

# Editorial:

## Let's Talk About Sex in YA

Nic Hilton and Gabriel Duckels

By referring to Salt-N-Pepa's iconic pop song in the title of this special issue, we evoke a topic that is both difficult and enticing in texts for young people. Our special section continues some of the many conversations that were started at the *Let's Talk About Sex in YA (LTASYA)* conference at the University of Cambridge in May 2021. This ongoing conversation is essential because YA literature's engagement with the topic of sexuality and sexual experience corresponds to broader histories of representation in texts for young people, which in turn frame real lives.

We began the planning of this conference in 2019. After the arrival of COVID-19, which itself had extreme implications for sex,<sup>1</sup> the world changed, but our desire (so to speak) remained the same: to investigate a dimension of YA literature which is intrinsic to the pedagogical and social dilemmas that structure the field and contribute to the construction and representation of adolescence.

YA has always been a ground for ideological struggles and social constructions of what sex 'should look like' for young adults. Emphasis on certain types of representations of sex and sexuality – such as losing your virginity, teen pregnancy, and sexual identity – ensures YA's place as a space of exploration, and for figuring out our relationships to difficult topics; YA can act as a powerful tool in dismantling repressive and contradictory ideologies about youth sexuality. As Lydia Kokkola emphasises in *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality*, "the ways

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1 In the UK, due to the implementation of COVID-19 social-distancing laws, sexual contact between people who didn't share a 'household was briefly made illegal.

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in which adolescent sexuality is presented in works intended for young readers reflect [...] changes in the ways society negotiates adolescence” (9). Ideas about virginity, desire, questions of sexual agency, pleasure, and responsibility tend to be integral parts of the construction of adolescent subjectivity and contentious issues for those who shape and reflect on these constructions.

In her opening keynote to the *LTASYA* conference,<sup>2</sup> Kim Reynolds surveys the history of sex in YA in the UK and USA since the 1970s, highlighting how early trends have affected the current state of YA publishing. Reynolds states that before the 1970s, there were plenty of educational materials on the biology of sex available for young people to access, but nothing that considered its emotional or pleasurable aspects. Judy Blume’s *Forever* (1975) marked a turning point for YA and for the publishing industry. Blume’s classic novel was radical because nothing bad happens in it: a girl wants to have sex with her boyfriend, she goes to the family planning clinic, they have sex, and there are no reprisals after having done the deed. It ends with the relationship coming to a natural and unproblematic ending as she has met someone new. The uproar about such an open and quotidian portrayal of sex in a book for adolescents remains a potent example of controversy, even after fifty years. After *Forever*, people had opinions on what was and was not appropriate content for young adults, and scholarship on youth sexuality emerged in YA studies.

Before introducing the five articles in this special section, it seems pertinent to give a brief summary of some of this scholarship and the foundational ideas that shaped our thinking for our original call for papers. In 2007, Reynolds declared that “[w]riting about sex, sexuality and relationships [...] is one of the most radically changed areas” (*Radical Children’s Literature* 114-115) in texts for young people. Roberta Seelinger Trites famously argued that the 20th-century YA novel “participates in the social construction of the adolescent as someone who must be repressed for the greater good” (83), and certainly, narratives about youth sexuality are an arena in which this process of repression plays out: the depiction of lust, desire, consent, sexual violence, sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, etc., in texts written for young people are deeply entrenched in ideas of control and sexual expression. However, since the early 21st century, YA literature has, in certain societies at least, become associated with a less repressive engagement with sex, sexuality, and sexiness. Reynolds identifies a post-2000 shift towards novels that are “more inclusive and less judgemental” (*Radical Children’s Literature* 116). Nevertheless, YA is still not as liberated as it may appear: many books – especially books containing sex-positive, LGBTQ+, and/or sex education content – come under attack as those in power continue to impose their sense of what constitutes appropriate reading for young people.<sup>3</sup>

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2 Kim Reynolds’ “The Literary Sweet Spot: Sex in US and UK YA Fiction from the 1960s to the 1980s” is a transcript from the opening *LTASYA* conference Keynote.

3 An explosion in attempts to not only ban but legislate against LGBTQ+ and BIPOC-authored novels and children’s picture books reported by the American Literature Association (ALA) in the United States make the clearest example of this.

While worries about losing your virginity, accessing contraception, and being ‘ready’ or not ‘ready’ to have sex are quintessential features of adolescent narratives, other changes to do with reproductive health and sexual freedoms of marginalised people offer up urgent topics for storytelling. At our time of writing, we are reeling at the US Supreme Court’s vote to overturn *Roe v. Wade*,<sup>4</sup> an act in the US Constitution which protects personal privacy, including the right to have an abortion, that has been in place since 1973. This step back might seem inconceivable, but the US is far from the only country where abortion access is difficult or under attack, and we also acknowledge the ongoing battles for bodily autonomy in countries including Northern Ireland, India, Poland, and Brazil. Female autonomy, hard won and only recently gained in many instances, is under attack, a context with obvious repercussions for today’s young readers and those producing content for them. Violence against people with disabilities, women, gender non-conforming people, and LGBTQ+ people are all escalating, underscoring the importance of debates about what young people can access. Therefore, another area we highlight in this special section is queer YA studies. This is an essential part of YA studies, because the LGBTQ+ rights movement has always emphasised the power of reading and representation as ways to foster community and identity. There is always so much more to talk about. Alongside the articles we have selected, we therefore present an extended bibliography of further reading to showcase research across these important topics. Our approach in this special section is not so much focused on the didactic utility of sexual content in YA novels, but on its sociocultural contexts, aesthetics, and intersectional relevance.

The special section itself opens with Audrey Coussy’s exploration of the affirmative representation of the sexuality of autistic youth. In “‘Just Be Careful’: Sexual Desire and Autism in YA Novels”, Coussy analyses a corpus of 10 YA novels published between 2009 and 2021 and argues that these texts counter the prevailing oppressive tendency to desexualise autistic people (as well as disabled people in general) by presenting the neurodivergent character’s sexuality not only through their own narration but from the perspective of their love interests. Casting light on what she sees as the authors’ not-so-hidden agendas, to help readers be informed and take their time when it comes to sexual intimacy, Coussy’s investigation constitutes a possible change in discourse and offers a counter narrative. The potentiality Coussy proposes is a common theme running through the section alongside limited representations, negative portrayals, and restricted sex education.

Following on from Coussy, Yan Du’s “When *Paper Puppy* Meets *Beijing Doll*: Reading Adolescent Female Sexuality in Two Chinese Youth Novels” addresses the multifaceted sexual politics that impact Chinese YA. Shedding light on the complexities of adolescent female sexuality as it is described and negotiated in late-20th-century China, Du highlights the tensions between young people’s desires and those endorsed by the state. These tensions inform the sexual discourses presented by Chinese YA authors, who, Du concludes, face

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4 The US Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* on Friday 24 June 2022.

challenges greater than ever before due to the increasing sexual literacy of their audience and the growing need for more diverse texts.

The next article is a study of several Indian YA novels' engagement with taboo themes: LGBTQ+ identities and issues; and adolescent girls' sexual desire. Ritwika Roy's "The Secret is That the Secret Changes': Sex and Taboo in India and Indian Young Adult Fiction" argues that the development of Victorian puritanical views in India after the arrival of British colonial laws continues to have an impact on the norms of Indian life and so makes life harder for Indian women and LGBTQ+ people living in a misogynistic environment. As with the failures of state-controlled sex education discussed in Du's article, Roy finds that the books she analyses serve as a kind of ironic sex-education guide by drawing attention to the failure of the Indian government to arrange mandatory LGBTQ+-inclusive sex education. The article draws attention to Indian examples of a trope that will be familiar to scholars working in queer YA studies: the enduring connection between the construction of queer figures and an overwhelming association with death and negativity.

In the two articles that follow, Carrie Spencer and Stephanie Lyttle explore the notion of the love triangle in YA literature. In "Beyond the Binary: Queer (Im)possibilities of Bisexual Desires in Selected US Young Adult Novels", Spencer illuminates the tensions that can arise even in seemingly positive representations of bisexuality, contending that there is, and can be, no monolithic story of gender plural desires. She uses examples of love triangles where at least one character is bisexual to unpack the possibilities of gender-plural desire as a means of disrupting narrative and social expectations. In Lyttle's article, "Challenging the Love Triangle in Twenty-First-Century Fantastic Young Adult Literature", the author frames the love triangle as a major selling-point of several blockbuster YA series, showing how a polyamorous approach to the love triangle destabilises its heteronormative and capitalist implications by undermining its increasingly stale formula of a presumably cisgender, straight, female protagonist who chooses from two male suitors. In this light, polyamory becomes a kind of queer methodology which can illuminate new perspectives on classic YA series, as well as providing a literary context for the emergence of YA texts that recognise polyamory as a legitimate rather than covert identity. Building upon approaches to taboo topics in texts for young people from our previous articles, both authors explore the biphobic, sex-phobic, gendered dimensions of the field, in which the subversive dimensions of the love triangle disrupt conventions of selfhood and desirability and therefore create space for possibilities and potentialities for alternative representations.

Sex, sexuality, and sexiness are intrinsic to understanding and engaging with broader histories and issues of sex in YA literature, whilst also providing references in which readers are able to position their own experiences. Therefore, to prioritise and investigate constructions of the adolescent as a sexual subject in YA novels is to make explicit the often-implicit tensions that shape adolescence. Critical approaches to the social, political, and aesthetic dimensions of the representation of sexuality – from desire to violence and back

again – in YA literature are booming and urgent, something our conference, and consequently this special section, highlight.

## Acknowledgments

We would like to thank Dr Lisa Kazianka for all her hard work on the *Let's Talk about Sex in YA* conference and for her assistance in the early stages of the editing process, including the editing of the contributing authors' articles. Additionally, we wish to thank Dr Alison Waller and Dr Emily Corbett for supporting this special section and helping us bring it to fruition.

## REFERENCES: A BIBLIOGRAPHY OF CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SEX IN YA LITERATURE

This bibliography is by no means exhaustive; it emerged organically as we wrote this Editorial. It is included here as a map of emerging and foundational critical perspectives, broadly categorised into three themes: sex and identity; rape culture and reproductive justice; and gender, sexuality, and queerness.

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