

# Review

## *The Age Between: Personal Reflections on Youth Fiction.*

**Aidan Chambers.**

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Catherine Butler

Aidan Chambers has a multifaceted place within children's and young adult literature. A major novelist, pioneering critic, founder of an innovative publisher's imprint, co-founder of an equally important scholarly journal – any one of these achievements would have earned him a respected place in our discipline. In combination, they make him uniquely qualified to speak on the world of young adult literature. This collection of essays and reflections is therefore fascinating in a variety of ways that mutually reflect upon each other; what Chambers the critic has to say about (for example) Mark Twain or Françoise Sagan will also enlighten us regarding the practice of Chambers the novelist, while Chambers the novelist's notes on his craft have implications for our understanding of the genre, its audience, and its terminology. Chambers begins his book with an autobiographical account of the first 15 years of his career as a writer, which is also, effectively, a brief history of the development of literature for young adults generally. Neither the author's progress nor that of the genre was without its setbacks and false starts, and any prospective author might be both encouraged and daunted by Chambers' sometimes painful experiences and his determination to progress.

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It is in the second essay, “What’s in a Name?”, that he first attempts to sketch a territory for the book and for its title. The period Chambers calls “youth” runs roughly from ages 13 to 25. This is where the readers and protagonists of his own books are mostly to be found, sitting between childhood and adulthood proper, but different from either. Its characteristics may be described at a number of levels of abstraction, from the neurological to the sociological, and the remainder of Chambers’ book can be read as a portrait painted from numerous angles, derived from existing literature, personal experience, theoretical discussion, and experimental artistry. The rest of this opening section, “Beginnings and History”, discusses ur-texts and foundational works: from the nineteenth century, *Little Women*, which gave us the inner and outer lives of its four youthful protagonists, and *Huckleberry Finn*, which dispensed with the mediation of an adult narrator to let its hero speak in his own voice; from the 1950s, J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* and Françoise Sagan’s *Bonjour Tristesse*, which might be said to have set down templates for the first-person youth novels of the following decades: confessional, eloquently awkward, insightful and myopic by turns.

The chapters on the formative era of youth fiction are succeeded by another group devoted loosely to “Defining Youth and Youth Literature”. For Chambers, defining youth is in large part a matter of identifying those experiences distinctively or exclusively associated with it, particularly subjective experiences – self-consciousness, the growth of autonomy, de-identification with parents, emotional intensity – rather than anything likely to be seen as a rite of passage (first kiss, first sexual encounter). Although he acknowledges the importance of the sexual act and discusses its depiction, his emphasis is more on psychological than physical maturity. To that extent, “the age between” (despite the implications of that term) is defined not through its liminality – its being neither childhood nor adulthood – but as an age no less distinctive than either and with its own peculiar qualities. Nor is it a state to be uncomplicatedly identified with a physical age at all, for all that it is loosely tied to the physical and hormonal changes that begin in adolescence. None of the experiences described can be pinned down to a rigidly demarcated set of years, and while one may reasonably generalise about the common trajectory of human experience, human diversity is such that there are few universals.

Importantly, too, some people retain, or are able to recall with unusual clarity, the particular subjective experience of youth. This, of course, is what has made it possible for Chambers to write of that period with authenticity and conviction, long into middle and even old age. Only recently does he report having lost touch, to some extent, with the immediate experience of his youth. Chambers’ experience of writing for and about youth is the focus of the third section of the book, “Strategies”, and is likely to be an indispensable companion for anyone working on (or even just interested in) his work and writing process. Some of the chapter titles read like sections from a “How to” book (such as, “How to Do More with the First Person”), and indeed any would-be writer will learn valuable practical lessons about,

for example, what Chambers calls “infusion” – the art of convincingly imbuing a youthful first-person narrative voice with perceptions and eloquence in excess of what such a character could plausibly command. Huck Finn is once again a go-to example here (“Twain infuses Huck with an understanding of life, a wisdom acquired during Twain’s mature years, transposing it by craft skill into perceptions Huck could discover by himself” [108]), but Chambers also draws on his own long experience of creating such narrators. The book’s longest chapter by some distance, “Ways of Telling”, is an analysis of the narrative techniques employed in Chambers’ ground-breaking novels, *Breaktime* and *Dance on my Grave*. For those familiar with the books in question the analysis is particularly valuable, but even someone who has not read them recently will find the account of their construction very revealing of Chambers’ psychology and craft.

The final chapter of the book comprises an interview with Debby Thacker, in which Chambers reflects on his own career and writing philosophy, and situates his reflections (as he does throughout) in relation to the novelists and critics who have influenced him, the latter group including Roland Barthes, Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Viktor Shklovsky, and Italo Calvino. If there is one disappointment, it is that Chambers has little to say about contemporary youth fiction. When suggesting contemporary texts (which he defines as texts of the last 50 years) for a putative canon, the books he actually mentions are 69, 63, and 46 years old as of 2020. It would have been good to learn Chambers’ thoughts on the youth fiction that has been published during the lifetimes of the youth of today. That caveat aside, I have no hesitation in recommending this book to anyone who is interested in the theory and practice of youth fiction, or in the experience of one its most illustrious practitioners.