Sex and the Young Reader [1]

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Theme Essay by Karen J. Ohlson

Should Parents Ever Censor What Their Kids Read?

Editor's Note: *When Karen Ohlson first published this TW essay as "Not Your Mother's YA Books" in 2010, her kids were still young teens. Now, they're both in college. But as she notes in this updated piece, sexual content in young adult books continues to vex and challenge parents.*



Nine years ago, *King Dork* was my first clue that "young adult" literature had changed a lot since my middle-school days.

The author of this YA novel, Frank Portman, is an old friend of my husband's who has led a punk rock band for a few decades. So, in 2006, I bought *King Dork* at a book-signing party, had it autographed for my then eleven-year-old son, and started reading it immediately.

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This mix of teen-misfit social comedy and alienated-youth monologue à la *Catcher in the Rye* (a book that Tom, the hero of *King Dork*, loathes for its cult status among English teachers) had me pretty entertained—until I reached the first blow-job scene.

Call me an overprotective mom, but I wasn't keen on my eleven-year-old expecting teen relationships to begin with the girl leaping onto the lap of the boy she's just met, licking his mouth, and then offering to gratify him orally:

> 'I wouldn't mind,' she said finally in a matter-of-fact tone, 'giving you some head.'

Uh…excuse me? Last time I'd checked, YA books were covered in the "Children's Books" section of the *New York Times Book Review*. (They still are, though YA now gets its own sub-list within "Children's Best Sellers.") And the official age range for YA, according to the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA), has long been twelve to eighteen—an unofficial invitation to strong readers of younger ages as well.

I felt betrayed. For years, I'd delighted in discovering children's books I could enjoy with my kids and recommend to nieces and nephews. Book reviewers, booksellers, and librarians had been my trusted guides. But after reading *King Dork*, I wondered if these gatekeepers had abandoned their posts, leaving me adrift with my kids in an embarrassing new world of way-too-adult YA titles.

At this point, I've read many more YA books, thanks to the mother-daughter book group I joined shortly after the *King Dork* incident with my nine-year-old daughter. By 2010, when I first published this essay, she was thirteen and my son fifteen; he'd moved on to regular adult books, but she and her friends were dedicated YA readers. While few of the titles I've read in the past decade are as explicit as *King Dork* (including *King Dork Approximately,* the book's 2015 sequel), I've had to come to terms with a new YA, one in which casual sex occurs in books that win the highest honors—and that I've recommended to teenage readers in my life.

Perhaps that means I'm one of the irresponsible gatekeepers now. But hear me out.

Sex Gets Casual

Lest you get a false impression, I should make this clear: Out of the seventy-plus YA books I've read since 2006, I've encountered blow-job scenes in only two: *King Dork* and John Green's *Looking for Alaska* (the 2006 winner of YALSA's Michael L. Printz Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature).

Also, I've come across only one freaky three-way makeout scene (in *Liar*, a 2009 title by Justine Larbalestier) and just one seriously-stoned-on-a-regular-basis narrator (Cameron, the Mad Cow Disease victim and modern-day Don Quixote at the center of Libba Bray's *Going Bovine*, the 2010 Printz Award winner).

There are plenty of YA titles out there that *don't* include notably mature content, although such content appears to be on the rise, judging from my recent, unscientific sampling of the 2015 Printz Award finalists and winner (*I'll Give You the Sun*). All five novels include frank portrayals of sexually active teens within larger stories encompassing such dramatic material as a school shooting, a suicide attempt, family upheaval, and an apocalyptic invasion by mutant, six-foot insectoids.

Even the gentlest of these titles—Mariko and Jillian Tamaki's graphic novel *This One Summer*, also a Caldecott honoree—has stirred up controversy about its "age-inappropriate" content for a book about tween main characters (who witness teen pregnancy, slut-shaming, and references to oral sex). And Printz finalist Andrew Smith's *Grasshopper Jungle* features the most impressive chronicling of moment-to-moment horniness levels I've ever witnessed in a narrator.

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But whether or not such books are becoming the norm, the number of truly edgy titles is not what pushed me out of my comfort zone after my *King Dork* awakening. Rather, it was the way I saw the mature content being portrayed in them.

While the YA category has pushed boundaries (and parental buttons) since its early days, the mature content was treated much less nonchalantly back then. Paul Zindel's *My Darling, My Hamburger* (1969) and Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975) got a lot of attention for their candid depictions of teen sexual pressures and the realities of abortion and contraception—and their characters took these issues very seriously.

Maybe too seriously. The Zindel book felt heavy-handed when I reread it a few years ago. The girl who "goes all the way" pays for it in spades, getting dumped by her boyfriend and driven to a hack abortionist by a sleazeball who is now the best she can hope for romantically.

Still, as a parent, I find the more casual treatment of similar subject matter in today's YA a bit unnerving. For example, the blow job in *Looking for Alaska* occurs as the narrator watches TV with a new girlfriend to whom he doesn't feel particularly close:

> Just as the Bradys were getting locked in a jail, Lara randomly asked me, 'Have you ever gotten a blow job?'
>
> 'Um, that's out of the blue.'

Sexuality and drug use often happen as a matter of course, or even as background noise, rather than as major focal points of the narrative—both in Printz winners and cash cows like the *Gossip Girl* series by Cecily von Ziegesar, which in 2007 led to a TV series that had a six-year run.

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Take Off Those Billabong Shorts—Before They Get Sweaty

The *Gossip Girl* books are about a Betty- and Veronica-ish duo of rich teenage Manhattanites constantly battling for the affections of Nate, a vapid preppy stoner. Here's how Nate is first described in *Don't You Forget About Me*—through the eyes of one of his gal pals, Blair:

> [H]is wavy brown hair streaked with gold, his eyes perfectly matching the green Billabong board shorts hanging low on his hips…. Even though they'd been together 24/7 for the last month, drinking frosty-cold mango margaritas all day and getting hot and sweaty all night, she still couldn't get enough of him.

Despite the impressive amount of time the *Gossip Girl* characters spend having sex, drinking, and smoking pot (with no ill effects to their model-perfect good looks), these activities feel secondary to the soap opera plots and consumer-porn product mentions: "Blair felt a tinge of sadness as Nate threw her apple green Hervé Chapelier tote over one shoulder and grabbed his own dirty monogrammed canvas L.L. Bean tote." (His monogrammed tote is dirty? No wonder she's sad.)

To older teens, casual sex and drugs in books like these are no big deal. When a friend of mine teased her seventeen-year-old daughter about tossing a *Gossip Girl* book into her gym bag, the daughter said, "No one takes these books seriously, Mom."

And when I brought up this topic recently with my own daughter, who's now eighteen, she pointed out that young readers these days are likely to encounter much more explicit content in the fan fiction that abounds online. Much of it features fans' imagined couplings among their favorite fictional characters and is more graphic than any mainstream YA book. See the *Archive of Our Own* website for fanfic about everyone from Sherlock Holmes and Harry Potter to the lads in One Direction.

However, in 2010, when I asked the thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds in our book group how they felt about sex in YA books, they admitted to feeling uncomfortable when the scenes are too graphic or when the relationship turns sexual too soon.

One of them asked, a bit plaintively, "Do authors have to make it so the moment a couple admits they like each other they have sex?"

This question made me wonder whether the YA publishing world has lost sight of its primary audience—especially since adult readership of young adult books has risen dramatically. A 2012 Bowker Market Research study found 55 percent of YA book buyers to be 18 or older—with 78 percent of these adults buying the books for themselves. It's hard to pinpoint the age of those who do the reading when parents often do the buying, but the trend continues: At its 2015 Children's Book Summit this September, Nielsen reported that 80 percent of all YA books are bought by adults.

Catnip for Tweens

If I were reading YA books for myself and not as a parent, I would never have thought the mature content was a big deal, either. As a parent, though, I had to laugh when I read the following 2006 response from John Green to the blog post "What to Do About Sexually Explicit Teen Books?":

> I have no problem with a parent reading my book and saying, 'Nah, I don't want my child reading this.' That's fine. In fact, if I had a 12-year-old, I might not let them read 'Alaska' for any number of reasons…. [T]he book is published for kids 14 and up.

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Green goes on to insist that *Looking for Alaska* has never been shelved in the children's section of bookstores, and that "the ALA [American Library Association] does not hand it to 12-year-olds or say that it's appropriate for 12-year-olds."

I admire John Green's writing and find much humor and truth in his books, but he's being disingenuous here. The teen sections of bookstores and libraries are often adjacent to those for children. And a parent hearing that *Looking for Alaska* won the Printz Award, from an organization defining the age range for YA as starting at twelve, would not be out of line in assuming the book is appropriate for twelve-year-olds.

Young teens and tweens still form a large part of the YA readership—ask any parent whose daughter was in fifth or sixth grade when *Twilight* or *The Hunger Games* came out. Designating a YA book as being for "14 and up" in tiny font on the inside front flap (as with *King Dork* and *Going Bovine*) in no way means eleven- and twelve-year-olds aren't going to read it. Even if this were a deterrent, I've seen no such designation on the covers of *Liar, Looking for Alaska,* or any of the 2015 titles I read.

But I don't think the answer is to segregate mature YA books in special areas of bookstores and libraries. Some libraries already do this—to my daughter's horror, when I used to bring her there as a young teen.

The Smokin' Hot Library Teen Zone

Welcome to the YA section of the main library branch in Oakland, California—known as the "Teen Zone." The Teen Zone is located at the opposite end of the building and up several flights of stairs from the Children's Room. In 2010, neither of my teens wanted to spend any time there.

Why? My daughter said, "too many cheesy romances"—a charge she leveled at the YA sections of other local branches as well. She was putting it kindly.

Everything about this room screams, "Reading is hip! There's sex here, and violence, too! Please read something, oh reluctant teen reader!" In fact, on a typical fall Monday in 2015, among the chattering after-school crowd, none of the twenty-odd teens I saw in the Teen Zone was reading books or browsing the bookshelves; they were all at computers, on their smartphones, or gathered around the projection of a computer screen on the wall.

Graphic novels are featured prominently on the shelf closest to the entrance, although they appear to be losing the competition with the nearby screens. On the fiction shelves, many books have brightly colored spines with titles that combine sex appeal and teen relevance. During my recent stroll along the shelves, a few jumped out: *Kiss & Blog*, *T.H.U.G. L.I.F.E.*, *Zombie Blondes*, and *Prom Nights from Hell*.

I haven't read any of these books; they may be excellent. But when you're surrounded by them, it's as if a convergence of searchlight beams is identifying *you* as a TEENAGER who wants to read about SEX and LUUV and GANGS and ZITS and every EMBARRASSING or SENSATIONAL teen-associated subject you can imagine.

No wonder I couldn't drag my kids in here. My daughter at the time preferred library branches with less embarrassing YA shelves, preferably integrated with the regular Children's Room and with more fantasy and adventure titles mixed in.

So, how about keeping mature YA titles mixed in with regular ones but adding easy-to-find advisory ratings? (As it turns out, the tiny-type "14 and up" I found on a very few book covers is more about reading level than spicy content.) That's the answer proposed in Tony Buchsbaum's 2010 article "Are Your Kids' Books Rated R?" in *January Magazine*, where he advocates content ratings for the covers of YA books. Buchsbaum's argument sounds reasonable, but check out the comments that follow it: 192 of them as of this writing, beginning civilly and escalating into a flame war.

"It Would Fly off the Shelves"

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Many of the comments point out the ethical problems in deciding what content requires a parental warning (sex? drugs? violence? language?) and the slippery slope toward censorship. But the most persuasive come from teens themselves, like thirteen-year-old Emily's incredulous response in 2010:

> Do you know what an R rating on the front of a book cover would scream to 10, 11, 12, 13 year olds? It would scream READ ME. It would scream I AM CONTRABAND. It would scream YOUR PARENTS WOULD NOT APPROVE. And, therefore, it would fly off the shelves.

Or this comment from fifteen-year-old Paige:

> I've been reading YA since about third grade, and I'm sure more then once I've come across things that my parents probably would have wanted me to not know about until an older age. But the truth of the matter is that adults can't—and shouldn't—be filtering what we read.... Would you rather have us experience it through a book, or first-hand?

Touché. I would much rather have had my kids reading *Looking for Alaska*, with its believable portrayal of the awkwardness surrounding a blow job (between two teens who don't know what to say to each other beforehand or afterward and who soon become estranged) than going through a similar experience themselves at the age of fifteen or thirteen.



Ultimately, I've had to accept that YA is just a market segment (ages twelve and up), not a rating or a guarantee of "appropriate" content. In 2015, we live in a world where smartphones are ubiquitous and 92 percent of U.S. teens report going online daily (including 24 percent who do

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"almost constantly," according to the Pew Research Center). YA books compete for teenagers' attention with everything from texting, social media, and video games to the endless outer reaches of the Internet. (Adult content? Where *isn't* it?)

As much as I'd like YA publishers and YALSA to take more responsibility for what they present to an audience that clearly contains plenty of tweens and young teens, the mature-content genie is out of the bottle. Our job as parents is to help kids handle the onslaught with their own best judgment. And YA fiction that lets them experience unwise choices vicariously isn't a bad thing.

Even if YA sometimes strays outside my comfort zone, I feel grateful it exists—and that teens are reading at all. When my kids were in middle school and transitioning into high school, they found YA books that connected with their lives in truthful, thought-provoking ways. YA books may be even edgier now than then (enough so that cautious parents will appreciate the ratings available online from groups such as Common Sense Media), but they also offer something that teens are unlikely to get in their inevitable contact with explicit content online: an emotional context.

The steamy make-out scenes in Jandy Nelson's *I'll Give You the Sun*, the 2015 Printz winner, are interleaved with characters wrestling with homophobia, the crossed border between consensual sex and rape, and the awkward seesaw of feelings surrounding each sexual encounter—especially the two-person "circle jerk" interrupted by a mom walking in the door.

This One Summer has drawn fire for portraying tweens witnessing a sexual drama among older teens, but this graphic novel also exquisitely conveys the simultaneous shame, confusion, and excitement of growing into female sexuality. And the spectacularly sex-obsessed Austin Szerba in *Grasshopper Jungle* doesn't just fantasize about three-ways and chronicle his horniness (while also battling enormous, humanity-destroying insectoids); he also navigates serious emotional minefields with his girlfriend and his gay best friend, grappling with his own emerging bisexuality.

I'm glad these books are out there, even though I backpedaled on giving *Grasshopper Jungle* to a nephew after buying it with that intent. (To paraphrase a character in *I'll Give You the Sun*, do I want to be known as "that pervy aunt"? I think not.)

And I'm not sorry I let my kids read whatever books they chose as they were growing up—including *King Dork*, when my son was eleven. I should note, though, that he had to hear my views on why I found its portrayal of teen relationships troubling. And when he asked if he could use it for his sixth-grade book report—that was a no.

Publishing Information

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- "Dancing," "Pinup," and "Boy with Husky Dog" © Von Allan [14]; used with permission.



Karen J. Ohlson is a senior features editor at TW. She was pleased that revising this essay gave her an excuse to check out a pile of recent YA titles, including the very funny *King Dork Approximately* (the 2015 sequel to *King Dork*).

Anticipating your next question, she reports that the “casual blow job” count in this second book is zero, perhaps because the “believable girlfriends” count is, refreshingly, two out of two. She also reports being amused by the narrator’s account of the climactic sexual encounter, which ends with “you can just keep on wondering. Some things are private. As it turns out.”

Speaking of provocative content and big-name YA authors, don’t miss “John Green’s Tour de Nerdfighters,” [15] Karen’s entertaining 2012 essay in *Talking Writing*.

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