a teenage lesbian’s younger brother, and *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun* 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 protagonist is not gay, but is very close to someone who is. What is important 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 texts do belong in the subset of lesbian Young Adult fiction because of their focus on lesbian sexual orientation.

Another form of mediation occurs in Young Adult 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 text. 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 term 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? (85-87)
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 feeling to the reader towards 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 may 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* depicts a young black teenager’s discovery of his mother’s sexual orientation and affair with a white woman. 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 sensitive side and stamp collecting as un-masculine, 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, in a similarity to the mediation 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” as a derogatory 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 about lesbian mothers. Woodson illustrates how difficult it is for a young man to pursue “un-masculine” 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 the 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.’ (136)
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 valorized and shown to be vital in the lives of young women, lesbian and heterosexual.

Zimmerman asserts that “lesbian novels are read by lesbians in order to affirm lesbian existence” (15). For the Young Adult reader this may also be true, but these fictions provide more than affirmation of lesbianism. In fact many Young Adult lesbian texts 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 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 Young Adult texts that portray sexualities of all kinds serve as a kind 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 fiction that provides a safe space for acknowledging lesbianism is Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind*. In this novel Garden...
portrays two young women who become close friends, then discover their 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 realize the truth, the young women 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) that depicts female bonding. Besides its depiction 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 two of their 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, especially for Liza, who is lectured by one of her favorite teachers:

“So I understand the pull that—sex—can have on young and inexperienced—persons. I do not understand 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 text. 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 1978 novel, two young female protagonists 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—‘ (146)

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 which 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 1978, when acceptance for lesbianism and lesbianism 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 may be extremely harmful to young readers to read her saying “I’m not anything.” Readers may 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 their 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 may 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 lesbianism, the reluctance of the characters to embrace lesbianism can be read as recognition of the fluidity of sexuality.

In contrast to the grown woman who recognizes (but may be struggling with accepting) her own lesbianism, the pre-sexual young woman finds in lesbian Young Adult fiction an alternate view of the compulsorily heterosexual universe. Young women are bombarded with messages each and 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, Young Adult 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 fictions validate and affirm that lesbianism is
indeed an acceptable, normal sexual orientation. And importantly, these texts provide a pointed critique of heterosexuality and predatory sexual behavior, and a place where young women can re-imagine sex beyond compulsory heterosexual intercourse.

The lesbian Young Adult text re-imagines sex, and provides an alternate view of sex for young women. In western, patriarchal 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 upon the idea that virginity is being able to say you have not yet engaged in heterosexual intercourse. The privileging of 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. In fact, a majority of women report that sexual intercourse is not their primary means of reaching orgasm. So, while Young Adult texts are not necessarily designed or written to be sex manuals, many young women (and men) do turn to them as a source of information.

Lesbian Young Adult fictions provide an alternative vision of sexual pleasure for young women. An alternative view is not simply important for young pre-sexual lesbians, but just as much for young heterosexual women. In a culture that promotes heterosexuality centered on intercourse and male pleasure, the particularly female centered sexuality present in these fictions provides a re-imagining 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 fiction is one of the few lesbian Young Adult texts that has a black protagonist; Ruby and her family are from Trinidad. The novel 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 text. Ruby 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.

(17)

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 to get around, and has apparent trouble removing her coat and simply moving around. Ruby explains in the text 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 Phylisia, 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*, depicts sex as mutually pleasurable and non-coercive. 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 be pleasurable and 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 re-imagining 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 narrative in Ruby moves between her struggles with her controlling father and her affair with Daphne, and like many other lesbian Young Adult 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 of an eleven-year-old boy, and begins to perceive the boy’s father noticing her as he begins to make increasingly obvious sexual advances towards her. 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, horny older man who seems to want to seduce his under-age babysitter. 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 lecherous older man and his babysitter are nothing but a cliché, in this context the episode serves an important function. Dr. Elgin’s inappropriate sexual behavior towards Val is an inadvertent warning against the predatory nature of 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 is feeling 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 readers, and for Val when, during her phone call to Chloe describing the incident, Chloe hears the details and tells her “Wow,
Val, this guy is sick.” Chloe aptly (and protectively) defines his predatory and invasive sexual actions towards Val as “sick,” which is how much of society might describe she and Val’s 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 text is one of an uncomfortable incident between an older man and a vulnerable young girl. 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 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 text, that of allowing young women another vision of how sexuality can be non-coercive, 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 fictions also reveal that predatory males learn their behavior early, and are not always older and more powerful. Much like the predatory 45-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 males. While the indecent exposure incident at school frightens Ruby and other young women, and is a reminder of their sexual vulnerability as well, 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 seems to seek 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. Of course, 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,”(107) and lesbianism appropriates ownership away from men and towards other women. While Ruby’s father’s brutality towards 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*. 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 sexist police captain who interviews her while she recuperates in the hospital. He is the perfect embodiment of the sexist, antiquated archetype of a hateful member of patriarchal culture. He asks her questions like “Was he your boyfriend?” and, more tellingly, “What did you have on?” (150) The police chief is clearly placing the 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 may be advising readers of the dangers of being young, female and lesbian in a homophobic and sexist culture. But her portrayal of the ultra-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 Young Adult fictions. The authors seem to be reminding readers of the potential for sexual violence that exists in a culture that tends to valorize violence and male domination. Castle’s reconfiguration of Sedgwick’s triangle is a useful means of discussing the lesbian Young Adult novel, since very often in these texts the relationship between two women is subverted or even overthrown by a male authority figure. In The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Lesbianism and Modern Culture, Terry Castle describes her theory of lesbian counterplotting, which involves a means for identifying and evaluating lesbian fiction. Her theory inverts Eve Sedgwick’s triangle of male homosocial desire by inverting 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” (72,74). Castle names these
counterplots either euphoric or dysphoric, depending upon 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 text as a whole. And like the juxtapositioning of
female bonding and male violence in these fictions, the actual predominance of each
aspect within each individual text 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 the young women. Castle might assert
that this text 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
text is that it is ultimately euphoric, and depicts continued resistance to male domination
that the young women display all throughout the text. Jaret and Peggy maintain their
relationship despite enduring social and physical harm, and the text ends with the two of
them planning their future together.

The lesbian Young Adult 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 Notebook of Melanin Sun
also allow readers to learn about and understand lesbianism through positive portrayals
and mediated narrative strategies. Many of these texts such as Crush, Happy Endings are
All Alike and A Stone Gone Mad also illustrate how difficult it is to be lesbian in a culture that continues to marginalize lesbianism and homosexuals. Within these fictions young women, lesbian and not, can find a space where it is possible to re-imagine and re-invent what sex and sexuality are and mean. Resistance to male-dominated and controlled culture exists in these fictions, and for young women (and men) they may be sources of enlightenment and empowerment otherwise lacking in much of popular culture they consume.

End Notes

1 Young Adult fiction that depicts lesbianism is quite controversial. According to critic Michael Cart, the topic of lesbianism was the leading reason given for book challenges in 1993. The most frequently challenged individual book in 1993 was a children’s title called Daddy’s Roommate, a story of an alternative family. Another frequently challenged children’s book is Heather Has Two Mommies.

2 Articles that examine lesbian Young Adult fiction include ‘Unshelter Me: The Emerging Fictional Adolescent Lesbian’ by Vanessa Wayne Lee, “Outside Looking In: Representations of Gay and Lesbian Experiences in the Young Adult Novel” by Nancy St. Clair and “From Queer to Gay and Back Again: Young Adult Novels with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969-1997” by Christine Jenkins.

3 In his history of Young Adult fiction From Romance to Realism, Michael Cart devotes almost sixteen pages to a discussion of gay and lesbian theme YA books, but barely mentions lesbian texts. He briefly mentions Annie on My Mind, but uses examples only from texts about male homosexuality. His attention to the male-themed texts reflects the culture’s masculinist tendency.

4 In 1969 author Alma Routsong chose to publish Patience and Sarah under a pseudonym, revealing her understandable reluctance to be affiliated with producing a lesbian text in a homophobic culture.

5 Matthew Shepard’s murder in 1998 was a hate crime perpetrated because he was gay.

6 A 1998 Massachusetts study, done by the Governor’s Commission for that state, revealed that one-third of teen suicides were committed by young adults who were homosexual.
Nancy Garden’s *Annie on My Mind* has been the subject of frequent challenges and has even been burned by religious fundamentalists in front of the Kansas City, Missouri school district headquarters. Also in 1993, a district superintendent removed the book from school shelves in Olathe, Kansas. Four students and their parents sued the school board (with help from the ACLU), and eventually the book was returned to the shelves after the First District Court ruled that the Olathe School District had violated the First Amendment to the Constitution. (Cart, 226)

When I was researching and collecting materials for this chapter, I had extreme difficulty finding many of these texts. Most were not available in public or University libraries, and many are out of print. I found some on Internet auction site eBay, and others in used bookstores. Almost all of the books I found in used bookstores were discarded by libraries.

Jervis’ bibliography was published in the magazine she edits, entitled *Bitch*. *Bitch* magazine is described as a “feminist response to pop culture,” has an audience of mostly young female readers.

In this chapter, lesbian will refer to female homosexuality and gay will refer to male homosexuality.

In Shere Hite’s study of female sexuality, *The Hite Report*, she reveals that the percentage of women who achieve orgasm during intercourse is very low compared to women who achieve it by other means. *Our Bodies, Ourselves* confirms the idea that many women achieve orgasm more often and more easily through means other than intercourse.

In fact, in her article on Young Adult lesbian protagonists Vanessa Wayne Lee asserts that Val’s “. . . idea of lesbianism develops alongside an exaggerated notion of heterosexuality” (153), implying that Hautzig’s portrayal of predatory older men is somehow unjustified. I would argue that Hautzig’s portrayal of predatory men is not only justified, but provides an important contrast to the mutual, gentle and cooperative relationship portrayed between the two young women.
Chapter 4
Discourses of Power: Young Adult Romance Novels

While Young Adult fiction in general is critically neglected, Romance novels receive more critical attention than most other subsets of Young Adult fiction. Prominent Young Adult critic Michael Cart argues that “aside from Seventeenth Summer, all the work in the romance category is ephemeral and eminently forgettable” (32). Despite this derision, 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 Young Adult fiction such as pregnancy novels, lesbian novels and some series fiction, the atypical Young Adult 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 Young Adult 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 texts 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) For texts previously viewed with much skepticism, Christian Smith’s work takes seriously a widely read subset of Young Adult fiction. Becoming A Woman Through Romance aptly illustrates
one aspect of the impact these texts may make on young readers. While Young Adult romances are not all formulaic, as some critics suggest, they do share common features.

Young Adult romances usually focus on a love 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. (84)

Romantic Young Adult fictions tend to follow a pattern, as Trites argues, but this chapter will examine texts that resist formula. Additionally, Trites asserts that sexuality in Young Adult fiction performs a very definite function; she argues that “sexual potency is a common metaphor for empowerment in adolescent literature” (84). In Trites’ view, romance plays a subordinate role in the Young Adult novel. However, as I will show in this chapter, romance is an integral component of how the genre defines and emphasizes female sexuality. Romance functions like depictions of social issues in Young Adult problem novels, but romance is central. In this chapter, I analyze the functions of heterosexual romance in Young Adult literature, and how these functions contribute to the construction of female sexuality and act as discourses of power.

In these texts 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 non-linear 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. (61)

Atypical romance novels help young women understand many of the experiences that may come with adolescence and romantic relationships. For example, when the romance narrative concludes with the severance of the relationship, young women can see that satisfying endings can exist without the obligatory attachment to a male partner. Non-traditional endings also disrupt pre-conceived 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 texts re-imagine sexual pleasure for young women, and redirect the focus away from male-centered pleasure and towards the female. In contrast to these recuperative functions, Young Adult texts 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. Two 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, the texts also assign blame to victims.

Through the non-traditional endings, valorization of female sexuality, protagonist self-definition and warnings about physical abuse, these romance narratives challenge the patriarchal authority that ties female self-fulfillment to a male partner. When a young woman becomes involved in a romantic relationship, the romance can provide the impetus for her self-discovery, as long as the romance is depicted as not the most important experience of her life. Like pregnancy in Young Adult problem novels, romance provides a young woman with a way to define her self apart from the traditional family structure; often a romantic relationship is the first time she sees herself as separate from her family. The feminist texts I discuss depict relationships as one aspect of life among many, and, importantly, defy the expectation that the heroine is solely defined by her relationship to a young man. The depiction of sexual activity or sexual desire reconstitutes young women as sexual beings. These texts illustrate that female sexual desire exists and is acceptable.

While romance fiction published specifically for adults is almost immediately recognizable due to covers illustrated with entwined lovers, Young Adult romance fiction is not as easily identified. Many Young Adult romance novels are published as series fiction. Young Adult romance series such as *Making Out, Sweet Dreams* and *Sweet Valley High* are among the most popular Young Adult fictions. 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 so-called “stand-alone” Young Adult romance novels that challenge traditional ideas about the importance of romantic relationships for
young women. I focus on stand-alone texts because they provide narrative alternatives to formulaic series romances that 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 may 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” (68). These Young Adult texts disrupt this convention by allowing heroines to be self-determined, their social status and self-worth not dependent upon attachment to a male.

While many Young Adult romance novels follow a predictable narrative, feminist novels that diverge from the standard plot provide resistance to cultural expectations about femininity. Typical Young Adult romance novels follow a standard formula, which varies slightly from the formula for adult romance novels. This standard formula, while previously applied by Radway to adult romances, can also be modified for the Young Adult romance. In Young Adult romance the expected outcome may not be sexual consummation and marriage, but rather a commitment or going steady with at least the promise of a secure teenaged future together. Or, as Brenda Daly asserts, “Most Young Adult romances close, predictably, with a kiss (and no more)” (56), perhaps revealing the reluctance of many Young Adult novelists to allow their teen characters to experience
full sexual activity. While the standard Young Adult romance plot may provide a less permanent resolution than the adult romance, the general path of the narrative remains similar. Young Adult romance texts that defy traditional conclusions resist the imposition of patriarchal social constraints by depicting female assertion of independence. Through alternatives to traditional heterosexual romance, strong Young Adult heroines redefine what it means to be female in a patriarchal culture. These texts show that a young woman can enjoy a romance but view the relationship as simply another aspect of her existence, and not the central space in her life.

Young Adult romance novels might seem an unlikely locus for social change, but the atypical Young Adult romance novel provides young women an important space in which to re-imagine the meaning of romance. While many traditional Young Adult romance novels, especially early examples from the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s reinforce the cultural ideology that a woman is defined by her relationship to a man, there are several notable exceptions. The very first Young Adult romance *Seventeenth Summer* (1942) is a nascently feminist text that explores female sexuality and independence solely through a young woman’s eyes. 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 to college.

This text’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 Young Adult 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 Young Adult 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 fauna 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, which reflects Julia Kristeva’s idea of feminine time. Cart overlooks the explicit link in the text 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, and Daly’s text beautifully embodies that perception.

*Seventeenth Summer* follows the literary tradition identified by Rachel Brownstein in *Becoming a Heroine*. Brownstein argues that the romance novel allows a reader to identify with a female protagonist in a “woman-centered novel,” which makes a “woman and her inner life central as they are not, in fact, in the bourgeois real world” (xxii). 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 Young Adult 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 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 the early publications to the more recent texts. It is important to note, however, that the romances Litton examines are all series fictions, not the stand-alone romances that I analyze. Wendy Smith sees the boom in the Young Adult romance that took place in the 1980s as a reaction to the proliferation of the “problem” novel in the 1970s. These realistic narratives depicted death, divorce, abortion, pregnancy and other social issues imbedded within narratives. In the 1980s the publishing industry promoted the Young Adult romance revolution by capitalizing on a perceived resistance to more serious texts. 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 texts all throughout the history of Young Adult literature.

In the 1970s atypical Young Adult romances began to flourish. Paul Zindel’s *I Never Loved Your Mind* (1970), depicts high-school dropout Dewey Daniels’ quest for love with a co-worker. By portraying a romance text from the perspective of a young man, Zindel allows his readers a glimpse into a rarely depicted side of Young Adult romance. But Zindel’s attempt 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 1978 *Love is One of the Choices* defies the stereotypical ideal of what a romance novel is or should be. *Love is One of the Choices* 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 Young Adult romance novel began to return to popularity, mostly in the form of series fiction. *Sweet Dreams* and *Sweet Valley High* are two popular series which follow a predictable formula. Nonetheless, despite the popularity of series fiction, stand-alone Young Adult romances 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 her father. This disparity tests their marriage, and provides impetus for mother-daughter discussions about gender roles. Of all the Young Adult romances I analyze in this chapter, *Girl Meets Boy* has the most conventional ending, yet still resists stereotyping throughout the text. Virginia Hamilton’s *A White Romance* (1987) depicts narrator Talley, who falls in love with a young white drug-dealing male who has been bussed into her formerly all-Black high school. This atypical romance novel reveals the difficulty facing young women when they encounter potentially abusive male partners. Sarah Dessen’s novel *Dreamland* (2001) deals with an abusive boyfriend who rises from the surface story of a seemingly normal teenage romance. This text importantly names and draws attention to the potential for abuse in teen relationships. Yet, Dessen’s focus on her protagonist’s perceived tendency to be drawn into the abusive relationship implies
that her personality (along with her neglectful and permissive parents) is ultimately to blame for her situation.

Through a first-person narrative, many Young Adult texts such as *Seventeenth Summer* focus on the second wave feminist ideal of the personal as political. Through first-person subjective narrative structures, these fictions give primary importance to the “politics of the internal” as Virginia Carroll Schaefer argues. This perspective, especially of a young female protagonist, helps readers to 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 the reader in her narrative, Daly also creates intimacy with her readers. 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 her 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 that they will understand—as she does—that her relationship with
Jack was a transformative experience for her. 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 without consciously acknowledging that her mother’s “condition” is due to her culturally prescribed subservience. Throughout the text 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 insure her own survival outside of 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) while she rides literally towards her future. While Angie looks at Jack, the very figure of anxiety and stress as represented by his hands “jammed” in his pockets and his sweater which
just happens to be “knotted” about his neck (290), he is depicted as a figure of patriarchy. With the depiction of Angie’s experience begins the quest for female self-definition, and sexual pleasure, in the Young Adult romance text.

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 very 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 towards Lorraine. 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. The way that Daly depicts 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.

While the basic plot structure of *Seventeenth Summer* can be read as a typical romance novel, the ending reveals the heroine’s strong commitment to self-development and education when she chooses to go to college instead of marrying her first love. 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 into 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. But it was only a moment and the whole night melted away around me. (274)

Jack’s proposal, which is for all purposes 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 Carroll Schaefer 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; when I look at something—say, the lake—the waves are so green and the foam so white it seems I can’t look at it hard enough; 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. (243,4)

Here 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 Carroll Schaefer see this moment as the denouement of the text, 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 part way, 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 patriarchal illusion that romance is the pinnacle achievement in a woman’s life.
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; assumed to identify with the heroine in her quest for satisfying and ultimately fulfilling romance. Occasionally a male will be utilized as the protagonist, thus functioning as a native informant from the world of men. In his 1970 Young Adult 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 Young Adult author, deconstructs gender stereotypes in this Young Adult romance. The text 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 is shown 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 for 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!” (131). 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 gender.

*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 apparent inversion of gender roles, while Dewey Daniels pursues Yvette romantically, she uses him for sexual pleasure and leaves him at the close of the text, insisting that she never loved him in 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 may reinforce 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, that 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 impacts 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 patriarchal power structure that would insist he continue to pursue Yvette.

Also rejecting the traditional importance given to romance, Jacqueline Woodson’s novel If You Come Softly refuses to soothe readers with a standard happy romance ending. If You Come Softly is a bildungsroman that challenges the idea that female self-definition should be linked to a male partner. In this text 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 feel and respond to their developing feelings, and refuses to succumb to stereotyping. While racial politics are present in this text, and inform the narrative tension, Woodson focuses primarily on the transitory nature of love and romance and the influence of racial bias.

In this text, 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 text
as flawed humans who may also be struggling with issues of love and fidelity. This realistic depiction of parents contrasts with stereotypical portrayals in many Young Adult books, and contributes to the complexity of the novel. In a stark and absolutely non-traditional 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 in the sunset hand in hand, the ending to this text allows readers to deal with loss. Woodson also valorizes the feelings that young adults have about their romances. 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 as for adults. In the last chapter, Ellie looks at a picture of herself and Miah in a happy moment. Ellie 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. (179)

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

One of the important features these feminist romance novels share is a focus on female sexual pleasure. According to Janice Radway in her study of adult romance novels, depicting explicit sex in an adult romance narrative is an acceptable narrative
feature as long as the characters are “in love.” The view of the dominant culture is that sex without love is unacceptable, especially for teen girls. Michael Cart mimics this cultural paradigm in his discussion of teenage sex in the Young Adult 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 Young Adult texts promote the idea that sex for the sake of pleasure, not bolstered by a “love” relationship, is explicitly wrong. This cultural 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” (36). Of course, Katherine argues that “it means more that way,” and Cart agrees, but goes even farther 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 Young Adult texts) proceeds to blame Artie’s impotence on Erica’s loveless sexual attitude. Yet, it is clear from the text that Artie is gay, and Cart
previously mentions this fact. Cart’s criticism of Erica is unwarranted, and reveals his
gender bias.

Judy Blume’s heroine Katherine is indebted to Angie Morrow of *Seventeenth Summer*, since both young women are allowed to experience sexual desire without being punished for their feelings. Resisting the cultural taboo against female sexual assertion, Blume continues the job that Maureen Daly began in 1942 by reconstituting female sexuality in her Young Adult romance novel *Forever*. This 1976 Young Adult romance portrays Katherine’s first romantic relationship and ensuing initial sexual experiences. Disturbing to many parents and authority figures due to explicit sexual content, *Forever* is nonetheless a profoundly feminist text which challenges the idea that women should not enjoy sexuality. In *Forever*, Katherine asserts herself sexually, achieves plenty of orgasms and takes responsibility for her sexual activity by obtaining birth control. Intriguingly enough, it is not Katherine’s enjoyment of sexual pleasure that sparks the most comment from critics, but her trip to Planned Parenthood garners a great deal of negative attention.

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, an information overload for the reader that might preclude her own trip to obtain birth control and information about sex. Despite Cart’s complaint, learning about a vaginal speculum is significant and useful. While Cart is upset with what he views as Blume’s didactic tone, Roberta Trites sees *Forever* as a “classic in this genre” but thinks that Blume fails at a truly liberating depiction of sex:

> The text 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. (88)

Trites analyzes the balances of power in *Forever* and other Young Adult texts, but she fails to recognize the 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* may be somewhat didactic, but the depictions of Katherine’s sexual pleasure function as a resistance to male-dominated sexuality. Her trip to Planned Parenthood might make it seem less frightening to teens that have not yet taken that "field trip.” Ultimately Trites’ criticism of *Forever* lies in her perception that the book
valorizes monogamy and romantic love as an important precursor to sexual activity. But the primary function of the text, despite its unhealthy body image messages discussed in Chapter One, is to valorize female sexual pleasure and overtly show that love and romance are not necessarily “forever,” and thus not the most important aspect of young women’s lives.

Ambiguous endings in romance novels resist neat and tidy closure and challenge patriarchal privilege. Known for her liberating portraits of teens in her novels, Norma Klein, in her novel Love is One of the Choices refuses to provide an easy ending for her readers. Subtitled “Every girl must make her own choices . . .” this text also provides an ending designed to encourage readers to make their own choices. In this Young Adult 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 in this text go back and forth from Maggie’s perspective and then to Caroline’s. As these two young women finish high school and prepare for college, Klein shows how devotion to a romantic relationship can provide a barrier to independence and self-fulfillment. In this text 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 this text, 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 her chemistry teacher, once reciprocated, reduces Caroline’s 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, then becomes pregnant. At the close of the novel, she may 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 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 Young Adult romance novels reinforce, as critic Catherine Ecroyd points out, the cultural construction that proclaims young women “cannot be happy, nor can they have an identity, without boys” (5). Yet many atypical Young Adult romance novels reject this philosophy by portraying young women who experience self-definition through a romantic adventure. This self-discovery is not due to the romantic attachment, but rather a process in which a protagonist is able to individuate herself in response to a relationship. In Hila Colman’s 1982 text *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 texts 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.” (13). Holly’s sense of autonomy is apparent as she asserts that she will not rely upon male attachment—a sense 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 the depiction of Holly’s mother is unflattering. She is shown to be torn between her own desire to further herself and her need to placate her husband. 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 as well. 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 may be that the honesty of the relationship is liberating as well. 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 foregrounds feminism, the text 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. Young Adult novels that depict physical and emotional abuse also illustrate that romance may not be the most important aspect of a young woman’s life, but it may be the most dangerous. Thus, another function of romance in Young Adult fiction is to warn readers through depictions of violence against women. Unfortunately, becoming the victim of abuse is a distinct possibility for many young women, and depicting both
emotional and physical abuse in the Young Adult romance subset at least 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 was deemed unacceptable by most of the readers of adult romance novels. In Young Adult 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 Young Adult 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, Dreamland deals directly with physical abuse. In Sarah Dessen’s Dreamland, protagonist Caitlin meets older, magnetic Rogerson, whose name links him to his abusive father whose name is also Rogerson, implying the family inheritance may have begun with the grandfather. Rogerson the younger systematically controls, berates and frequently beats Caitlin senseless throughout their relationship. This portrayal of abuse is terrifyingly realistic, including the narrative’s tendency to question her protagonist’s reaction to the abuse. Dessen’s blaming the victim mentality begins with the back cover, which declares “Wake up, Caitlin,” implying that if she were only to “wake up” Caitlin 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. Then when her sister runs away, the parents obsess about the missing daughter and literally forget about Caitlin. In the first pages of narrative, 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 mimics the later scene in the book when her parents finally realize Caitlin’s danger when they witness Rogerson battering Caitlin on their front lawn. Caitlin’s parents intervene to end Caitlin’s relationship with Rogerson, exposing 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 text if the victim weren’t portrayed as so 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. The primary impetus for the relationship is linked to Caitlin’s sexual desire, which Dessen faults as the impetus that begins the relationship. 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 text promotes; that desire creates danger.

This text 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 Young Adult texts 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, 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 a dangerous.

As Caitlin begins to feel desire, she loses perspective and “goes under” suggesting
she is overwhelmed by her feelings. 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 as leading to 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 text is telling. Counseling and therapy are important sources of support for victims of abuse, but all throughout this text 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 text can also be read to be promoting a more oppressive view of romantic relationships and potential abuse. Barbara 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 patriarchal 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 text argues, she invites whatever happens to her.

In *Dreamland*, the abuse was emotional and physical. In *A White Romance*, the abuse is almost completely psychological. In this novel by novelist Virginia Hamilton, protagonist Talley meets and falls in love with David, a drug-dealing young man who immediately 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 (the white one) controls the romance. Talley is a young woman who attends a formerly all Black high school which has been made into a Magnet school, which attracts many white students to attend. *A White Romance* tells Talley’s story entirely from her perspective, a well-established narrative tradition in Young Adult literature. But in this text, 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 text, 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. But the difference for Talley is in how she responds to and deals with her situation. Talley is able to accept her desire as powerful, but is not shown as being totally 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,” mimics 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 text; Talley at one point realizes that she feels “chained” to David (134). It is very soon after they attend a
Judas Priest concert together and Talley gets violently ill from drinking and being nearly crushed by the heavy metal crowd, that she articulates her perception that David doesn’t really care what happens to her, as she thinks, “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 text. 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!” and then 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 text 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, impenetrable force that leads to tragedy, and may result in battery, so it is to be avoided. In A White Romance, desire is powerful, yes, but is not shown to cause an abusive relationship. In fact, much like other
non-traditional Young Adult romance novels, *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.

Refusing to capitulate to the standard happy romance ending reveals a romance novel that transgresses prescribed gender expectations. Allowing teenage protagonists to remain 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 textual reminder of the importance of heterosexual attachment, some Young Adult romance novels resist the standard happy ending and replace it with a more ambiguous, more realistic, more feminist conclusion. These ambiguous conclusions mark these feminist romance novels as vastly different from their more traditional counterparts. And usually, the differences these more progressive texts share are not limited to the endings, but reflect more substantive differences in character, tone and narrative structure. These differences make these novels 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 Carroll Schaefer explains, these kinds of endings and textual anomalies leave open “the frightening possibility that perhaps a romantic relationship cannot satisfy all the needs of a young woman” (17). These literary features of Young Adult 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.

End Notes

1 Linda Christian-Smith’s book *Becoming A Woman Through Romance* examines teen romance fiction as a product of 1980’s conservatism. There are many articles that address this subset, but more than a few are mostly descriptive and evaluative. Some articles that critically examine Young Adult romance are: “Double Date to Double Love: Female Sex Roles in Teen Romances, 1942-1985” by Joyce Litton, “Laughing With, or Laughing at the Young Adult Romance” by Brenda Daly, and “Growing Up Female” by Catherine Ann Ecroyd.

2 Janice Radway’s book *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature* is a groundbreaking study of adult romance novels and the women who read them. Radway argues that despite being maligned by critics, romance novels deserve critical attention. She also argues that readers of romance novels are envisioning a utopian future and utilizing popular literature to make meaning in their own lives.

3 As Janice Radway argues in *Reading the Romance*, standard adult romance novels must follow a certain predictable formula in order to be perceived as successful by their audience. The formula basically follows a structure that can be summarized as follows: the female protagonist meets the hero, he responds ambiguously to the heroine and she to him, they are separated and then, ultimately, blissfully reunited and live happily ever after. The ultimate result of this stock narrative is to reinforce the patriarchal power structure and traditional gender roles for women and men. However much the young woman in question initially resists the lure of the powerful male, she will ultimately succumb to his desirability and devote herself to him after he displays appropriate (but limited) sensitivity to her needs.

4 Most traditional Young Adult romance novels mimic adult romances by emphasizing the importance and primacy of traditional romantic attachment to a woman’s identity. While these novels are entertaining and reveal much about our culture, they tend to depict romance as the appropriate primary focus of a young woman’s life. These texts are numerous, but some of the more popular are *Sister of the Bride, Wait for Marcy*, and *Jean Craig Finds Romance*. It is safe to say that much of Young Adult fiction directed towards females produced between 1942 and 1965 centered on romance, or at least included it in the story.

5 Viewed by many critics as the very first Young Adult text, *Seventeenth Summer* was originally published in 1942 for an adult audience. Almost instantly it became clear that the primary audience for the novel was indeed young adults. It is now recognized as a classic in the genre, and shelved in the Young Adult section of bookstores and libraries.
The ending of *Seventeenth Summer* would profoundly displease Radway’s romance novel readers. Radway’s readers hate nothing more than a “bad” romance novel. According to Radway, bad romance novels often include what the readers considered unhappy endings, which were generally shown to be endings in which the heroine and hero were not together as a romantic couple. Other features that marked romance novels as “bad” were promiscuity, excessive violence, and a weak hero.

Wendy Smith’s 1981 article in *Publisher’s Weekly* is entitled “An Earlier Start on Romance.”

Virginia Carroll Schaefer published an article entitled “Re-Reading the Romance of *Seventeenth Summer*” in *Children’s Literature Association Quarterly*.

Maureen Daly has revealed in interviews that her life is the basis for Angie Morrow’s experiences in *Seventeenth Summer*. She also reveals that Angie’s sisters are based on her sisters, and Angie’s parents are portraits of her own mother and father. Daly also began to write *Seventeenth Summer* while she was a teenager, perhaps revealing why the book conveys such a powerful sense of immediacy and truth. It is the story of a seventeen-year-old young woman written by a seventeen-year-old young woman.

According to the Los Angeles Commission on Assaults Against Women, “One-third of high school and college age youths experience violence in an intimate relationship during their dating years.” They also state that “between 12% and 35% of teenagers have experienced some form of violence in a dating relationship.” Additionally, they note that “teens aged 16 to 19 were three and one-half times more likely than the general population to be victims of rape, attempted rape or sexual assault.”
Series fiction (also known as formula fiction) is a number of books based on a similar plot, focus or theme and written by one author (or many authors) following the same formula, and published sequentially. Despite their popularity and prominent place in the Young Adult section in bookstores and libraries, series books receive negative critical attention. Even Young Adult critic and feminist Scholar Jack Zipes initially reacted with horror when his 10-year-old daughter began to obsessively read the Young Adult romance series *Sweet Valley Twins*. In his history of Young Adult 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” (102). His assessment of series books as less serious than stand-alone novels, is typical of Young Adult 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” (108). Both critics assume that all series fictions are vacuous texts, and they seemingly cannot conceive that quality series books exist. While many series may indeed lack “quality,” the series discussed in this chapter are worth studying.

What makes series fiction unique is twofold. First, series are best selling commercial products. Their popularity is astounding; some titles such as *Goosebumps* and *The Babysitter’s Club* sell millions of copies each month. In fact, the vast popularity of series fiction has prompted many Young Adult 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 texts can. Series fictions are popular because they provide continuity and predictability for young readers whose lives are often in adolescent turmoil. These fictions provide much needed feminist alternatives by illuminating the lives of young women and men in transition. Series books reveal the ongoing cultural emphasis on the standard of beauty forced upon young women. By depicting issues such as anorexia and bulimia, body image problems are exposed. By depicting the dangers of abusive relationships, the issue of violence against women is exposed. Series books also provide alternative perspectives of sex and sex roles for young women, through multiple narrators and protagonists. Through these same motherless protagonists, these texts act as surrogate mothers and disseminate information about sex to characters and readers.

Young Adult series fiction began when The Bobbsey Twins, Nancy Drew Mysteries and The Hardy Boys were published in the early 20th century. Series have continued to be extremely popular throughout the 20th century. For example, Sweet Valley High books have sold hundreds of thousands of copies, and spawned sequels such as Sweet Valley Twins and Sweet Valley University. Another popular series, The Babysitter’s Club, depicts teenage girls who baby-sit for extra money and talk about boys in their spare time. Making Out, another currently popular series, depicts older teenagers and their romantic entanglements and struggles with dating. Many popular television shows have spawned series fictions based on the characters in the shows; Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Dawson’s Creek are two popular series that produced equally popular serial novelizations. Besides romance and television show knock-offs, there are
horror series, fantasy series, Christian series, historical fiction series, mystery series and adventure series. According to Barbara Christian-Smith in *Becoming A Woman through Romance*, the biggest boom in the Young Adult 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 Young Adult romance series following. Christian Smith argues that the teen romance series are particularly market driven texts:

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. (14)

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

Series fictions share 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 the *Alice* books, protagonist Alice figuratively goes through adolescence during the life span of the books. Thus the author is able to show how Alice (and her two
friends) deals 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 (the idea that a person is judged solely by looks). By depicting beauty as the norm, these texts continue an obsession with body image and beauty that has pervaded media for decades. In addition to perpetuating an unrealistic standard of beauty, series fictions focus 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 fictions disseminate 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. The format of series books provides predictability and reassurance to readers whose lives are in adolescent turmoil. These books present information about sex and gender roles through alternative models, sustained narratives, and a focus on female sexual development.

In contrast to stand-alone books, and because of the unique form and narrative possibilities they present, series fictions deserve a separate chapter. Series books make a unique contribution to the construction of female sexuality and femininity because of the way in which these Young Adult fictions depict the lives of adolescent characters in transition. Where a “stand-alone” text may portray a conflict or issue such as sexuality, dating, or body image and resolve it in 200 pages, Young Adult series fictions depict 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 a long
period of time, sometimes even years, rather than just a few weeks or months.

The Young Adult 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 particular texts because these series
transcend the confines of the series format. Admittedly many Young Adult series
succumb to poor writing, cardboard characterization and stereotyping, but the series I
examine create complex characters, narratives and more realistic situations. In contrast to
most Young Adult 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 Young Adult series that depict female characters in
varying stages of adolescence. The Nancy Drew Mystery Stories began in 1930 and
pioneered a strong female character that challenged authority and became a role model
for young women throughout the 20th century. The very first Nancy Drew Mystery, The
Secret of the Old Clock, was the first volume in what became a landmark series in young
adult literature.5 The character of Nancy Drew has been credited as being the first
feminist heroine of series fiction, a claim that can be upheld by examining her role in the
texts. 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. This chapter begins with the Nancy Drew series because the character’s creation is a feminist milestone in Young Adult 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 *Alice* books focus on Alice’s development from the age of 12 through 18. This Phyllis Naylor Reynolds series consists of fourteen titles (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 texts take her through middle school and high school. The *Alice* Series is one of the most challenged texts in school and public libraries, most likely due to some sexual content and to their frequent placement in the children’s section (rather than the Young Adult) in libraries.6

While the *Alice* books utilize the first person format to provide the uniquely personal and subjective perspective of one young woman, the *California Diaries* series offers an unusual non-linear perspective on adolescent experience. Ann Martin’s *California Diaries*, published from 1997 to 2000, feature five protagonists, four female and one male who are revealed through their individual diaries which present each character’s unique perspective on shared events. The use of varying points of view present alternative perspectives; rather than becoming accustomed to one protagonist’s perspective, they have five to choose from, thus allowing more opportunities for identification.
The Gossip Girl series is the most recent, with two titles that were published in 2002, and more on the way. The omniscient narrator in the Gossip Girl series serves a similar purpose to the multiple narrators of California Diaries. By providing insight into the multiple protagonists in the series, the reader has 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 the Gossip Girl, each of these series shares unique depictions of the process of adolescence for females.

Reading series fiction functionally replicates a traditional monogamous romantic relationship. The acquisition of sameness found in reading series fiction is comforting for teens, some critics suggest. 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” (4). Her diction 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 texts 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.
The usual criticisms of series fictions tend to focus on the quality of the texts; and many critics assert that series fiction contains substandard writing and predictable plots. Young Adult 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 that when librarians or parents read one text from a series they are reassured that the rest of the series will be the same. It is this predictability that contributes to the fairy-tale like function of contemporary series fictions. And like many childhood fairy tales, the repetition, familiarity and predictability of series texts reinforce whatever cultural messages are depicted within the texts. In a life phase such as adolescence that is ruled by change, series fiction is literary Xanax—an anti-anxiety form of reading.

While series fictions may function to alleviate anxiety, they also need to provide narrative tension. Series books, like fairy tales, engage young readers with intriguing stories that lead up to a definite conclusion. But unlike fairy tales, in a series the conclusion may not come until the last book in the series. In her analysis of fairy tales Marcia Lieberman focuses on the impact these stories may 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.’ (187)
Lieberman’s analysis can also be applied to Young Adult fiction, including series books. Series fictions present depictions of sexual roles which model how to be and what to do for young readers; but more importantly series fictions draw readers in and hold them captive by creating a narrative similar to that of the fairy tale. Series fictions do not offer definitive closure in each text; rather each text 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 on, these fictions function as transitional fairy tales for adolescents. And also like fairy tales, series books contain powerful literary tropes: absent mothers, rescuing males and the ever-present standard of beauty.

Like other Young Adult literature, series fictions emphasize 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 Young Adult fictions, and one that takes on special significance in series fiction. In series fictions, 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 One, where thinness was the default for weight. In series books, beauty is the default for looks. The only distinctions come over degree of beauty; is she beautiful, or merely attractive? Obsession or preoccupation with physical appearance is a common feature of Young Adult fictions; 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, 1)

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, 1)

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, 10)

As it is in stand-alone texts, lookism is alive and well in young adult series fiction, and is not limited to the male gaze but extends to female self-assessment as well as scrutiny of males deemed worthy of attention. Even the physical appearance of males comes under close scrutiny in these texts, as evidenced by the description of Nate from the first pages of Gossip Girl.

The depictions of physical appearance in series fictions set 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 Kinsky 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. (6)

Despite the inference to self-commodification by equating her features with “ingredients,” this passage shows the level of attention and detail given to depicting physical appearance. The focus on physical appearance in texts 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 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. (4)

*Ophelia Speaks* is a revealing glimpse into the thoughts and feelings of young women in formation; and their continuing worry over looks and weight literally embodies our culture’s preoccupation with the bodies of young females. Young Adult series books reinforce this preoccupation, and the frequency in 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 many series fictions such as *Gossip Girl*, 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. This 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. (183)

Throughout the series texts 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 towards that goal is often the choice of characters in series fictions. In *Gossip Girl*, Serena is the epitome of this standard; she does nothing to attain or work for her looks. Blair, on the other hand, 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, and then purges, usually 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 One, Blair has struggles 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, but 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 is contrasted with Serena, who seems to give her looks no thought at all.

Serena’s good looks are set up as an example of 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 which 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 enacts 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 fictions young women’s status as beauties causes them to be objects of intense scrutiny.

The interaction between ultra-beautiful 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 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 over social status, is common amongst 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” (114). Throughout the *Gossip Girl* series Blair and her friends torment Serena, and try to assassinate her character by spreading rumors about her. In these texts 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, 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 texts. Vanessa trades in her white tee-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 utilized 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. Author 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 Young Adult 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 Young Adult fictions; and in more recent texts this pressure is literally 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, much more than usually presented in a stand-alone text. 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 her overbearing father. After her band wins second place in a Battle of the Bands contest, Maggie reveals her achievement to her Dad:

‘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. (Maggie #3, Wednesday, 1:07 a.m.)

These passages towards 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 multi-voiced 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. This perspective also provides a more sympathetic portrayal of Maggie, whose problem with anorexia Amalia responds to with courage and compassion. Amalia notices Maggie’s increasing emaciation, and does some research into eating disorders on the Internet, and 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. (Amalia #9, Friday 9/25)

Amalia’s perspective of her friend Maggie’s anorexia deepens over the course of all fifteen books in the series. Amalia’s ability to help Maggie deal with her eating disorder seems almost super-heroic considering her own struggle with an abusive boyfriend, but her mediated 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 doubly-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 stand-alone texts in Chapter Four that focus on a battered female, these perspectives provide some narrative distance. For example, readers learn about Amalia’s possessive boyfriend, James, through Amalia’s own words in her diary. The mediation comes from her growing awareness that his behavior marks James as potentially abusive. The parallel stories of the women 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’ 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 towards 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. (Amalia #4, 1/6)

The reaction of the turtle to the oncoming rock foreshadows Amalia’s reaction to James’ oppressive, controlling behavior.

In some diary entries, Amalia writes about herself in third person, figuratively ducking her head to create some distance between her feelings and her experiences. Her entries are also a form of mediation for readers and for herself. 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. (Amalia, Jan 5, #4)

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’ behavior is dangerous. But Amalia does not realize she is in danger right away. 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. (Amalia, Oct.10 #9)

Amalia’s reaction to Cheryl illustrates that she has learned that James’ abusive behavior was not her fault, and her intention to warn Cheryl shows that she has 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 important, she allows readers to become comfortable with a character before she labels them “anorexic” or “victim of abuse.” This lengthy time span in series, plus the various points of view she presents, all make the California Diaries series an unusual example of Young Adult series fiction.

In these series texts, 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. Alice’s two friends Pamela and Elizabeth depict opposing views of femininity. Her friends Pamela
and Elizabeth each provide alternative choices for readers. Pamela is depicted as a bit wild and perhaps too adventurous, while Elizabeth is portrayed as almost the exact opposite. Elizabeth’s prudish behavior seems to be given more approval in the text 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 counter-balancing 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 before she’s sixteen. Elizabeth, on the other hand, 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 one possibility of sexual type that Alice is to avoid.

The *Alice* books provide the most explicit discussion of sexual roles that I have found in series fictions. Series such as *Gossip Girl* and *California Diaries* depict sex and portray sexual activity as just another aspect of adolescent life. These two series allow characters to experience sex, but do not discuss it overtly in the text. Sex is present, but remains unexamined in the narrative. The *Alice* texts explore ideas about sex roles through the experiences of the protagonist and her discussions about sex with adults and her friends. Although Linda Christian Smith argues that “for heroines, sexuality involves
a great deal of repression, very little pleasure, and considerable danger” (31), alternative views of female sexuality do exist in Young Adult fiction. Alice learns about sex and sex roles by asking questions and observing her older brother and father in their romantic relationships. Alice also utilizes 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 subjective point of view, readers readily identify with her character. Alice is an “everywoman” of sorts, whose adolescent experiences may 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 parent’s 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 patriarchy, and the texts 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 problematize the developmentally crucial mother-daughter relationship. In these series texts such as *Nancy Drew Mysteries* and the *Alice* books, 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 feminist theorist 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 . . . (18)

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

In some cases, such as Nancy Drew and the *Alice* series, a father replaces the absent mother in terms of introduction to the patriarchy. These particular father-daughter pairings reinforce patriarchal power and, imbedded within the power structure, insensitivity towards female sexuality. For example, Alice’s father can’t even verbalize his observation that she might need to start wearing a bra. Alice’s father 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 may 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.

The absent mother trope present in each of these series performs a vital function. The lack of a female figure reveals Alice’s struggle to understand the cultural expectations that surround her and her friends as they deal with adolescence. In the first book, the Agony of Alice, her father prompts her realization that she might need to buy a bra. As do many Young Adult fictions, all of the Alice books utilize first-person narrative, and thus validate the subjective experience of a young girl:

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. (7)

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” (26). 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 texts is that women can help each other. Alice seeks out other females for help when her father can’t help her.

Seeking out other women for advice and 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. (9)

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 inadequate. By her rejection of Elizabeth’s mother’s metaphoric description of sex, Alice articulates her need for more realistic and practical information. Describing 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 whom to go to for information reveal Alice becoming aware 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 squeamishness 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 myself 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, varying sexual positions, and finally Carol falls asleep and Alice has the information she wants. And since they can’t seem to get similar information from their parents, Alice shares her new knowledge with her friends Elizabeth and Pamela, 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 Young Adult fictions, provide needed and necessary information about sex for young readers in formation. These descriptions may lack erotic appeal, but if they were any more erotic they would
most certainly be challenged even 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*, (another novel that discusses and depicts sex) 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*” (92). Her criticism could easily be applied to Alice’s discussions of sex with her cousin—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 their parents. And 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. Absence of a mother is a pattern set in the first series, the *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories*.

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 is Alice’s, but their familial circumstances are similar. Nancy Drew is a young woman whose mother has died, leaving her with 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 takes over some functions that would normally be provided by a mother. Each text 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 her Dad is “not incestuous
by act, but it does have sexual implications” (1029). Zacharias is right. Though Nancy and her father can in no way be construed to be physically intimate, but their close bond reveals Nancy’s attachment to patriarchal 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 thus, 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.

In the *Nancy Drew Mystery Stories*, ideas about opposing sex roles are embodied by Nancy’s two good friends (and cousins) Bess and George. Much like the contrasting figures of Pamela and Elizabeth in the Alice texts, Bess and George represent opposing female roles. Bess represents the helpless female; she eats too much and relies upon 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 interprets them, 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” (56). 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 disgustedly unromantic,’ said her cousin. (136)

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, and yet 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 illustrated 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 may not be unusual, her choice to prefer him above 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 the quest of the 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 Nancy is only sixteen years old. 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 Four, I discussed the car as a symbol of sexual activity and a driver’s license as permission to have sex; indeed Nancy has license and a car. She is a calm and capable driver, yet 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, yet remains chaste.

Nancy Drew, along with other series fiction protagonists, offer readers unique opportunities to come to know a character over a longer period of time than in stand-alone texts. The series books in this chapter provide distinct depictions of young women in formation, and through the extended narratives that series inhabit, readers are engaged in the process of growing up alongside their heroine. These particular series books create strong and intriguing portrayals of young women. Nancy Drew is a feminist icon and precursor to the Young Adult heroine in many series books. Nancy’s contemporary equivalent is Alice, whose quest for social and sexual information mirrors adolescents’ need for more explicit discussions about sex. *California Diaries* and the *Gossip Girl* books each provide alternative extended narratives. The *California Diaries*, through multiple narrators and perspectives, give authority and voice to young women who help each other through the rocky stage of adolescence. The *Gossip Girl* books expose the
inherent problems of trying to achieve an unattainable standard of beauty. Through
depictions of body image issues, eating disorders and the sexual double standard, these
series fictions expose some of the social constraints that continue to plague the lives of
young women.

Louann Reid and Ruth Kline argue that series books deserve respect just as the
young people who read them deserve respect. 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 blatant presupposition that series fiction lack
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” (110). Somehow, the very
characteristics that make these books so appealing to young readers are what cause
critics, teachers and parents so much concern. Close examination of series fiction reveals
that these texts can provide valuable reading experiences. Series fiction merits the same
critical attention as stand-alone Young Adult literature.

End Notes

1 Jack Zipes is a well-known critic of Children’s and Young Adult fiction. This anecdote
is from his most recent collection of essays entitled Sticks and Stones.

2 Librarian Judith Saltman estimates that R. L. Stine (Goosebumps) was the best selling
author in America in 1992, indicates that since 1992 “there are more than 160 Stine
books in print in 16 languages” (108). The Babysitter’s Club books have sold over 100
million copies.

3 Librarians often choose to shelve series books under a group title such as Fear Street or
Nancy Drew Mysteries, rather than giving each individual title in a series its own listing.
This action perhaps indicates that series fiction titles are truly seen as practically
interchangeable. One librarian I spoke with indicated that Sweet Dreams, a very popular
Young Adult romance series, has so many titles that she stores many of them in a back room in case she runs out of the copies on display. She also admitted she has no way to determine if she has particular titles within the series without looking through all of them.

4 Amazon.com lists over 600 titles in the various Sweet Valley series.

5 Carolyn Stewart Dyer, who writes about the popularity of the Nancy Drew series, found that more than “eighty million copies had been sold since 1930, and new books were still coming out every month in what may be the longest running continuously published series of children’s books.” (2)

6 In several of the libraries I visited, the Alice books were almost equally divided between the children’s and Young Adult sections. The division usually had the earlier texts in the children’s section and the later in the YA section, but this was not always the case. This confusion over audience may reveal a more generalized anxiety over the definition of YA literature.

7 Judith Saltman, Professor of Library Science, argues that “series give children security” and provide “sameness, repetition and the satisfaction of expectations met” (108). Louann Reid and Ruth Cline, professors, believe that one of the attractions of series fiction is their “safety” (94). Silk Makowski echoes the above sentiments in her book Serious About Series.

8 Linda Christian-Smith indicates that the reaction to teen series “ranged from annoyance to rage” (14). One of the most outspoken critics of series fiction is the Council on Interracial Books for Children. They argue that romance series teach girls to put boys’ interests before their own, encourage girls to compete against one another for male attention and depict only lives of white, middle class suburban youth.

9 Lookism is the “evaluation of a person solely based on appearance” according to Mary Pipher in Reviving Ophelia, page 14.

10 Each of the California Diaries books is a diary of one of the five main characters. There are no page numbers in any of the books; like a diary they go by day, date and sometimes time of day. (In some of the copies I checked out of local libraries, readers had written in page numbers at the top of each page.)

11 In the original texts begun in 1930, Nancy’s age was sixteen. Later, when the books were reissued in the 1950’s and 1960’s, 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 novel.
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*

Young Adult literature as a field of study has grown in the past two decades for a number of reasons. One is the increasing attention to marginalized literatures within literary criticism; another is the recognition that teachers and educators need to examine the books that adolescents actually read. Blending literary criticism with pedagogical interest in popular and critically acclaimed Young Adult texts benefits both areas of study. By examining and analyzing the genre from a literary perspective, scholars can see that popular adolescent texts provide opportunities for in-depth study of literary themes, tropes and issues. By including pedagogical issues in examination of Young Adult texts, scholars can illuminate and understand how these books can be used in classrooms.

Young Adult and Adolescent literatures provide a unique and compelling window into the lives of adolescents. These books, more than any other genre, depict adolescent characters in formation. Young Adult literature provides a literary space where adolescents 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, Young Adult literature helps them understand, experience, enjoy and possibly even revel in their adolescence. This genre allows teens to identify with protagonists. By studying and analyzing the books that teens actually read, literary scholars, educators, librarians and
parents may come to understand why teens read the books they do. Especially for girls, 
adolescence is a confusing and often disturbing life phase. Young girls, and increasingly 
young boys as well, are faced with enormous pressure from all types of media to look and 
be a certain way in order to be considered acceptable. 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 patriarchal culture is especially problematic for 
young women, who are told that they can do and be anything, but are still restricted by 
oppressive patriarchal structures.

Young Adult fictions provide unique opportunities for young women to see 
themselves and each other depicted in these texts and imagine themselves as heroines. 
The depictions of female sexuality and femininity in Young Adult fictions provide 
alternative visions of what it means to be a female adolescent in contemporary American 
culture. These alternative visions include depictions of young women as powerful, in 
control and independent as well as sexually assertive, confident and adventurous. 
Through these alternative visions, Young Adult 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 need a way to help 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” (130). Young Adult fiction is a unique form of popular culture that is 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.

Body image issues are a continuing social problem for young women. The cultural pressure to be perfect, which translates into ultra-thinness, is perpetuated by many Young Adult texts. And some of these texts, such as *Forever* and *Nell’s Quilt*, link body image to sexual power and assertion, depicting thin characters as strong, powerful and in control of their sexual lives. Alternate depictions position fat or heavy characters as not in control; they are portrayed as promiscuous, passive and punished for their fatness as well by social exclusion, pregnancy and sexual violence. A few texts such as *Imani All Mine* and *Name Me Nobody* challenge this negative perception of weight by exposing an unattainable standard of beauty imposed on young women. These depictions reveal the historical progression of weight issues in Young Adult fiction from 1970-2000.

In early texts, depictions of body image were secondary and submerged in the narrative. In later books, weight and body image issues are overtly addressed and discussed, exposed a cultural awareness of the issue. Examination of these fictions reveals a continuing preoccupation with body image and weight, and damaging ideas about female bodies still pervade Young Adult fictions.

Another body image issue is teenage pregnancy. While most often pregnancy is portrayed as a punishment for sexual activity, for example in *Annie’s Baby, My Darling,*
My Hamburger and Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones, this subset also situates pregnancy as an impetus for a young woman’s separation from the family structure. In Young Adult fictions pregnancy functions most overtly as a warning about the dangers of sexual activity, embodied by Sarah Dessen’s novel Someone Like You. These fictions also reveal conflicting messages about pregnancy that expose social ideologies about the sanctity of the fetus. Additionally, reproductive issues such as access to birth control, sex education and abortion are raised. Pregnancy novels also expose the sexual double standard that punishes females more severely and more often than males.

Sexual orientation is an increasingly important issue for young adults in formation, who may be in the process of adjusting to an orientation other than heterosexuality. In a homophobic culture dealing with homosexuality is an especially vital aspect of Young Adult literature. These fictions, such as Annie on My Mind and Patience and Sarah reconfigure female sexuality for lesbians and for straight women by envisioning sex as mutual and non-coercive. Underlying these narratives is an embedded critique of heterosexuality. By depicting male predators, these lesbian fictions warn young women about the dangers of predatory men. Lesbian Young Adult fictions also provide unique representations of female bonding and female community, as well as mediated presentations of sexual orientation.

While the teen romance novel may have received more critical attention than other Young Adult subsets, it may still be the most critically maligned. Despite critical scorn, romance novels continue to be extremely popular with young readers. These atypical romances I study reposition romance away from the central space in young women’s lives and place it in a subordinate position, revealing that young women can
engage in romance but not be consumed by it. For example, books such as *Seventeenth Summer* and *Love is One of the Choices* re-imagine what romance means to young women, and also reconstitute sexual desire for young women. Some romance novels also depict battering and abuse, in texts such as *Dreamland* and *A White Romance*, providing reflections of an increasingly pervasive social problem.

The most popular subset of Young Adult fiction, the series novel, deals with a variety of issues including physical abuse, body image, eating disorders and sexual activity. These series, from *Nancy Drew* to *Gossip Girl*, offer extended narrative structures that depict issues, problems and the cultural negotiations young women make in the process of growing up. Series fictions provide distinct opportunities for authors to engage their readers over an extended period of time, and their depictions of young female protagonists struggling with gender roles and sexual ideologies provide needed overt discussions of these and other issues.

Within the genre of Young Adult Literature exists a feminist continuum of resistance to the discourse of patriarchal culture. The thread of feminist writing in Young Adult 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 building self-esteem is helpful in the face of overwhelming cultural influence. The strand of resistance, which depicts resistance not only to individual acts of repression and patriarchal oppression, portrays the structures of patriarchal institutions exposes them for the harmful structures they are. Very often these two strands exist simultaneously within individual texts. This
dissertation analyzes complex cultural messages imbedded in Young Adult fictions, and aims to reveal texts as both cheerleaders for the status quo and sources of resistance.

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

Scholars in Education have long recognized the importance of Young Adult Literature as a genre worthy of study and critical attention. While many studies on the genre focus on content or evaluation, my hope is that this dissertation demonstrates the value of literary and feminist analyses of Young Adult literature. It is also my hope that Educators will include more Young Adult texts which have previously been neglected such as series books, romances and lesbian novels.

*How to Make a Girl: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature* is a project in service of Natalie Angier’s hopeful vision of a world in which “girls can imagine futures for each other.”
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VITA

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