Kate Chopin Corrupts the Young Person [1]

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TW Column by Emily Toth

From Seductive Entreaties to Full-Frontal Snogging



I**t used to be a truth universally acknowledged** that short stories would be written with the Young Person in mind. Said Person was naïve, maybe rural, but not neurotic or rudely curious. For him—or her, but "him" was the word generically used—authors were supposed to describe "the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American," as I quote William Dean Howells in my biography *Unveiling Kate Chopin*.

American authors were to avoid "certain facts of life which are not usually talked of before young people, and especially young ladies." So proclaimed Howells, the most powerful figure in American literary magazines in the 1890s.

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The Young Person had a vulnerable mind, and it had to be protected.

And so I've no doubt misspent my adult life reading Kate Chopin (1850–1904), whose stories were much too open-minded ever to be published by Howells, editor of the *Atlantic*. The mother of five sons and a daughter, Chopin spent most of her writing life in an unacknowledged tug of war about what the Young Person should be allowed to read. By the standards of the day, she was (of course) dangerously permissive—just like my mom, who let me read *Peyton Place* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* when I was an innocent twelve-year-old in Ohio.

I'm still grateful, of course—as were Chopin's kids, who adored her.



Her first nationally published story in the *Youth's Companion* ("For Marse Chouchoute") was for children, but it was not the kind of story she most wanted to write. In her native St. Louis, Chopin created a salon of like-minded artsy people who joshed and pontificated together on Thursday nights. They were, according to her son, "a pink-red group of intellectuals who believed in intellectual freedom and often expressed their independence by wearing eccentric clothing."

Still, she followed—at first—the dictates of Howells. Chopin set out to write what was then, more or less, young adult literature. But even her earliest stories have peculiar twists. Her first collection, *Bayou Folk* (1894), was called "charming" and "humorous," but it's full of difficult or tragic situations hidden under Chopin's easy, light writing style. The *Youth's Companion* editors were apparently so beguiled by her use of local color—dialects, funny customs—they didn't notice that children are half-killed by neglectful parents ("A Rude Awakening") or a black boy dies trying to deliver the mail forgotten by a lazy white boy ("For Marse Chouchoute"). Howells himself sent a note of praise to Chopin for her story about two children who go barefoot rather than use their new shoes ("*Boulôt and Boulotte*").

To Northern editors, Southern poverty was seen as cute—and perfectly appropriate for the Young Person to read about.

What wasn't appropriate? Oh, you already know. Chopin did hint at what Howells called "guilty love" in her short stories, but not for the *Youth's Companion*. *Vogue* published the adult stories she's most known for now, such as "The Story of an Hour," because *Vogue,* as stated by its editor Josephine Redding in 1894, was the avowed enemy of "the fetters imposed by the Young Person…. The pink and white—débutante afternoon tea—atmosphere in which convention says we must present love, means intellectual asphyxiation for us."

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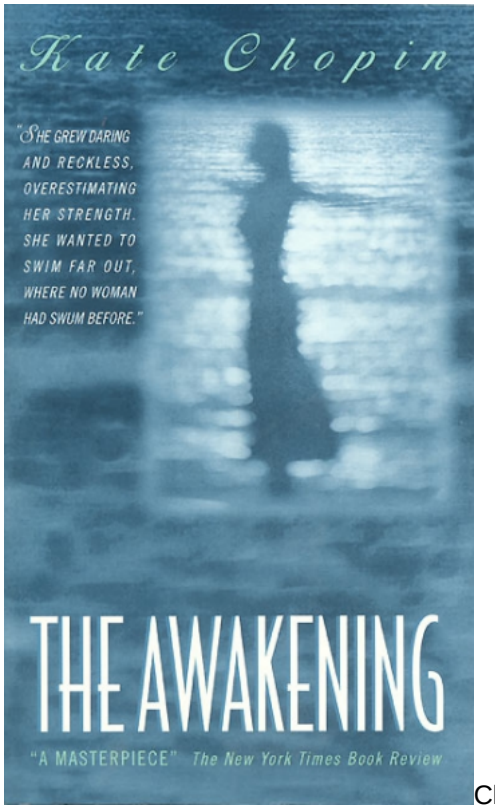
Vogue was, of course, edited by a woman. A few years later, another female editor—Lucy Monroe of Herbert S. Stone and Company—was most instrumental in getting *The Awakening* published. Women, it seemed, fretted much less than men did about protecting the Young Person.

By the mid-1890s, Chopin was a literary celebrity in her hometown, written up in author profiles (a new genre). In those, she described herself as un-serious, without a writing studio (not true). She said she preferred to write in the common sitting room, with her children "swarming" around her. But at the time, her youngest child was 15 and the oldest 24—hardly young, vulnerable rug rats. Maybe the fifteen-year-old, her daughter Lélia, would qualify as a Young Person with a doting mom—but she was loud, rebellious, and hardly the picture of naïveté. Chopin knew all about the care, feeding, and harnessing of children in American as well as Creole society, and seemed to prefer the more easygoing ways of Louisiana. She also read French literature, which was much more open to new, uncensored ideas for all ages.

And she enjoyed scandalizing adults and corrupting young people in a mild way—through books. Thomas Hardy's novel *Jude the Obscure* (1895), for instance, had been something of a cause célèbre in England and the United States. It has child suicide, murder, and sexual loathing, and it brims over with morbidly depressing episodes. (I read it as a teen, in the last century, and can't bear to do that again. Even attempting to read the plot summary in Wikipedia—a prime text for young adult readers today—put me into a deep funk and ruined my day.) Chopin, though, left a copy of *Jude the Obscure* on her coffee table, to the horror of acquaintances.

What if a Young Person should pick it up and read it? she was asked.

Chopin said she hoped he (the Young Person) would indeed pick it up and read it and discover that it was "unpardonably dull and immoral, chiefly because it is not true." Anyway, she couldn't imagine "robbing youth of its privilege to gather wisdom as the bee gathers honey."



Chopin did not write *The Awakening* (1899) for the Young Person, though there are some charming youngsters as background. (The Farival twins, for instance, wear matching dresses and play excruciating piano duets.) But once *The Awakening* appeared, it was pummeled by most reviewers as morbid, immoral, distasteful—all the words used for *Jude the Obscure.* One critic whined that it showed a woman "harboring thoughts fit only for the smoking-room"—another place where a Young Person was not to venture.

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A few brave souls, though, defended *The Awakening.* Charles Deyo, a regular at Chopin's salon, made it clear that it was not for the Young Person. Rather it was for "seasoned souls, for those who have ripened under the gracious or ungracious sun of experience."

Contrary to rumor, *The Awakening* was not banned in St. Louis, but it was challenged in a public library in Evanston, Illinois. Many other libraries never ordered it. After Chopin's death, it went out of print for half a century, until a motley cadre of critics, grad students, and activists (including me) resurrected it in the 1970s—a noble campaign described in *Awakenings: The Story of the Kate Chopin Revival,* an anthology edited by Bernard Koloski (Louisiana State University Press, 2009).

Now, *The Awakening* is even taught in high schools, to the Young Person, although not without controversy. In suburban Chicago in 2006, a high school board member wanted Chopin's novel and six other books (including *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Beloved)* to be banned from classroom use because of their alleged profanity and explicit sexual references. The board member, Leslie Pinney, admitted she hadn't read the books. But she was sure they were dirty.

Still, the field of young adult literature has opened up—catastrophically, purists would say—since Judy Blume's *Forever* created a sensation in 1975. Her characters actually do it, unambiguously. They're not punished, the young woman's not shamed, and she doesn't get pregnant.

Chopin would approve of today's YA with its lack of taboos. Meanwhile, everything's gotten so smutty in our barbarous times that Young Persons don't even know sex takes place in *The Awakening.* Some of their teachers, at least in my state, tell them Edna and her rakish admirer Alcee Arobin don't do it. In fact, they do (in chapters XXVII, XXXI, and XXXV). But the language is too vaguely poetic for contemporary teens, as in the moment when Edna becomes "supple to his gentle, seductive entreaties."

What goes where? Today's Young Persons want to know. And like Kate Chopin in her prime, I want to know more.



So, I asked some actual teenagers to recommend YA books I might scrutinize for this column. One suggested *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging* (HarperTeen, 2006) by the British novelist Louise Rennison. I read it, laughed a lot, and often didn't know what I was reading, thanks to the British slang—which probably corrupted me without my knowing it.

My consultants on three continents have translated "snogging" variously as "shagging" (copulation), "wanking" (masturbation), "necking" (kissing and hugging), or "a big fat sloppy kiss." Sometimes, young people just have to

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make their own decisions.

Regardless, Kate Chopin is no doubt dancing in her grave in St. Louis. Maybe she's even a zombie who hovers around when any Young Person thinks about snogging—and she whispers in his or her ear what Molly Bloom says in that other much-banned book: "Yes!"

Publishing Information

- All direct quotes here are from *Unveiling Kate Chopin* by Emily Toth (University Press of Mississippi, 1999).
- "Book Ban Debate Is Long, Impassioned" [5] by Jamie Francisco, *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 2006.

Art Information

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