

Desire and Punishment: Adolescent Female Sexuality in Three Novels

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Résumé: La représentation de la sexualité féminine ignore le désir et s'appesantit sur la faute et la punition, double réalité que le roman sentimental tend à occulter. A. Altmann étudie trois romans contemporains qui présentent des cas de maternité non voulue, différents, certes, mais faisant ressortir la vulnérabilité des adolescentes.

Summary: Social constructions of female sexuality have traditionally been short on desire and long on punishment. Romance has been the veil concealing the realities of both. Three contemporary novels for adolescents, read as a triptych, show pictures of sex and unwanted teenage pregnancy from three different perspectives, linked by a common understanding of the sexual vulnerability of adolescent girls.

That sex and romance are primary connecting threads in girls' tradition is evident in the narratives of teenage girls, which make it clear that in the current period, at least, sex and romance are the organizing principles, the fundamental projects in many, many teenage girls' lives. (Thompson 354)

Social constructions of female sexuality have traditionally been short on desire and long on punishment. Romance has been the veil concealing the realities of both. Fiction offers us a way to explore some of these constructions and their inherent contradictions.

I have chosen three contemporary novels for adolescents that, read as a triptych, both support and challenge some of the dominant discourses on sexuality available to young women. One of these novels is Canadian, one British, and one from the United States. My main focus here will be the Canadian novel, *january, february, june or july*, by Helen Fogwell Porter, published in 1988. The other two, Berlie Doherty's *Dear Nobody*, published in Britain in 1991, and Virginia Euwer Wolff's *Make Lemonade*, published in the United States in 1993, will be discussed as companion pieces. All three have teenage girls as protagonists, and deal with unplanned teenage pregnancy.

january, february depicts sex for a young woman as straightforward physical pleasure, the satisfaction of desire. It also makes clear that young women are made vulnerable by their sexuality in a way that men are not, because they can become pregnant. For young women, the awakening of sexual desire that comes with the physiological maturing of adolescence brings with it the possible punishment of public shame and entrapment. *Dear Nobody* makes desire acceptable as a development from emotional intimacy, and turns the punishment of unwanted pregnancy into unexpected fulfilment. *Make Lemonade* emphasizes the vulnerability and entrapment that sexuality can mean for young

women, and leaves out desire and pleasure entirely.

Porter's novel won the Canadian Library Association's Young Adult Book Award in 1989. The award is no firm guarantee of literary quality, but *January, February* is a fine novel. In spite of its quality and status as an award winner, it has had remarkably little attention. I suspect a part of the reason for its having been almost ignored is the treatment of adolescent sex and unplanned pregnancy in the story. (The other part is probably that it is very much a regional novel, set in St. John's, Newfoundland, and was published by a small Canadian press.)

The book has had only three reviews. One, in *Books in Canada*, said "*January, February, June or July* is a carefully balanced, unpretentious novel about an appealing young person, but it's an adult novel all the way, and a polished one" (Hill 35). The second, in *Atlantic Provinces Book Review*, comments that the book "becomes hopelessly bogged down in trivia and banality" (Baker). The third review, in *CM*, recommended this book "to more mature high school students and to adults, who would gain a better understanding of each other through reading it" (Blaine). The reviewer ends with a warning: "Contains occasional explicit language." This review is the only one to appear in a journal or section of a journal reviewing books for young people.¹ Adult readers who review and buy books for young adults may have decided that the factual tone and frankness of the novel are inappropriate for teenage readers.

In contrast, the other two novels were widely reviewed. *Dear Nobody*, which won the Carnegie Medal for 1991, was on the ALA "Best Books for Young Adults" list in 1993, *School Library Journal's* "Best Books of 1992" list, and had a starred review in *Booklist*. *Make Lemonade* was on the 1994 ALA "Best Books for Young Adults" list, an ALA "Notable Book for Older Readers," an ALA "Recommended Book for the Reluctant Young Adult Reader," a "Top of the List" winner for youth fiction in *Booklist* in 1993, and was chosen for the PNLA's Young Readers Choice list in the senior division for 1995/96.

Two of these books, therefore, will be widely read, and one will not. The three complement each other in a number of ways, one of which is in what they have to say about sex, a central concern for both their adolescent and adult readers.

These three novels, taken together, make an interesting triptych. The panels show pictures of sex and unwanted teenage pregnancy from three different moral angles or perspectives, linked by a common representation and understanding of the sexual vulnerability of adolescent girls. This description of the books is, of course, a flagrant reduction. To borrow a phrase from John McPhee, as a description this statement "is only somewhat more encompassing than to say that Herman Melville wrote a novel about a one-legged madman in vengeful pursuit of a whale" (McPhee 116). These are works of fiction, not case studies or sermons. By limiting my discussion of them to a reading of what they have to say about sex and teenage pregnancy, and by limiting the discussion even further by approaching it as a societal question rather than as a question of plot, I do not mean to suggest that these novels should be read as parables in a program for sex education. There are many other things going on in each book — social,

political, emotional, aesthetic. These are stories about individuals, not examples, and the particular is always different from the general.

But it is illuminating to examine how the messages that may be taken from these novels fit into the available contemporary discourses on adolescent sexuality (even though, in a sense, each book attempts to interfere with such discourses by particularizing them).² Certainly these novels contribute to the moral climate in which girls learn ways to live their sexuality. And certainly young readers explore their worlds through books such as these.

In *january, february*, the fifteen-year-old protagonist, Heather, has her first sexual experience as a result of her own desire, not because of romance. Her short relationship with Frank, the young man who is her partner, is based on her physical need and pleasure. Heather becomes pregnant, and has an abortion, in a clinic. An older sister forges the note giving her mother's permission; with this proviso, the procedure is legal.

The book is about Heather's becoming a sexual being, not about emotional intimacy or romantic involvement. This is unusual in a book about a young woman. Linda Christian-Smith has pointed out that "Romance colours the way in which sexuality is presented in adolescent romance fiction. It promotes sexuality as something magical, mystical, and loving that happens to girls" (30). Christian-Smith also notes that romance only tells part of the story: "Although it is certainly true that the psychological is an important aspect of sexual responses, downplaying physiological components removes this dimension as a legitimate aspect of heroines' sexuality" (34). In *january, february*, the physiological components are front and centre.

Heather is not a "bad" girl. Her sexual desire is innocent and natural. The encounters that satisfy it contain no element of rebellion against family or society, but are simply a response to the urges of her maturing body. But the trauma of her pregnancy and abortion is a reflection of her social circumstances: she is constrained by the limited horizons of working class poverty in St. John's.

january, february begins with an epigraph, a quote from Willa Cather: "The summer moon hung full in the sky. For the time being, it was the great fact in the world."³ The title of the book comes from an old popular song, "Shine on, shine on harvest moon / Up in the sky / I ain't had no lovin' since January, February, June or July" (Porter 24). For Heather, lovin', physical love, is the one great fact in the world for the time being.

There is a veneer of romance on Heather's relationship with Frank, but it is very thin, a product of Heather's expectations of love. She is aroused by the sexually explicit novels her mother brings home, but she feels more comfortable with the perfect happiness and closed bedroom door of L. M. Montgomery's *The Blue Castle* (16). Heather has a crush on Frank: she has cut a picture of his winning hockey team out of the newspaper (27), and blushes when his name is mentioned (8). But when Heather and Frank meet at a party, he only vaguely remembers having seen her once before and has to ask her name. And when she is in his car with him, being driven home from the party, Heather realizes that she

doesn't know him at all. "What did she really know about Frank Marshall? That he was a hockey star, that he was good-looking, that he seemed nice, that he'd saved Donna's party from the police a few months before" (30). Frank is simply a handy focus for her emerging sexual desire, and her crush on him is a suitable cover story:

She didn't want to think about what was happening to her, but she didn't want the feeling to go away, either. Before, when such a sensation came over her when she was reading about sex, or for no reason at all, she'd tried to abolish it, pretend it wasn't there. Now that it was connected to Frank she didn't want to run away from it any more. (62-63)

Sex and sexual pleasure are something Heather cannot help but be aware of. Her best friend, Debbie, hints that she is already sexually active (14). Her mother, Eileen, brings home Harold Robbins novels, and is engrossed by steamy scenes in soap operas (17). Her sister Shirley encourages Heather to go out so that Shirley and her boyfriend can have the livingroom to themselves, since Shirley doesn't have a room of her own. She tells her "'You might meet a nice fella tonight if you goes to the party. You don't know what you're missin'" (14).

At the party, boys and girls are openly fondling each other. In the livingroom, Debbie's boyfriend has his hand in her blouse, and her mouth is pressed into the opening of his shirt. The boy, holding out a joint, asks "'You want some more Deb, or am I makin' you happy enough?'" (22)

In the kitchen, a boy and girl were standing next to the refrigerator, arms tight around each other. The boy pushed the lower part of his body against hers. The girl began to move her pelvis slowly and rhythmically against him. Heather thought she recognized her as Darlene Snelgrove, who was a grade below her in school. (23)

Heather goes outside, because she doesn't quite know what to do with herself.

She supposed that what was going on inside the house should have disgusted her, but she wasn't disgusted at all.... Just for a moment she allowed herself to wish that somebody was touching her the way Harry was touching Debbie, or holding her the way the boy in the kitchen was holding Darlene. (24-25)

When she goes back into the kitchen, Darlene and her boyfriend have changed position: "He had his hand inside her jeans and was caressing her while she gave little moans of pleasure.... 'Let's go upstairs,' said the boy hoarsely. 'C'mon, let's get up there quick'" (27). Heather goes to get her coat. "She'd better get home quick; she didn't like the way she was feeling. Or, to be perfectly accurate, she liked the way she was feeling too much" (27).

Heather has learned to be wary of her physical desire. Her sexuality is both stimulated and repressed by the discourses that constitute and organize the practice of sex in her world. In spite of what she sees around her and feels herself, sex as the misty, private culmination of true love and marriage, as in *The Blue Castle*, is the right kind, safe and socially sanctioned.

Her mother tries to insist on a moral code for her daughters that she does not live herself. When Heather warns Shirley to be careful about what she gets up to with her boyfriend in the livingroom in case their mother gets home early from her own date, Shirley says, "'Mom's funny, ent she? She's after havin' a

hysterectomy now, so she can do what she like. But when she talks about us you'd think she was the Virgin Mary or someone" (14). And if she saw Shirley's birth controls pills, "she'd have a fit and a half" (13).

Good girls don't have sex. Heather wonders to herself whether she should pretend to resist Frank, so that he won't think she's "too easy" (45), and Frank tells her "You needn't be afraid of me. I wouldn't hurt you. I know you're a good girl" (66). (With bad girls, men don't have to be careful.) Heather doesn't see herself as a bad girl, and she doesn't think of her sisters, or of Debbie, in that way. But outside of the circle she knows well, and cares about, she applies the good girl/bad girl distinction, in the face of her own experience. When the doctor, who suspects Heather is pregnant, tries to reassure her by saying "I talk to girls like you almost every day," Heather's unspoken response is: "Girls like you. What kind of a girl did she think Heather was, anyway? Someone like Darlene Snelgrove?" (121)

Both Heather and Frank know something about birth control. Although Heather gets pregnant, she is still technically a virgin. "You won't get pregnant or anything. I won't put it inside," Frank says (83). And he doesn't: "I had sense enough for that... I don't want anything to happen to you" (84). Her sister Shirley had advised her to get birth control pills at the planned parenthood clinic, as she herself did when a friend of hers had a pregnancy scare: "You should go up and get some, too, just to be on the safe side. You never know when you might need 'em. It's better to be sure than sorry" (13).

But Heather, like most of us, thinks of herself as different. And to some extent she is. "You never haves any fun. I'd go cracked if I was like you, stayin' in every night studyin' or readin' library books. It's not good for you," says Shirley (12). Her mother is pleased that Heather is going to make something of herself, that she isn't running around with boys. "She don't have time for stuff like that, do you, Heather?" (39)

Heather had planned a life for herself different from the one her family and friends are caught in. She wants to go to university, get a glamorous job in journalism or broadcasting, get an apartment of her own and then her dream house, with some shadowy man in the background (43). This dream fades in the immediate reality of the physical excitement and pleasure she gets from Frank, "the great fact in the world." But that immediacy itself detaches Heather from space and time, heightens her sense of her particularity so that she can think only of the moment, and not of its implications.

Heather is surprised by the physical pleasure Frank gives her. Her mother's official line on sex is that men only want one thing, and for women it is just an obligation. "I mean, enough is enough, right?" she'd say to Mollie. "I mean, you got to keep a man happy to a certain extent, right? But enough is enough" (45). Heather is worried by her own willingness and the intensity of her desire.

She had heard so much for so long about men and boys coaxing women and girls, wheedling them, even taking them by force, that she was led to believe that women were passive observers, or at best, receptacles for the lusts of men. What about the lusts of women? She didn't like the word lust, though; it didn't seem appropriate for the way she'd been feeling. (84)

That first evening with Frank, on the way home from the party, when he kisses her and feels her breasts she thinks that "Nothing that had ever happened to her in her life had felt as good as this" (32). And, thinking about it later, "she realized that even when she and Frank had been together on Saturday night *she* hadn't had enough" (45).

Heather looks forward eagerly to each encounter with Frank in the back seat of his car, and does get more.

Frank hadn't really pushed her to do what she had done last night; she'd wanted to as much as he had. . . . It had felt so good, so warm and hard and alive. Once he'd put his penis against her, she wouldn't have been able to bear it if he'd taken it away too quickly. (83)

Although Frank's respect for her as a good girl makes them stop short of actual penetration, he does lose control once. "I meant to take it away, just in time, but I couldn't. I just couldn't" (84). In spite of their being careful, Heather pays the price for their pleasure: she gets pregnant.

If Heather has the baby, she'll be trapped in the hard life, dissatisfaction, and even squalor that she sees all around her. Her sister Lorraine dropped out of high school after grade ten, and found a job in a supermarket. Then she got pregnant and had to get married. Her husband drinks too much, can't find work, and is seldom home. Lorraine is "brownd off" all the time (9). She resents her husband and feels tied down by her sticky, clinging young son. Heather looks at Frank's mother, worn by raising six children alone; at her grandmother, obliged to struggle with a violent alcoholic husband; at her own mother, divorced, disappointed, as short of emotional energy and courage as she is of money.

Heather never seriously considers keeping the baby herself. The psychiatrist who has to recommend on her case to the therapeutic abortion committee suggests that perhaps her mother could take it. Heather rejects that possibility. "She doesn't believe in abortion, but she wouldn't be able to look after a baby. She works" (131). Eileen's solution, Heather is certain, would be to make her have the baby and then give it up for adoption; "And muddled and confused though she was, sick, terrified and abandoned as she might feel, she knew she would never be able to do that" (128).

So Heather doesn't tell her mother she is pregnant, and Shirley forges Eileen's signature on the permission form. She doesn't tell Frank, either. The intimacy between them had been physical, not emotional.

She certainly didn't ever want Frank to know. She didn't really blame him for the freak thing that had happened, felt it was as much her fault as his, but, when she thought about him at all, she couldn't bury the bitterness as she compared his situation with her own. (144)

Heather has nightmares about the abortion, both before and after it happens. In preparation for it she is processed (that is what it feels like to her) by a gynaecologist, a psychiatrist, a social worker, a nurse. All these people are kind, and either matter-of-fact or sympathetic. But to Heather it all seems unreal, somehow inappropriate.

Words like 'termination' and 'pregnancy' and 'sexually active' and 'all the way.' What did all those words have to do with how a person really felt when something like this happened to her? (133)

At home, after the procedure, which is done as day surgery, Heather tries to analyze how she feels.

She was still a bit lightheaded from the anaesthetic and the bleeding; she found it hard to straighten up when she walked. Apart from the physical problems, her main feeling was one of deep relief.... Maybe her conscience would bother her badly. Right now she felt too sore, too tired, too sleepy to worry about future feelings. (182-83)

Porter takes us through all the details of the preparation for the abortion, and of Heather's recovery immediately afterward. Her readers miss only the surgery, for which Heather is under anaesthetic. The reality of this alternative to carrying an unwanted pregnancy to term is made quite clear.

So are the arguments in its favour. Presumably, readers who have entered into Heather's story can understand her choice. Eileen's story from her youth of the girl who jumped off a cliff because she was pregnant, probably by her father, is an even graver instance of dire need. The two other patients who are prepped together with Heather for the same operation are also persuasive examples. One is just a child, a little girl with long plaits, reading a book by Judy Blume (154). (Heather doesn't know her story, only wonders how she got here.) The other is Mrs. Sullivan. She is a Catholic, but she is forty-four years old, anaemic, with seven children already, the youngest of whom is retarded (157). Her husband is a recovering alcoholic, and Mrs. Sullivan didn't tell him she was pregnant because she "didn't want to bring another worry on him" (167).

January, February is very concretely located, and Heather's story is shaped by the culture of the community in which she lives. Her family, friends, and acquaintances work at poorly paid, uninteresting jobs when they are able to find work at all. Alcoholism is common, an escape from frustration or despair that only makes things worse. The young people drop out of high school and recreate the hopeless situation that traps their parents. Their resources are limited. The girls become sexually active at a young age — fourteen or fifteen. Sex is a source of pleasure and excitement readily available to them (they embody it), and men are the only thing they have to look forward to. As Shirley tells Heather, "Since I broke up with Randy there's nothing to do nighttime" (177).

That social class and economic circumstances are factors in this early beginning of sexual activity is made obvious by the presence in the story of Linda Stone, a middle-class school friend of Heather's whose main function seems to be to stand as a contrast term. Her background is pointedly different from that of the other young people in the book.

Linda hardly ever talks about boys, and she looks younger than Heather, although she is taller. "For one thing, you could never tell if she had breasts or not" (48). Summer or winter, her body is concealed under layers of good clothes. Darlene Snelgrove is Linda's opposite.

Darlene was small for her age; in spite of that, she looked older than she really was. She was wearing lipstick, eye shadow and mascara, as she did every day; her jeans looked as if they had been sprayed on her. (48)

At the age of fourteen, Darlene is defined, objectified, and trapped by her sexuality.

Porter's novel suggests that a life with more choices, rather than stricter control of young women's sexual activity, is the only way out of the trap. The same solution is proposed by Sharon Thompson, reporting on a study in which she interviewed fifteen- and sixteen-year-old girls about love and sex.

Teenage girls are not having too much, too soon. They have too little — too little pleasure, too few options, not enough sexual power.... For feminism the chief goal is not finally to protect young girls from the sexual reality but to protect and expand the possibilities for women's liberation — that is, for equalizing the genders and expanding women's opportunities for knowledge, pleasure, and work — for lives rich with personal and collective meaning. (Thompson, 376)

The second panel of my triptych, *Dear Nobody*, paints a different picture, a sweeter, more acceptable version of Heather's story. Helen and Chris are already in their last year of school and both plan to go to university. They are in love, and sex is a culmination of their emotional attachment. They make love, only once, in Helen's room, with billowing silk scarves and music in the background (1). The physical aspects of the experience are completely veiled in romance.

Helen becomes pregnant. Chris tells her that he loves her, and won't leave her (64), but Helen knows he's not ready to take on the responsibilities of fatherhood. For Chris's sake, she tries to bring on a miscarriage (67), but fails.

When Helen tells her mother she is pregnant, her mother urges her to have an abortion. "Think of your future.... You mustn't throw it away" (82). Helen and her mother go to the doctor together, and Helen agrees to terminate the pregnancy. But when she is in the hospital, waiting to be prepared for the operation, she realizes she can't go through with it (89-90). The baby is real to her all along, even at first, when she is frightened and desperate and doesn't want it. (The book begins with Chris as narrator, but from page 37 on Helen's voice is heard as well, in letters written to the baby, whom she addresses as "Dear Nobody". For the rest of the book, Helen's letters and Chris's narrative alternate.)

Helen gets little encouragement to have the baby. Her father tells her "You're throwing your life away" (96). He wants her to take up her scholarship to study music, to make the most of the chance he never had. Her mother, emotionally scarred by her own illegitimate birth, for which she has never forgiven *her* mother, feels Helen has let her down (95). Chris feels trapped (64). Only his Aunt Jill, who tells Helen about her own lasting regret after she aborted an unwanted fourth child, indirectly suggests that Helen should consider keeping the baby (74).

Helen's grandfather does accept her decision, and offers Helen, and the baby, a home if she finds her mother too difficult. But he, too, tells her she and Chris are too young for these commitments (148). He is relieved that they aren't going to marry. "People will get wed. They think it's going to open the world for them.

But it doesn't, you see. It closes all the doors" (147). There is consensus among the adults that youth is the time to make the most of your chances, and that sex with its attendant threats of pregnancy and marriage can close that future down too early. All of the grownups want something better for the children than they have themselves. A part of the richness and the complexity of this novel is its treatment of relationships. Marriage and parenthood are thoroughly taken out and shaken, and the realities of adult life are contrasted with love's young dream.

Although Helen and Chris love each other, she breaks off their relationship. She is ready for the baby, but she is not ready for Chris or marriage, "for for ever" (122-123). In the end, she lets Chris come to the hospital when the baby is born, and they name it together (198). Little Amy will have a father, although he won't be her mother's husband. And Chris's mother will send money for the baby's support until Chris is able to do it for himself (184).

The last page of the book is a letter from Helen to Chris. She writes that "I think I'm exactly where I want to be, at this moment of my life." And she describes to him four generations together in the same room: Helen's grandmother, her mother, Helen, and Amy, "milky-sweet and sleepy." The rifts between mothers and daughters have been bridged. "It was as though Amy was a fine thread being drawn through a garment, mending tears" (200).

These trailing clouds of healing glory, like the billowing silk scarves in Helen's room, are very different from the stringent and astringent realism of *january, february*. With the obvious exception of the baby growing inside Helen, this book largely ignores the body. Doherty, unlike Porter, spares her readers most of the unpleasant (or perhaps problematic) physical details, although she does a fine job of exploring the emotions. Doherty also glosses over the realities Helen will face as a single mother. Helen's cleverness, her musical gifts, her academic success are repeatedly pointed out. On the one hand, this emphasis makes clear how promising a future her pregnancy threatens. On the other, it seems intended to reassure us that Helen will make it, if anyone can. She plans to go to the local university once the baby is old enough to go to a creche, or maybe even reapply to the music school that had offered her a full scholarship (153). "There's time, there's time, there's time. We'll do it together, little Nobody" (112). I am unpersuaded, even irked, by this optimism, which is firmly nailed in place by the sentimental sledge-hammer of the ending.

Nicholas Tucker, in "Children's Books and Unwanted Pregnancies," expresses a similar reservation about *Dear Nobody*, although, as I do, he likes the book very much.

Impressionable teenagers reading *Dear Nobody* may get the idea that love is always enough when considering whether to have a baby, regardless of the age or preparedness of the mother. But real life problems caused by unplanned pregnancies out of wedlock can be considerable, and no teenage novel should encourage immature readers to believe otherwise. (4)

He thinks that "some literary recognition that abortion may not always be a terrible thing for those requesting it is surely in order so as to provide all readers,

especially young ones, with a more balanced view," (5) and recommends Rosa Guy's *Edith Jackson*, published in 1979, as a corrective to the sweet fulfilment of *Dear Nobody*. If he had known about it, he might well have recommended *january, february*.

The third panel of my triptych, *Make Lemonade*, does not raise the question of abortion. There is no romance in it, and only a passing mention of desire (154). The sexual vulnerability of young women and the facts of life for a single mother are at the forefront. Like *january, february*, it is a story of the constraints of urban poverty, with the difference that the setting is an inner city, unnamed, somewhere in the United States.⁴

The narrator is LaVaughn, fourteen years old and in grade nine. She and her mother are determined that LaVaughn will go to college, although no one in her whole family, no one in the sixty-four apartments in her building, has ever been to college. The idea came from a movie she saw in school in the fifth grade. "It was about how you go to college and the whole place is clean with grass planted and they have lion statues and flowers growing.... Then you get a good job and you live in a nice place with no gangs writing all over the walls" (9).

College will get LaVaughn out of a place where the people living in her building have to have a Watchdog Committee that keeps the drug sellers and pimps out (14) and teaches a self-defence course for all the girls who are twelve or older (15). LaVaughn's mother runs the building's Tenant Council. She is a strong woman, "a big Mom" (15). "My Mom sunk her teeth into this one, this college idea. Every time I look like I'm forgetting college she reminds me some way. My Mom has an attention span that goes on for years" (12).

To earn part of her college money, LaVaughn begins to babysit for a young woman named Jolly who is only seventeen years old, unmarried, with two small children, and completely without any of the skills that would allow her to make a life for herself and her babies. Sex is not a part of LaVaughn's own life as yet. But Jolly is an object lesson of what sex can mean: a man taking his thoughtless pleasure, sometimes by force. "You end up pregnant because some guy has some nice high for you" (154).

LaVaughn becomes very fond of two-year-old Jeremy and Jilly, the "goeey baby" (6), and she wants to rescue them and Jolly.

I heard somebody say Jolly didn't face reality. Jolly she says, 'You say that? Reality is I got baby puke on my sweater & shoes and they tell me they'll cut off the electricity and my kids would have to take a bath in cold water. And the rent ain't paid like usual. Reality is my babies only got one thing in the world and that's me and that's the reality. You say I don't face reality? You say that?' (20)

LaVaughn persuades Jolly to enrol in the Moms Up program in her own school so that she can get a better job than unskilled factory work for a boss who gropes the women he supervises. But Jolly is resistant and unreliable, and sometimes LaVaughn loses sympathy with her. One day, she is fed up with Jolly's only doing things partway.

I say to her, 'That the way you did the birth control too? Partway is good enough?' Jolly got shorter faster than I could see but I was an eyewitness and I know she did just before she got taller, layered with camouflage and she could have held hand grenades. Slowly she made her words come out, and there was a weight there I have never heard before on anybody, even as soft as she was talking: 'Sometimes you don't have time. Sometimes they don't let you have time to. They get in a hurry, they forget you're even around.' (131)

We can assume that abortion wasn't an option for Jolly, as it was for Heather and Helen, since she lives in the United States. She is poor, undoubtedly without medical insurance, even if abortion were medically available, and the men who carelessly fathered her children probably wouldn't have provided money. We have no idea whether Jolly was a willing participant in the sexual acts that made her pregnant, although the suggestions are strong that she had little, if any, control over the situation. What we do know is that whoever had the pleasure, Jolly paid the penalty.

Make Lemonade presents young women as potential or actual victims of male sexuality. There is no discourse of female desire. More surprising is the complete absence of romance, which is such a pervasive presence in girls' lives and fiction. There are no boyfriends, not even vague dreams, like Heather's in *january, february*, of a shadowy man somewhere in the future. The women in this book are on their own, and rely only on themselves and each other. Men don't figure in the story at all except as a faceless sexual threat — the pimps who have to be kept out of LaVaughn's building, the nameless men who impregnated Jolly, the predatory violence that necessitates self-defence courses for twelve-year-old girls.

In this dangerous world it is easy to see that for girls puberty is what Janet Lee, writing about menarche, calls "a transition to womanhood as objectified other" (362). She concludes that the process by which young women are sexualized denies them "power to define the body and live in it with dignity and safety; power to move through the world with credibility and respect" (362).

Make Lemonade argues that the way to get that power is through education. College will let LaVaughn move to a cleaner, safer place. Moms Up will teach Jolly confidence and self-respect and the skills necessary to make a decent life for herself and her children. The answer is straightforward in this short, tightly focused, and beautifully written novel. Neither romance nor desire complicates the issue.

In *january, february*, Heather knows university can be her way out of her depressingly limited world. But she is sidetracked by her own sexual desire, for which she is unprepared. In *Dear Nobody*, Helen is expected and encouraged to develop her gifts to their fullest potential by going to The Royal Northern College of Music, but she gets ambushed by romance: Chris would not have kept her from taking up her scholarship — the baby does.

Thompson notes that the search for romance itself may be the greatest inhibitor of a young woman's future.

Most teenage girls' lives are 'ruined by love,' in Elwin's phrase — to the extent that they are ruined, shortcircuited, or pared down — not by the pleasures and dangers associated with sex and not by promiscuity, but by the propensity to stake precious time and lose heart at the gaming table of romance. (352)

That is not the case in my triptych of novels. All three emphasize instead the inescapable fact of heterosexuality for a young woman: sex, whether it is a response to her own physical desire, a progression from emotional intimacy, or an act of violence against her, can lead to pregnancy.

Our society is so structured that the only safe and acceptable way to have children is within a monogamous, heterosexual marriage. Sex has often led to marriage in what Thompson calls “the shotgun connection of sex, reproduction, and marriage” (376). Ideally, the order is reversed and love leads to marriage and then to sex and children. Romance is supposed to guarantee that order by insisting on commitment before sex.

When any new relationship is embarked on, the question always posed is that of its future goal. The experience of pleasure is not seen to represent an appropriate goal — or rather, if it is presented as such, then it is negatively sanctioned. If, as in our story, it is ‘impossible’ from the start that the two characters will ever become a ‘couple,’ or indeed where such a union is never striven for in the first place, the bond between them is considered shameful. If, however, the question of whether they intend to become a couple can be answered in the affirmative, then further points present themselves for clarification. Are they capable of the union? Can he provide for her? Can they offer security to prospective children? (Haug 223)

For adolescents, the answer to Haug’s last three questions is usually “no.” They lack the psychological, social and financial resources. For that reason, adults try to control the awakening sexual desire of adolescents by emphasizing the penalties to be paid for it. Those penalties are higher for girls than for boys. Of course, both are equally vulnerable to disease, which has recently been added to the public discussion of consequences of sexual intercourse. But in the case of pregnancy, the girl is left holding the baby.

She suffers the physical and emotional trauma of abortion if that solution is possible and acceptable. If it is not, she is the one who is visibly pregnant, and therefore disgraced as at best irresponsible and at worst shameful. She must cope with the enormous disruptions that pregnancy and motherhood make in a life that is still developing. Shame is part of the punishment. Until recently, a pregnant girl dropped out of school, either because the pregnancy had to be concealed, or because of a general feeling that she had set herself apart from her peers and could no longer expect to behave as one of them. Her life was shortcircuited not purely out of necessity, but because she was expected to live out the consequences of her transgression.

The inequity of this situation is all the more poignant because the desire young women are punished for is not even supposed to be their own. Traditionally, sexual desire has been the prerogative of men. Good men accepted the responsibility to control that desire. Good women hoped and waited for love, and were taught to protect themselves from men.

These expectations are changing, but they are far from gone. In 1988 Michelle Fine published her findings from a study of sex education in public schools in the United States. She found that while the warnings for girls are loud and clear, there is still no discourse of female sexual desire.

The authorized sexual discourses define what is safe, what is taboo, and what will be silenced. This discourse of sexuality mis-educates adolescent women. What results is a discourse of sexuality based on the male in search of desire and the female in search of protection. The open, coed sexuality discussions so many fought for in the 1970s have been appropriated as a forum for the primacy of male heterosexuality and the preservation of female victimization. (40)

In June of 1995, Tamsin Wilson reported on a comparative study of safer sex materials available in Britain:

[The study] reveals that gay men are offered material that represents safer sex as fun, highly erotic, imaginative and pleasurable.... In utter contrast, safer sex materials for 'women' [sic] are devoid of any suggestion of erotic excitement, pleasure, desire or fun. They are weighed down with questions of family responsibility and often suggest that women (should) find sex unpleasurable, difficult or offensive. (18)

The two quotations from Fine and Wilson are describing institutionalized public discourses. Many adults are undoubtedly having conversations with young men and women about sexuality that are very different from the official line. But public discourse both reflects and shapes private conversation, and the extent to which a double sexual standard for men and women continues to be upheld is depressing. Even more depressing is to see sexuality defined predominantly in terms of disease and pregnancy — not as a complex set of desires and pleasures that we must become conscious of and careful about because it is so important in our lives, but as a force that must be controlled because it is dangerous to our health and future economic success.

It is enough to make me head straight back to the romance novels of my own adolescence in the early 1960s, which Christian-Smith found are similar to those of the 1980s. They, too, are a part of the public discourse, and far from satisfactory in their implications. The double standard is there, and they are rigidly heterosexual. Love may be a bargaining chip in the struggle for boys to get sex and girls to withhold it, or a misty veil that obscures desire. But they at least suggest that whatever is going on is more complicated and interesting than the warning on a cigarette package.

The three novels in my triptych support and challenge the dominant discourse on the sexuality of young women in different ways and to different degrees. *Make Lemonade* challenges only our social and literary anticipation of romance. It fits neatly into the dire warning category of authorized sex education as Fine describes it. *Dear Nobody* gives us the romance, but breaks the pattern when Helen ends the relationship with Chris because she is ready to be a mother but not to be a wife. Her decision is very much a reversal of the usual sequence. This novel also turns what begins as the expected disaster of unwanted pregnancy into an unexpected fulfilment.

January, February is by far the most challenging book of the three. It shows a fifteen-year-old girl preoccupied with sexual desire, and is frank about the physical aspects of her sexual response. It makes clear that she is unprepared to cope with her developing sexuality, and blames her mother and the larger society

for her lack of preparedness. It is factual about the penalty a young woman may have to pay for sexual activity, but allows her to refuse to have her life ruined by an accidental pregnancy. And with all that, the book is not didactic. It does not seem intended to do good by informing young readers. Like *Make Lemonade* and *Dear Nobody*, it is a fine novel. It is also a notable contribution to the almost-missing discourse of female adolescent desire.

NOTES

- 1 A fourth evaluation of this novel appeared in *CCL* in 1992, four years after *january, february* was published. It is not a review of the book as a new publication, but rather a very positive discussion of it in an article on children's books from Newfoundland (Brett 55). Here, too, the book is flagged as "for mature readers only."
- 2 My thanks to Margaret Mackey, who was instrumental in clarifying my thinking on this point.
- 3 The source is acknowledged only as "Willa Cather, 1876-1947."
- 4 Wolff is deliberately imprecise in locating her story. Readers are left to form visual images of the location and characters for themselves.

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