

## Sexuality

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### Abstract

*Sexuality is both everywhere and nowhere in children's literature since it collides with an ideology of childhood innocence that works to erase childhood sexuality altogether. Debates about identity, self-expression, the boundary between childhood and adulthood — and attempts to police that boundary — often center on sexuality. Anxiety around children and sexuality often results in censorship, particularly when it comes to sex education. While young adult literature can fill some gaps left by inadequate sex education, expecting it to serve as an adequate substitute can give adolescents unrealistic expectations about sex that can harm them at least as much as lack of information. Depictions of sexuality in adolescent literature work to some degree to regulate and even prevent the healthy development of young adult sexuality. Similarly, while there has been a recent much needed increase in LGBTQ representation in children's and young adult literature, many still leave any sex that falls outside the strict bounds of heterosexuality implicit rather than explicit, subtly othering queer desire via its relative invisibility.*

*Keywords: sexuality, children's literature, education, censorship*

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Debates about identity, self-expression, the boundary between childhood and adulthood, and the policing of that boundary often center on sexuality. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED, 2011), the word “sexuality” first diverged from the word “sex,” meaning gender, around 1797 to mean, “the quality of being sexual or possessing sex.” The next definition the OED cites, with first use circa 1833, is “sexual nature, instinct, or feelings; the possession or expression of these.” The last definition is still in use today, with recorded use in 1897, is, “a person's sexual identity in relation to the gender to which he or she is typically attracted; the fact of being heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual; sexual orientation” (OED). Michel Foucault (1978) explains the development of that definition through the divergence between the concepts of “sex” which has become synonymous with copulation, and “sexuality,” which is a discursive construct. Social institutions use this discursive construct to control the masses through the regulation of all sexual behaviour. As Lydia Kokkola (2013) argues, this regulation is especially evident when it comes to adolescent sexual behaviour because, at least in Western culture, sexuality lies firmly in adult territory. When adolescents explore their sexuality, they have dared to enter the adult domain and have thus disturbed the boundary between childhood and adulthood.

Sexuality is both everywhere and nowhere in children's literature because it often collides with an ideology of childhood innocence that works to erase it altogether. As Kenneth Kidd (1999) notes, in “contemporary children's texts . . . sexuality is both specific and diffuse, at once a physical reality and a polyvalent social form” (p. v). Western culture frames sexuality as the antithesis of innocence, and our obsession with the idea of the innocent child (see Marah Gubar's (2011) keyword essay on “Innocence”) has resulted in the attempted erasure of child sexuality. As Jacqueline Rose (1984) argues, because adults do not *want* children to be sexual, they erase the sexuality of children from children's books altogether. Thus, the logic goes, children are never sexual, and sexuality is something that only happens to children when they become adults. Within that assumption lies tension because even as the dominant narrative suggests children “are (and should stay) innocent of sexual desires and intentions. . . [they] are also officially, tacitly, assumed to be heterosexual” (Bruhm & Hurley, 2004, p. ix). That assumed heterosexuality shapes depictions of children since, as James Kincaid (1994) suggests, “our culture has enthusiastically sexualized the child while denying just as enthusiastically that it was doing any such thing” (p. 13). Indeed, images of sexualized children abound, from child actress Shirley Temple to Alana of *Toddlers in Tiaras* reality TV fame. How we read these images, however, varies over time based on how convinced we are of childhood innocence and the innocence of the adults around them. For example, Lewis Carroll's photograph of Alice Liddell as a beggar girl, with her “bare calves and shoulders, her soliciting gesture, and her ripped rags, all provoke suspicion” (Higonnet, 1998, p. 123) for a contemporary audience—especially in the context of Carroll's nude photographs of other little girls and the unknowable details of his relationship with Alice. To Carroll's contemporaries, however, this particular photograph evoked no such suspicion because it was an image “of natural innocence and therefore innocent [itself]” (Higonnet, 1998, p. 125).

The advent of sexuality often marks the boundary between childhood and the beginning of adulthood. Just where, though, is that boundary actually located, and what happens when children cross it? The age of consent is not historically or regionally consistent. In Britain, children could legally consent to sex at age twelve until 1875, when Parliament raised the age of consent to thirteen (Nelson, 2012). In the United States, the age of consent was set between ten and twelve through most of the 1800's and only increased on a state by state basis to between sixteen and eighteen around 1920 (Volokh, 2015). Still, despite the flexibility and historic inconsistency of this boundary, Western culture treats it as constant and unquestionable. Sexual experience thus

still marks the boundary between childhood and adulthood, and the “language we use to describe the first time one has sex often signals boundary-crossing behavior” (Kokkola, 2013, p. 7). Not only is the boundary itself fraught, but children’s literature also depicts the other side as frightening. As Gubar (2011) explains, “books and films for and about adolescents often suggest that the advent of mature sexuality makes you a monster” (p. 126). For example, in Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* series (2005-2008) and much of the “abstinence porn”—a term coined by Christine Seifert (2008)—inspired teenage characters like Bella Swan to associate the loss of their virginity with a literal transformation into monstrous form.

Many adults police sexual knowledge almost as heavily as sexual behaviour in the name of childhood innocence, a practice based on an assumed equivalence between knowledge and behaviour that keeps accurate information about sex away from those who may need it. As Kokkola (2013) argues, “in the context of sexuality. . . the difference between experience and knowledge is significant: one can *know* a great deal, but this is not the same as *experience*” (p. 29, emphasis in original). This marked difference does not result in any sort of dissemination of knowledge, though—87% of librarians “say the main reason they avoid certain books is because they include sexuality or sex education” (Booth, 2011, p. 29). Similarly, the American Library Association consistently reports that “sexually explicit” material is the top reason books are challenged. More difficult to quantify is the amount of self-censorship authors use when writing about sexuality. Censorship, both formal and self-imposed, “reveal[s] anxieties about the vulnerable reader, sexual and religious norms, and the threat of the ‘other’ to dominant ways of understanding the world” (Miller, 2014, p. 121). Anxiety about representation of sexuality manifests in censorship within all genres, from sex education to young adult realist fiction to new adult fantasy.

The anxiety around children and sexuality manifests in sexual education where (at least in the United States) if it happens at all, the norm is to take the sexiness out of sex in an attempt to regulate it. As Lissa Paul (2005) points out, “until recently there has been only one exception to the ‘instruction and delight’ rule of children’s literature: books on sex education. Sex education is not about delight. Or toys. Only instruction—and the more clinical the better” (p. 222). Sex education books for children that try to maintain the sexiness of sex like Robbie Harris and Michael Emberley’s (1994) *It’s Perfectly Normal: Changing Bodies, Growing Up, Sex, and Sexual Health*, which includes cartoon images of people having sex, are often censored or banned altogether. Sanitizing sex education does not actually result in less sex, though—the United States has much higher rates of sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted teen pregnancies, and abortion than European countries with more thorough—or just *more*—sex education (Levine, 2003). Though there are many sex education books for children, access to them is far from guaranteed.

If the “sexiness” has been taken out of sex education, where, then, can teenagers and adolescents go for more information? One place is young adult literature. As Roberta Trites (2000) elucidates, “teenage characters in YA novels agonize about every aspect of human sexuality: decisions about whether to have sex, issues of sexual orientation, issues of birth control and responsibility, unwanted pregnancies, masturbation, orgasms, nocturnal emissions, sexually transmitted diseases, pornography, and prostitution” (p. 84). Teenagers can turn to fiction to learn about more than just the technicalities of sex. They can also learn about the behaviours surrounding it. As Levine (2003) argues, “children need two kinds of information: the ‘facts’ and truthful ‘fictions,’ the stories and fantasies that carry the meanings of love, romance, and desire” (p. 150). The best young adult literature can help begin to fill in these gaps and provide young adult readers with both types of knowledge. However, young adult literature cannot seamlessly take the place

of sex education. In *Will I Like It*, an older, unusually non-moralizing sex education manual, author Peter Mayle (1977) reassures readers that:

a lot of sex, as advertised in books, plays, films, TV and magazines conditions us to expect sexual perfection. If our own first efforts don't measure up, we get disappointed and discouraged, and maybe even start to think there's something wrong with us. There's nothing wrong with us at all, except that real life is seldom as well-organized as fiction. (p. 2-3)

Expecting young adult fiction to fill the gaps left by shoddy sex education can result in unrealistic expectations about sex—and young adult fiction—that harm adolescents at least as much as lack of information does.

Young adult literature depicts sexuality in a variety of contradictory ways, often differing based on genre. For example, young adult romance often “promotes sexuality as something magical, mystical, and loving that happens to girls” (Christian-Smith, 1990, p. 30). These novels depict girls as passive objects rather than active participants—sexuality happens *to* them. In the problem novel, while young women may be more active than their romance novel counterparts, “sex is very often the ‘problem’ requiring resolution. . . . And because sex is *the* problem, carnal desire is separated from the rest of the teenagers’ lives” (Kokkola, 2013, p. 16). Early examples of this genre include Judy Blume’s (1975) *Forever*, which traces Kath and Michael’s relationship from beginning to end, and Norma Klein’s (1977) *It’s OK if You Don’t Love Me*, which depicts the more liberal Jody’s relationship with the more conservative Lyle. In contrast to realist young adult fiction, the fantasy genre can be used “as a protective cover to save the work from prying adult eyes, [where] writers have managed to extend considerably the range of subjects dealt with in children’s literature” (Hughes, 1978, p. 555). Still, while characters may have better sex in young adult fantasy novels, these novels still often associate the loss of virginity with violence. For example, in Stephenie Meyer’s (2008) *Breaking Dawn*, Bella awakens from her wedding night with Edward covered in bruises. In Kristin Cashore’s (2008) *Graceling*, a much more sex-positive novel that emphasizes the importance of informed consent in healthy romantic relationships, Katsa “consents to hurt, and bleed, at [Po’s] touch” (p. 242) their first time having sex. No matter the genre, depictions of sexuality in adolescent literature work to some degree to regulate and even prevent young adult sexuality as much as they work to inform or entertain.

While the majority of children’s and young adult books deal with heterosexual sex, a growing number explore more marginalized sexualities. Although Trites (2000) claims that all “teenage sexuality is defined in terms of deviancy” (p. 87), society marginalizes some sexualities more than others. LGBTQ children and young adults experience sexuality differently from their heterosexual peers: as Foucault (1978) explains, same-sex desire has changed from something one *does* to something one *is*. It has become an identity rather than an action (see Kerry Mallan’s keyword essay on “Queer” (2011) for a more detailed discussion). Perhaps as a result, texts about gay characters “privilege the discourse of homosexuality over the physical sexual acts of gay men, defining homosexuality more rhetorically than physically” (Trites, 2000, p. 103). The same shift in focus applies to other queer child characters. For example, picture books like Leslea Newman’s (2015) *Heather Has Two Mommies* and Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell’s (2005) *And Tango Makes Three* focus on the sexuality of the parents rather than of the child (or penguin chick). Queer or trans picture books like Marcus Ewert’s (2008) *10,000 Dresses* and Cheryl Kilodavis’s (2009) *My Princess Boy*, while concerned with the gender identity of their child protagonists, mostly contribute to “the rise of the ‘boys in dresses’ trope” (Bittner, Ingrey, & Stamper, 2016, p. 2) and do not address sexuality.

In young adult fare, though authors are much more likely to address LGBTQ sexuality than in picture books, these texts still often center on questions of identity rather than actual sex. In Francesca Lia Block's (1989) *Weetzie Bat*, progressive though this novel may have been for its time, the sexual experiences of Dirk, who is gay, are much less explicit than those of Weetzie, who is not. Novels about trans characters often center on surgical transitions at the expense of other concerns, but when these characters do explore their sexuality, they can fare even worse. For example, in Brian Katcher's (2009) *Almost Perfect* or Cris Beam's (2011) *I am J*, "the trans character hates to be touched. This fear centers on denial of the body, from fear of being possessed and controlled, and fear of assumptions about their sexuality" (Macleod, 2014, p. 327). This fear is not unfounded: in *Almost Perfect* when Sage reveals to her romantic partner that she is transitioning after they kiss, he physically assaults her. While there has been a recent much needed increase in LGBTQ representation in young adult literature, including novels as diverse as Malinda Lo's (2009) *Ash*, Benjamin Alire Sáenz's (2012) *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe*, Rachel Gold's (2012) *Being Emily*, and Kristin Cashore's (2017) *Jane, Unlimited*, many still leave any sex that falls outside the strict bounds of heterosexuality implicit rather than explicit.

Although depictions of sex and sexuality have been largely conservative in children's literature, as the topic becomes less taboo, these depictions may become more radical. Kimberly Reynolds (2007) argues that there has been a simultaneous shift in both young adult literature and culture to include more radical ideas about sex and sexuality. As those depictions become more widely available, access to accurate knowledge about sex and sexuality, whether in sex education manuals, picture books, or young adult fiction, will hopefully become easier to find for children, adolescents, and young adults and help ease the crossing of the boundary between childhood and adulthood.

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