

# Let's (Not) Get It On:

## Girls and Sex in Young Adult Literature

Amanda M. MacGregor

A disturbing trend is apparent in recent young adult novels: Sex and sexuality are not being presented in a positive light. Adults who are invested in teenagers and their formation of identity should be concerned that young women are receiving negative and even scary messages about sex from these novels.

Although YA novels today are doing a respectable job in addressing crucial issues of protection and safer sex, they continue to slight the importance of depicting positive sexual experiences. Realistically, not every experience will be a positive one. Certainly there are risks, both emotional and physical, that come with the decision to have sex. Those concerns aside, these books are doing girls a disservice in their portrayal of sex. Examining eleven YA novels published in the past few years, I was surprised that contemporary books contain such old-fashioned ideas about girls and sex. Their overriding themes fall into three main categories: girls fending off boys' advances and girls lacking desire; sex with a punitive message; and implied sex, sex behind closed doors, and bad sex. A fourth category covers exceptions to these themes and shows other messages.

### Sexual Warfare

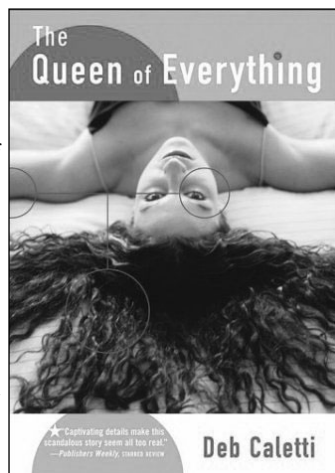
In most of these novels, young girls spend much of their time engaged in a war over sexual territory. Their male counterparts pressure them to be sexual, leaving the girls to fend off their advances. Sex is always on the minds of male characters, and they don't let the girls forget that. In Deb Caletti's **The Queen of Everything**, Jordan is in a relationship with Kale, a boy whom she finds quite flawed. Jordan says, "Kale brought me to the park and tried to convince me to have sex. I couldn't do it; down deep I thought I had better love Kale, and down deep I knew I was having trouble even liking him" (175). The word "convince" removes any trace of desire that Jordan might have had.

This same stock male character shows up in Sarah Dessen's **Someone Like You**. When Macon and Halley are alone in her house, Halley keeps stopping his advances, knowing it isn't right. She thinks about her ex-boyfriend: "Noah had never slid his hand further than my neck, had never found ingenious ways to get places I was trying zealously to guard" (181). Macon tells Halley, "I'm into being patient and waiting and all, but it's been almost three months now" (182).

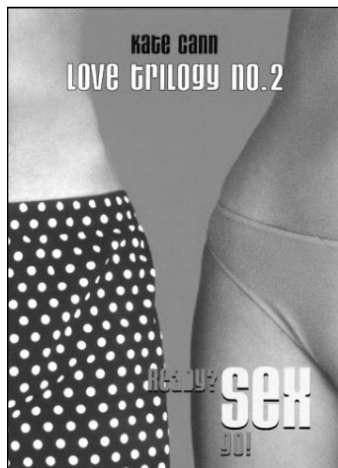
A big part of this boys-pressuring-girls scene involves guilt. The boy makes it clear to the girl that there is a time to have sex; most of these girls have held out beyond that time. Many of them apologize for not "giving in" to sex. Macon asks Halley to think about having sex with him. She says, "And I *did* think about it, all the time. But each time I was tempted, each time I wanted to give up my defense and pull back my troops, I thought of [my best friend] Scarlett" (182). Halley puts this struggle into military terms. For too many girls in YA novels, sex is a battle, a war, something that requires defensive strategy and savvy maneuverings. For

Halley and Macon, the pressure to have sex becomes all-consuming. Halley says, "We didn't even talk or laugh as much anymore, or even just play around. Everything had narrowed to just going to his house, parking out by the lake and battling for territory while arguing about trust and expectations" (209). Never mind what should be fun about a teenage romance—the fun is replaced with the full-time job of keeping a boy at bay.

The need to fend off a boy isn't always the overriding message, but it makes an appearance in almost every book examined. In one of the most didactic books, **If You Loved Me** by Marilyn Reynolds, Tyler uses this title line repeatedly on Lauren, who has vowed to remain a virgin until marriage. She suggests that there's nothing wrong with what they've been doing so far. He replies, "I don't think that's enough for me anymore. I don't want to pressure you. I'm just telling you how I feel. . . . If you loved me. . ." (66).



Later when they are at Tyler's house by themselves, Tyler starts to undress them both while Lauren keeps saying she isn't ready, she doesn't "want to do IT" (98).



Kate Cann sets the sexual battle lines immediately in the preface of *Sex*, book two of *The Love Trilogy* (*Ready, Sex, Go!*). Colette says, "We went through wordless negotiations in those seven weeks. He wanted to have sex right away. I didn't. Just kissing him was unnerving enough" (Preface). The girls in these books certainly are not stupid. They know that this pressure isn't a right or a necessary part of any relationship, and that boys' attitudes are askew when they think that such pressure is okay. Cann writes, "I turned and stared at him. I still couldn't get my mind around the fact that, for him, taking all your clothes off and making

love to someone for the first time was less embarrassing than talking" (3). Colette tells Art, "I mean—sex is mutual, or it should be anyway. Not something you spring on someone" (4). Yet their understanding that sex is mutual doesn't alleviate the pressure that these girls experience.

## Sexless Girls

The corollary to this category is that girls have no desire and boys *need* to pressure them in order for anything sexual to happen. When portrayed constantly as saying no, girls appear sexless. In *The Queen of Everything*, Jordan tells the reader about her ex-boyfriend. "I didn't want to have sex with Chuck. I don't know why. Sometimes I really am a closet prude like my mother accuses me of being" (121). The message is that a sixteen-year-old girl who doesn't want to have sex is a prude, even though Jordan and Chuck do everything but have sex. Jordan isn't sexless, but since she hasn't had sex yet, she's still seen (at least by boys) as a prude.

In *Someone Like You*, Halley says that she thinks about sex all the time. But the reader never witnesses her desire, only her fending off of Macon; this admittance is surprising news.

Hillary Frank's *Better Than Running at Night* presents a complicated relationship between Ellie and Nate, who move quickly from getting to know one another to having a sexual relationship. Ellie thinks, "This was the moment I'd wondered about and looked forward to for so long, but I'd imagined it unfolding differently. Slower. Plus, how could I say no at this point? He'd think I didn't like him. Or maybe he wouldn't like me anymore" (52). Rather than enjoy her first time having sex, Ellie feels that she is too far along to say no, implying that she would back out if she could. She has sex not from intense desire for Nate or even just for sex, but because when she is roped into it, she doesn't want him to stop liking her. Later when the same situation repeats, Ellie says, "He had brought protection, so there wasn't any logical reason to object" (74). Apparently, not wanting it to happen is not enough reason to say no. Ellie and the other girl characters allow themselves to be acted upon by boys rather than owning



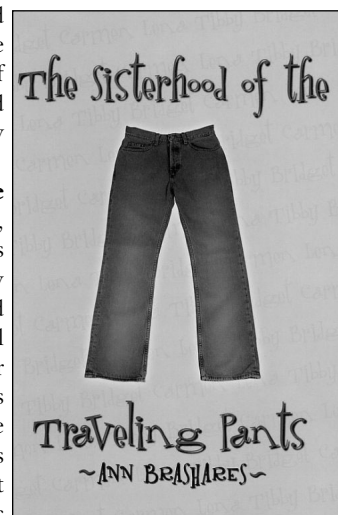
their own desire. Their stories tell us that sex is not something a girl should want to do; a girl gets coerced into it when she is worn down from a boy's constant pushing.

## Punishment for Sex

What happens in YA novels if a girl does desire to be sexual and therefore has sex? Odds are that she will be punished in some manner. Punishment ranges from the extreme (pregnancy or death) to the more plausible (the boy cheats on the girl and emotionally punishes her). Certainly pregnancy is a logical result of sex, but most YA novels convey that most sex *will* lead to pregnancy. Cann allows one of her characters in *Sex* to have sex without negative physical or emotional consequences, but doesn't let her best friend off the hook so easily. Val shows up at Colette's house to say, "I think I'm pregnant" (132). The scenes that follow show Val's distress as she tells her boyfriend and Colette's mother. The scenes at the abortion clinic are vividly depicted. If teenage girls are not already petrified about getting pregnant, Val's story tells them to be afraid.

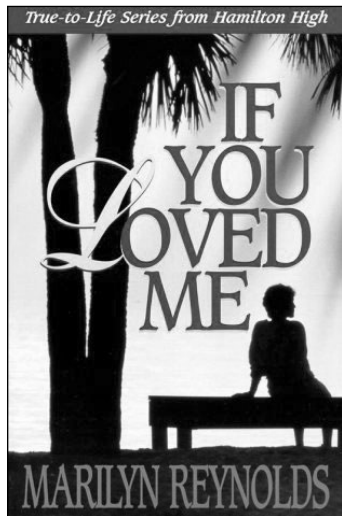
In Ann Brashares's *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, Bridget's punishment is not as tangible as Val's. Bridget aggressively pursues the object of her desire and nabs him, but is not ready to deal with the consequences of her behavior. Emotionally, Bridget moves too quickly, losing the confidence with which she generally approaches life. Brashares writes, "She hadn't imagined her encounter with Eric would be so . . . personal. She thought it would be a jaunt. An adventure to brag to her friends about. She expected to feel powerful. In the end she didn't. She felt like she'd scrubbed her heart with SOS pads" (216). Bridget holes up in her cabin at camp, sleeping too much and feeling sad. Although she doesn't get pregnant and ostensibly has sex on her own terms, Bridget still endures punishment.

*Someone Like You* carries a very punitive message. Having sex just one time, Scarlett not only gets pregnant, but the next day the boy dies. This smart young woman falls prey to ignorant notions of sex. Dessen writes, "I thought there was no way it could happen the first time" (96). Scarlett's situation is a constant reminder that sex can lead to unexpected, unwelcome results. Her friend Halley, as explained earlier, is waging her own battle over sex. Referring to her sexual episode as a "mistake," Scarlett tells Halley, "But I can't preach to you, because I was sure I was doing the right thing. I didn't know he'd be gone the next day. Like, *literally* gone. But you have to consider that" (186-87). There is no room in this novel for sex with a happy ending, sex with someone who might stick around and not leave or die. Scarlett might not be preaching, but Dessen certainly is. In the end, Halley *almost* has sex with Macon. Fittingly, her punishment is that she *almost* dies. All the way home, Halley



apologizes to Macon for not having sex, until angry Macon wrecks the car. Halley ends up in the hospital, effectively learning her lesson about sex.

Dessen's message that having a single sexual encounter can ruin your life is perpetuated in Reynolds's **If You Loved Me**. Lauren's best friend, Amber, has herpes. Amber says to Lauren, "But God,



why me? I only had sex once, and with a clean guy, too. At least, I thought he was a clean guy. And now I've got this herpes curse for the rest of my whole life. I should have stayed a virgin. Like you" (27). Just in case the reader isn't scared of getting a sexually transmitted infection, Reynolds makes sure to describe Amber's "oozing sores" repeatedly. Amber's punishment is clear-cut; Lauren's is more complex. Sure that she will not give in to Tyler's pressure to have sex and excluding any pleasing reason to have sex, Lauren says, "I want to stay a virgin. No way could I handle having a

baby yet. And no way could I handle an abortion. Or HIV, or herpes, or genital warts, or any of that stuff we hear about in health ed" (48). Reynolds shows her readers that the only things that can result from sex are negative. Lauren stays true to herself and doesn't give in. When she finds that Tyler is sleeping with another girl, Tyler explains that it's because he loves Lauren—he can get sex and not have to wear Lauren down or make her break her promise to herself. This complicated way of punishing Lauren for her choice weakens Reynolds's overall message never to have sex. The decision to have sex or not to have sex always has a natural consequence, but it is doubtful that in real life the results will always be this dire.

## Bad Sex, Hidden Sex

Another common occurrence for girls who have sex in these books is that the sex is either implied, behind closed doors, or just plain bad. In **The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants**, one can only assume that the big event that shakes Bridget up is sex. She and Eric meet one night; then there is a gap between their meeting and Bridget being alone, reflecting on what happened. "She had clung to him, wanting him, unsure, brazen, and afraid" (207). Bridget thinks that "the intimacy between them had been unfathomable" (207) and closes up after "her encounter" (216) with Eric. It seems clear that they had sex, but Brashares never says so, never shows the reader what happened. When Brashares writes, "Bridget wasn't sure if she was too young for him, but she knew she was too young for what she had done with him" (264), she comes close to admitting that what happened was indeed sex.

There is no question that Scarlett has sex in **Someone Like You**; her pregnancy leaves no room for speculation. Yet not until almost one hundred pages into the book does Scarlett discuss with Halley the fact that she had sex. Shocked, Halley asks if they used anything. Scarlett says, "Of course we did. But something happened, I don't know. It came off" (96). Beyond that exchange, the actual act of sex remains closed off from the reader, illuminated only in reference to the mistake that it was and that it caused.

When Kale and Jordan finally have sex in **The Queen of Everything**, it's awful. Instead of having sex because she wants to, Jordan has sex because she's angry, upset, and confused. When Kale begins to kiss Jordan, she can only think, "I wanted him off me" (261). Jordan lets Kale have his way with her, making it clear

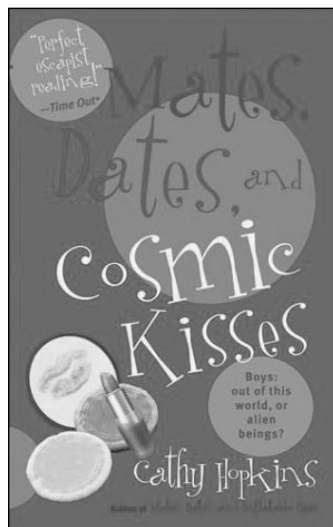
that it is not enjoyable: "He was hurting me, Jesus, but he didn't seem to notice. His face was sweaty. Turning red from somewhere inside the layers of tan. I turned my head. I didn't want to see him. I concentrated on the worn-down inner soles of someone else's sandals. Concentrated on being away from there until Kale moaned the moan of something ripping away and laid his full weight on top of me" (263).

Although the sex is right there for the reader to see, it's an unpleasant sight. All that guilt for something that was horrible anyway! Jordan says, "I wanted to cry. A feeling of loss and aloneness overtook me, and it seemed sudden and incurable and sad as a deadly disease" (265).

Ellie endures similarly unenjoyable sex in Frank's **Better Than Running at Night**, although she is more in control of the situation than Jordan. Frank writes, "The beginning part felt all right. But the farther we went, the more it seemed like we were two incompatible machines that someone had experimentally hooked together and then pushed go. And his machine was definitely winning. . . . It was over before I knew it" (52-53). That can hardly mean that the experience was particularly noteworthy for Ellie.

Where are girls in novels who have sex and enjoy it? Ellie, a complicated character, seems well on her way to learning what she enjoys, but as we see her, she is at Nate's mercy. Later in the novel, Ellie is using an anatomy book for her sketches. In it, she reads about orgasms. She says, "Of course I knew that guys climax. Duh, you couldn't miss it. But I have no recollection of them ever telling us in sex ed that girls do, too. I wondered if I had. I didn't think so" (139). The reader draws the conclusion that if Ellie is having sex and doesn't even know that girls can have orgasms, it's probably not that great for her. When authors either hide the act of

sex away behind closed doors or depict it in a negative light, they create an unpleasant and scary view of sex.



## The Rare Positive Messages

A final category of sexual messages in these books is less defined.

**Mates, Dates, and Cosmic Kisses** by Cathy Hopkins presents a message sorely lacking in the other books. Lucy and Izzie discuss what to do about the fact that Tony, Lucy's boyfriend, is moving faster than she would like. Instead of expending large amounts of energy to fend off his advances, the girls

decide the best course of action is to tell him to back off. Izzie says, "Take control. Dump *him*. He's making you feel bad. You should feel you trust Tony and you obviously don't. It should feel really special. You should be the one that chooses. You shouldn't feel forced into anything you don't want to do" (164). Yeah!

Izzie goes on to tell Lucy, "We should be the ones that choose or else we're all going to go through hell, up and down and round and round, trying to please boys but losing ourselves in the process" (165). Such an option is not offered to the other girls in these books. Rather than take control of the relationship or be forceful with how they feel about sex, they quietly suffer and remain submissive. Hopkins allows her characters to have a real sense of agency and lets her readers know that it's okay to make it clear that this sort of pressure is not acceptable.

In **Better Than Running at Night**, Ellie is not totally at the mercy of Nate's desires. Although many of their sexual encounters

leave the reader thinking that Ellie just wants them to be over, that's not always the case. Before they have sex, Ellie wonders "what would happen next time I saw him. I had finally gone beyond first base. Beyond second, too. I imagined what it might be like to go all the way with him" (42). Later, Ellie thinks, "As I drew I thought about Nate. About Nate in my bed" (43). Frank is not afraid to show that Ellie is a sexual being who has desires and who wonders about sex, which many of her contemporaries portrayed in these books don't do. Frank also doesn't keep the sexual act behind closed doors. From undressing each other to the pain Ellie experiences, the reader sees it all. This matter-of-fact approach is missing from nearly all the other books examined here. Frank's decision to show the sex and use words like "orgasm" seems bold by comparison.

The only other book in this group that addresses the physical aspects of sex is **The Love Trilogy: Sex**. Cann confronts her reader with overtly sexual scenes. She writes, "Then he moved between my legs, and began slowly pushing inside me, and I had no more thoughts. . . . He barely moved at first, just nudging a little further, a little deeper, while he buried his hands in my hair and our breathing sounded loud, so loud" (70). Colette's desire is obvious to the reader and she is even allowed to initiate sex. Cann writes, "I put my hands on his hips and pulled him toward me. I was surprised by how turned on I felt. Wasn't sex supposed to satisfy you? Weren't you supposed to space it out a bit?" (74-75). Both

Frank and Cann show their readers the pleasing side of sex as they present characters who deal with sex in honest, positive ways.

### If You're Female, Don't Initiate

One final message comes across in Cecily Von Ziegesar's *Gossip Girl* series, where one is left with the impression that if a girl initiates or desires sex, it won't happen—or if it does happen, it will be a miserable experience.

Fascinatingly, although the *Gossip Girl* books are supposedly the most racy, sexy books available for teens today, no one actually has sex in them.

Essentially, the whole first book, **You Know You Love Me**, is Blair's plan to have sex with her boyfriend. She is foiled at every turn, even when she greets her boyfriend, Nate, naked at her door. After more than one hundred pages of such scenes, Nate's conscience (which hasn't been around for the many months that he's been pressuring Blair to have sex) gets the better of him; he tells Blair that he had sex with her best friend two years ago. Blair is hurt and feels stupid for letting her desire for Nate show. In **All I Want is Everything**, the third book in the series, it's Vanessa who tries to initiate sex, only to be rejected. Von Ziegesar writes, "Briefly she considered asking him again if he wanted to try having sex, but she didn't want to ruin the moment. She'd just have to wait until he was ready, although with Dan that

might mean waiting until they were married or something" (26). When Vanessa takes a more direct approach, she is still rejected. "Vanessa was standing next to his bed wearing a black lace push-up bra and a pair of black lace short shorts that were both so flimsy and sheer, Dan could see *everything* through them" (117). Dan is appalled. However, by the end of the book, Dan seems more sure of his relationship with Vanessa. One gets the impression that they might be on their way to having sex sometime soon—but only now that Dan can initiate it.

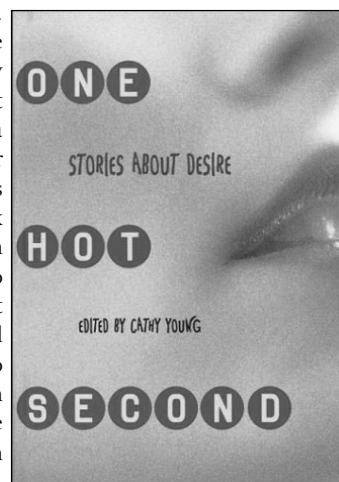
## Sex and Love Go Together

Although most of these books are unsatisfying and even unsettling in the messages they send to young women, they don't purport to be books about sex. Two recent anthologies do make this claim. In **Love & Sex: Ten Stories of Truth**, editor Michael Cart writes, "There are still too few works of fiction for young adults that deal artfully yet honestly with the complexities of human sexuality" (ix). This anthology attempts "a courageous, nonjudgmental commitment to telling the truth" (xii). This mission statement is admirable and for the most part, this anthology delivers. It's not as sexual as might be expected, but it certainly sends a less frightening message than other books do. One troublesome note is that almost all the stories link sex with love—not bad in itself when most people want sex and love to come together in their lives. Yet absent from this collection is any real sense of someone having sex just to experience sex. The romantic notion that sex is always linked with love will surely be shattered for teen readers as they go through life.

Like **Love & Sex, One Hot Second: Stories about Desire** is an anthology dedicated to pushing the envelope. Although sexual desire is at the heart of every story, their overall messages are not that revolutionary. Again, these stories rest on the constant intersection of sex and love, while an awful lot of dying, cheating, and lying goes on. Teenagers fall in love, act on their desires, and usually end up regretting what took place. Potentially, such compilations could be groundbreaking; in reality, their messages sound too similar to those elsewhere in young adult fiction.

### Who Cares about Negative Messages?

Why hasn't this negative spin on teenage girls and their sexuality generated much critical attention? An extensive search for current criticism of this message proves futile. Apparently, not many people are bothered by the pervasiveness of this negative message. Some criticism from ten or more years ago seems relevant today. In *Young Women and Their Dream Lovers: Sexuality in Adolescent Fiction*, Linda K. Christian-Smith studies young adult romance fiction published between 1942 and 1982. She concludes that the novels reveal a code of sexuality containing six key elements: "Romance is the only proper context for sexuality; sexuality is defined as heterosexuality; genital sexuality is reserved mostly for adults; girls respond to boys' sexual overtures but do not initiate any of their own; sexual definitions reside within a network of power based on romance and family; and resistance to genital practices is encouraged" (210). My own more recent explorations show that this code of sexuality still is upheld today, twenty years after Christian-Smith's study.



In *Sex in Children's Fiction: Freedom to Frighten?* Pamela D. Pollack calls for a more positive depiction of sex in young adult novels. This article appears in **Young Adult Literature: Background and Criticism**, a 1980 publication. More than twenty years later, too few have listened to Pollack's plea: "What is necessary is some notion that sex should be a satisfying experience shared by people who care about each other" (199). This message is still missing from most novels examined today. Pollack notes that young adult books characterize "boys as being at the mercy of their hormones and girls as being at the mercy of boys" (200). Sound familiar? Yet Pollack sees young adult literature as the perfect teaching ground for solid, reliable facts about sexuality: "Potentially, children's fiction dealing with sexual themes can answer the same questions as nonfiction on the topic, and do so in a more immediate and involving way" (203). As for the scare tactics and negative messages in young adult novels, she says, "There's no point in terrifying readers already fearful about sex and its consequences" (202). To read this criticism of books from the 1970s and realize how little has changed is sad indeed.

Some might argue that although these messages are troubling, they won't damage the young women who consume them. But Christian-Smith believes otherwise: "Young women readers are taught several things about sexuality through teen romance fiction. They are taught that women's sexuality is dangerous, that sexual desire must be properly channeled, and that the proper channel is heterosexual romance. . . . Teen romance novels are read during adolescence, when sexuality is of the utmost concern to young women. Although teen romance reading is a vehicle for making sense of their sexuality, it is deeply implicated in reconciling young women to traditional places in the world" (221-223).

When one looks carefully at what young women are being told today through the books they are reading, the message is clear. Individually, each book might feel flawed but probably won't seem to follow an agenda. When taken as a whole, these books represent a platform, perhaps an unconscious one. How can girls not be affected by the lessons taught here?

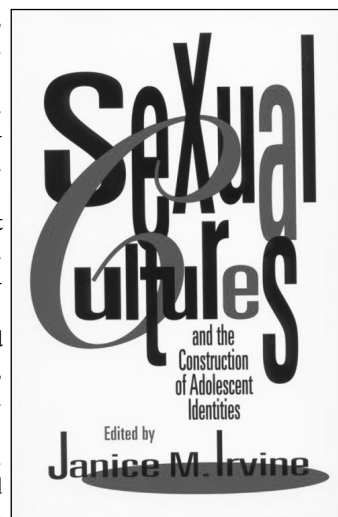
Writing about the lack of positive messages about sex in young adult books, Pollack says, "Whether this is caused by the inability of adult authors to deal with sexual concerns of the young in an honest and realistic manner . . . and/or by the continuing hang-ups of the adult society at large is not at issue here. What is at issue is that our young people are being shortchanged" (204). This indeed is the issue. Criticism from the late 1970s and early 1980s about the conservative approach taken with sex in young adult novels still holds up today. In other areas, these books have made great strides. They are more inclusive of a variety of races and of different sexualities, and they break new ground in form and content. Yet authors shy away from making sex a pleasurable and positive experience, especially for girls. Continually showing girls under pressure for sex, being punished for having sex, and hiding sex away behind closed doors does a disservice to young adults. Teenagers deserve to have the option of seeing positive

When taken as a whole, these books represent a platform, perhaps an unconscious one. How can girls not be affected by the lessons taught here?

representations of sex in the books that they are reading. Judging by what was available in 2003, it looks likely to be a long wait.

## Books Discussed

- Brashares, Ann. **The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants**. Delacorte, 2001. 304p. \$14.95. 0-385-72933-2. \$6.99 pb. 0-440-22970-7. **VOYA** October 2001.
- Caletti, Deb. **The Queen of Everything**. Simon Pulse/S & S, 2002. 384p. \$6.99 Trade pb. 0-7434-3684-9. **VOYA** February 2003.
- Cann, Kate. **The Love Trilogy: Sex**. HarperTempest, 2001, ©1997 U.K. 240p. \$6.95 Trade pb. 0-06-440870-1. **VOYA** October 2001.
- Christian-Smith, Linda K. *Young Women and Their Dream Lovers: Sexuality in Adolescent Fiction. Sexual Cultures and the Construction of Adolescent Identities*. Janice M. Irvine, Ed. Temple University Press, 1994. 336p. \$69.95. 1-56639-135-0. \$22.95 pb. 1-56639-136-9.
- Dessen, Sarah. **Someone Like You**. Viking, 1998. 272p. \$16.99. 0-670-87778-6. Puffin, 2000. \$5.99 Trade pb. 0-14-130269-0. **VOYA** August 1998.
- Frank, Hillary. **Better Than Running at Night**. Houghton Mifflin, 2002. 240p. \$17. 0-618-10439-9. \$10 Trade pb. 0-618-25073-5. **VOYA** February 2003.
- Hopkins, Cathy. **Mates, Dates, and Cosmic Kisses**. Simon Pulse/S & S, 2003. 208p. \$4.99 pb. 0-689-85545-1. **VOYA** April 2003.
- Love & Sex: Ten Stories of Truth**. Michael Cart, Ed. Simon and Schuster, 2001. 240p. \$18. 0-689-83203-6. \$7.99 Trade pb. 0-689-85668-7. **VOYA** June 2001.
- One Hot Second: Stories About Desire**. Cathy Young, Ed. Knopf, 2002. 224p. \$10.95. 0-375-81203-2. PLB \$12.99. 0-375-91203-7. **VOYA** June 2002.
- Pollack, Pamela D. *Sex in Children's Fiction: Freedom to Frighten? Young Adult Literature: Background and Criticism*. Millicent Lenz and Ramona M. Mahood, Eds. American Library Association, 1980. 524p. O.P.
- Reynolds, Marilyn. **If You Loved Me**. Morning Glory Press, 1999. 224p. \$8.95 Trade pb. 1-885356-55-2. **VOYA** February 2000.
- Von Ziegesar, Cecily. *Gossip Girl*. Little, Brown.
- You Know You Love Me**. 2002. 240p. \$8.99 Trade pb. 0-316-91148-8. **VOYA** June 2002.
- All I Want is Everything**. 2003. 224p. \$8.99 Trade pb. 0-316-91212-3.



**[Editor's Note:** For a summary of recent research on teens and sexual behavior, see "Young Adult Sexuality Research" in FYI on page 453.]

Amanda M. MacGregor received her M.A. in Children's Literature from Simmons College in August 2003. This article began as a research project for her course work. She discovered what teens read through her job at The Children's Book Shop in Brookline, Massachusetts. She lives in Boston.

