

Barbara Kay: Adolescent fiction has undergone a sea of change since Nancy solved the Mystery of the Old Clock  
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Last week Nancy Drew, teen detective, celebrated her series' 85th anniversary of continuous publication. In the 1950s, Nancy still wore demure dresses, drove a snappy blue convertible and called home from a telephone booth. Today I'm told she wears jeans and t-shirts, drives a hybrid car and carries a smartphone. Nevertheless, I am sure the clever sleuth is still the upright character she always was: cheerful, resourceful, civic-minded, ethical, honourable, courageous and loyal. And non-sexual.

What a sea change fiction for adolescents has undergone since Nancy solved the Mystery of the Old Clock.

In my youth, children read what educators call "window books," books that focused a child's attention outward onto character-building adventures abroad — literally or figuratively. Nancy Drew was a humble subset of what one would call literature, and made no special moral or aesthetic claims. But the series nevertheless obeyed the general principle of its era of influence: while unrealistic, the stories mimicked the aspirational thrust of classic literature — that is, its main character strove to prove her merit according to the standards of her (admittedly white-bread) culture.

As we became more and more an identity-obsessed, sexualized "therapy culture," adolescents gravitated to "mirror books," me-focused fiction in what became designated the Young Adult category (YA), targeting 12-18 year olds. This fiction is usually narrated by a disaffected adolescent, the plot typically lingering over social pressures involving sex, drugs, divorce and racial or gendered alienation. Adults in these books are often either absent, hostile, abusive or in other ways unsympathetic. The reigning motif is victimhood. The narrator's only source of self-esteem is pride in remaining "authentic" in a conformist and hypocritical society. The Urtext for mirror books was J.D. Salinger's 1951 novel, *Catcher in the Rye*.

The troubled protagonist of Salinger's novel, Holden Caulfield, is an icon of psychological health, though, when compared to today's YA protagonists. Holden merely moped about and sneered at people for being "phony." By contrast, in Jackie Morse Kessler's 2011 YA novel, *Rage*, a girl is filled with self-loathing, symbolized by compulsive cutting. Sadistically bullied by her peers as "cutterslut," she slashes her arm to shreds, "but the badness remained, staining her insides like cancer. She had gouged her belly until it was a mess of meat and meat..." In Cheryl Rainfield's 2010 YA novel, *Scars*, the narrator is a girl who has been raped since she was a toddler by her father, who provides her with knives to cut herself to death as a teenager. In the Canadian YA novel, *When Everything Feels Like the Movies*, by Raziel Reid — this year's Governor-General award winner for best fiction in children's literature — a narcissistic and masochistic gay teenager, whose ambition is to become a cocaine-addicted male prostitute in Hollywood, obsesses over sexual fantasies (some quite deviant) and proudly recounts successful baiting strategies to ensure attention-getting beatings.

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Clearly this kind of lurid extremism pays off in the marketplace. Books ostensibly written for adolescents are nowadays increasingly bought by aesthetically lazy adults with simplistic adult appetites. So there is strong motivation in this glutted buyer's market for writers of YA to gild their festering lilies. They are furthered encouraged in their transgressive impulses by progressive cultural elites (like those who sit on the G-G Awards committee) who naively pride themselves on their belief that the more frankness around sexuality of all kinds young readers encounter, however disturbing, the more helpful it will be in expanding their understanding and sympathy for marginalized youth.

Is that the case? Does adolescent immersion in fictional worlds where characters their age suffer or inflict horrible sex-related abuse on themselves, and where graphic content is — it seems to me — expressly designed, like pornography, to elicit a prurient response, have a salutary effect?

In fact, there is no evidence to show that is the case. But there is evidence to suggest the opposite. In her 2013 book about bullying, *Sticks and Stones*, journalist Emily Bazelon describes a method some schools use called “social norming” to discourage drinking and driving. She writes, “When [students] find out that [drinking and driving] is less prevalent than they think — outlier behavior rather than the norm — they’re less likely to do it themselves.” The same with cruelty, by inference, behaviours like cutting, anorexia and grotesque sexual fetishism.

We can’t go home again in children’s literature, nor should we try. But one can at least say with confidence regarding Nancy Drew something one cannot say with confidence about the representative YA examples I have cited above: She did no harm

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