

## 25 YEARS OF ADOLESCENT LITERATURE

by Anna Stensland Lidberg

Looking back over twenty-five years of adolescent literature -- the period of the existence of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English -- we find profound changes have occurred. Bea Knodel in the Winter-Spring 1983 issue of the Minnesota English Journal recognizes one way in which adolescent literature has not really changed: few good books with significant young women characters are being written ("Still Far from Equal -- Young Women in Literature for Adolescents," pp. 1-5). Although the last decade has seen an increased number of adolescent books written by competent women authors -- Judy Blume, Lois Duncan, Paula Danziger, Sue Ellen Bridger, S. E. Hinton, Norma Klein, Sandra Scoppeton, Jeanette Eyerly, Judith Guest, Madeleine L'Engle, just to mention a few -- young women tend to be flat and one dimensional in their development. Our generation needs a modern Charlotte Bronte or Jane Austen. But in spite of this pattern we seem unable to break, other changes have occurred: the disappearance of the taboos against adolescent smoking, drinking, swearing and erotic love; the development of what was a budding science fiction genre among writers for adolescents in the early 1960's into an acceptance by teenagers of fantasy; and finally the evolving of some fantasy, along with the greater freedom to deal with sex, into all kinds of horror books.

In 1955 Richard Alm pointed out, "... most novelists present a sugar puff story of what adolescents should do and should believe rather than what adolescents may or will do and believe." ("The Glitter and the Gold," English Journal, September, 1955, pp. 315-322) In his 1964 edition of Literature Study in the High Schools, Dwight Burton wrote, "The 'seamy' side of life is generally avoided; erotic drives are ignored; smoking and drinking are seldom alluded to (adolescents, of course, never drink in the books); swearing and bad grammar are avoided -- these are some of the most obvious taboos." (p. 62) Seldom were adolescents' problems left unsolved at the end of the novel. The quality of the novel was judged primarily on the ease or

difficulty with which the young person solved the problems. Anne Emery, a prolific writer of this earlier time, wrote generally trite stories of upper-middle class life. In High Note, Low Note, Jean Burnaby befriends a girl, Kim Ballard, from a rather bohemian family. Jean's family show little sympathy for Kim, who finally does lead Jean astray, but not very seriously. In Beverly Cleary's Fifteen, a somewhat better and more realistic book, Jane Purdy knows immediately when Stan Crandall delivers horse meat for the pet dog to the home where she is babysitting that he is the boy for her. Typical of books of this time, Stan is a nice boy who brings Jane home at 10:30 p.m. and kisses her briefly after he has given her his identification bracelet, only to be interrupted by the family cat and Jane's father who both appear, unluckily for Jane and Stan, but luckily for the author and the adolescents' parents and teachers.

If we use G. Robert Carlsen's list "1982 Books for Young Adults Poll" (English Journal, January 1983, pp. 76-83) as an indication of the directions of adolescent literature, we find that the list still does have some of the trite girl romances, such as Rosemary Vernon's The Popularity Plan. Shy Fannie has so much difficulty talking to boys that her friends set up a plan to make her one of the most popular girls in school, until Fannie herself decides that Ronnie, a quiet and serious art student, is the boy she wants. Young and immature adolescent girls will probably always read and love this kind of book.

But more typical is The Proposal by Karen Ray in which Sarah's unwanted pregnancy results in Jim's determination that she should have an abortion and finally Sarah's decision, when Jim's proposal finally comes, that she does not want to marry him. Although in some ways Sarah is close to the modern young woman, in that she is training to be an engineer, something her mother cannot quite understand, her spunkiness appears only near the end of the story in a rather unrealistic scene. During the earlier parts of the book she has demonstrated traditional attitudes of allowing Jim to take the leadership in decision making, even when her own body and future are at stake. But

sex, abortion and birth control devices are discussed openly. Another story of young love from Carlsen's 1982 list is Ilse Koehn's Tilla, which takes place in Germany during World War II. When Tilla finds that her mother and younger brother are dead and her home destroyed from bombing, she joins forces with Rolf, a disillusioned member of the Hitler Youth Corps on the journey to Berlin to find remaining family members. Because of the dangers they face, they sleep together and learn to love while they endure the horrors of war. Adolescent girls taking the pill and sleeping with young boys is no longer shocking to the reader.

Adventure and mystery have always been a large part of adolescent reading. Certain classics, such as Treasure Island, Ivanhoe and The Tale of Two Cities were chosen for classroom study originally because they were good adventure stories. In 1964 Burton was recommending sea stories, such as Kipling's Captains Courageous and Jack London's The Sea Wolf; westerns like Jack Schaefer's Shane and Conrad Richter's The Sea of Grass; and war stories like Michener's The Bridges of Toko-Ri and John Hersey's A Bell for Adano. Commenting on adventure, Burton wrote that selections of science fiction had begun to appear in junior and senior high school anthologies and that perhaps it was "a respectable form of fantasy." But, he goes on to say, "Fairytales, magic carpets and jimm are not for adolescents." (p.47)

But then students discovered J.R.R. Tolkien's The Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings trilogy. Suddenly adolescents were transporting themselves to Middle-earth, accepting the existence of little people smaller than dwarves called hobbits and fighting the great War of the Ring over good and evil. Some of these adolescents also became fascinated by the fantasies of the mind found in the novels of Herman Hesse, whose young protagonist in Demian, Emil Sinclair, learns through seeing characters around him symbolically that he must face a world in which good and evil cannot be separated: Abraxas, who represents the god who combines god and devil, a young girl he calls Beatrice after Dante because she personifies for him the pure and the good; and Frau Eva, who is Mother Eve. Students followed the heroine of



Hannah Green's I Never Promised You a Rose Garden into the depths of a mental breakdown and out again as she created her own crazy world and characters.

Fantasy and science fiction are still popular among Carlsen's 1982 books. Monica Hughes' The Keeper of the Isis Light, a book unfortunately already out of print, tells of a young girl, Olwen, whose parents had been sent to the planet Isis to prepare for future colonizers from Earth. Because her parents were killed when she was very young, she was raised by the robot, Guardian. When Olwen is sixteen, living in peace on the beautiful planet, the first shipful of Earth people arrives. Olwen must learn to accept people who differ from her. In Steven Miller's beautifully illustrated fantasy, The Midnight Son, Phaedran, a child of light, sets out on an odyssey on the planet Fauna, searching for something which was lost and which will make him complete. Helping in his search are the beautiful Belisant, Keeper of Lost Beauty; her old uncle, Wyddan the Wise, and Corric, the King of Fauna. But Phaedran must explore alone the underground world of darkness, encountering the deadly Eel Monster and the inhuman Firedrake before he discovers the secret of the Midnight Sun.

In 1982 Carlsen finds that many adventure books seem to have turned to the horror of disturbed characters, unnatural animals and bizarre situations. Youths looking for thrills and suspense from fantasy games find the fantasy turning into realistically terrifying situations.

Stephen King's Cujo demonstrates terror when a beloved pet dog becomes rabid and traps a young mother and her four-year old son in their car. Another story of animals gone bad is John D. Healy's Klauen. A peaceful New Jersey seashore resort experiences calamity when ferocious over-sized cats begin to kill. Before the police investigation is over, the cats have created carnage among the pleasure-seekers and the residents. We begin to wonder what happened to modern animal books like Fred Gipson's Old Yeller, James Kjelgaard's Big Red, Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings' The Yearling, and Jack London's The Call of the Wild.

Stephen King's novella, "The Mist," illustrates the darker side of human nature when terror replaces human instincts among a group of people trapped in a super market by a fog bank which destroys everything in its way. Lois Duncan's Stranger with My Face illustrates further interest in the supernatural and ESP. Laurie is haunted by a feeling that someone is spying on her and that someone has been in her room when she wasn't home. Friends report they have seen her doing things she has never done, and her boyfriend claims he has seen her with another guy. She feels that she is going crazy. Then she discovers that she is an adopted child and that she has an identical twin living far away who is evil and who has learned astral projection, which means that she can project herself to Laurie's home and school. She can and does take Laurie's place in any situation, with evil results.

Instead of going to sea or to war vicariously, as a former generation of adolescents did by reading Nordhoff and Hall's Men Against the Sea or Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front, the modern generation is creating its own adventure through fantasy games. In Rona Jaffe's Mazes and Monsters, four college students escape the unhappiness of their real world by playing the game Mazes and Monsters in their dormitory rooms. But when they move the game to nearby caverns, which are declared off-limits because a former student was lost there, the terror of their own mixed-up lives becomes all too real. Another book about games is one of the books Carlsen's students placed at the top of their list of good books for 1982: John Coyne's Hobgoblin. After his father died suddenly, Scott Gardiner must move with his mother to Flat Rock, where she has taken a job as an art historian cataloging the artifacts at Ballycastle, which was built by a wealthy Irishman. Scott, who had excelled at playing the game Hobgoblin at his private school, is encouraged to lead his classmates in playing the game at the castle during a Halloween party. The bizarre history of the castle is finally played out during their game in a tragedy involving Scott, his mother and some employees of the dead owner.

Books like Salinger's Catcher in the Rye, the anonymous Go Ask Alice and even Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones were shockers in their time for teachers, librarians and parents because of their vivid sex references and sometimes human depravity. They all demonstrated the loosening of the taboos and the horror of disturbed adolescent lives. But nothing before can approach the terror of Richard Lortz's Dracula's Children, a book on Carlsen's list. Five children, who because of poverty, incest, drugs and alcohol in their families, band together and live in Central Park like animals, preying first on a woman returning home alone and then on a man and his dog. Before the police can hunt them down like the animals they have become, the reader is shocked by descriptions of cannibalism.

That which is unexpected, discouraged or forbidden has always been fascinating to teenagers: sex outside of marriage, drugs, mental illness, incest, homosexuality, and danger of all kinds. As the taboos have been lifted and more adult books become available to teenagers, these topics have crept into books written by writers of adolescent books. The generation of youths which has available the sex stimulation of mass media, TV, video games and drugs has experienced almost everything. Writers must dig deeper and deeper to find situations which appeal. Fantasy is one area which offers the possibility of greater thrills and horror. Unfortunately, human degradation is another. Perhaps the terror and shock in some adolescent books are reaching the point that adolescents will be jolted into sanity.

For complete up-to-date information about the titles used in the article, consult the latest Books in Print.

#### OLDER BOOKS

Anonymous, Go Ask Alice.  
Cleary, Beverly, Fifteen.  
Dickens, Charles, The Tale of Two Cities.  
Emery, Ann, High Note, Low Note.

Gipson, Fred, Old Yeller.

Green, Hannah, I Never Promised You a Rose Garden.

Hersey, John, A Bell for Adano.

Head, Ann, Mr. and Mrs. Bo Jo Jones.

Hesse, Herman, Demian.

Kipling, Rudyard, Captains Courageous.

Kjelgaard, James, Big Red.

London, Jack, The Call of the Wild.

\_\_\_\_\_, The Sea Wolf.

Michener, James, The Bridges of Toko-Ri.

Nordhoff, Charles and James Hall, Men Against The Sea.

Rawlings, Marjorie Kinnan, The Yearling.

Remarque, Erich, All Quiet on the Western Front.

Richter, Conrad, The Sea of Grass.

Salinger, J. D. Catcher in the Rye.

Schaefer, Jack, Shane.

Scott, Walter, Ivanhoe.

Stevenson, Robert Louis, Treasure Island.

Tolkien, J.R.R. The Hobbit.

\_\_\_\_\_, Lord of the Rings.

#### BOOKS FROM "1982 BOOKS FOR YOUNG ADULT POLL"

Coyne, John, Hobgoblin.

Duncan, Lois, Stranger with My Face.

Healy, John D., Klauen.

Hughes, Monica, The Keeper of the Isis Light.

Jaffe, Rona, Mazes and Monsters.

King, Stephen, Cujo.

\_\_\_\_\_, "The Mist," from Dark Forces edited by Kirby McCauley.

Koehn, Ilse, Tilla.

Lortz, Richard, Dracula's Children.

Miller, Steven, The Midnight Son.

Ray, Karen, The Proposal.

Vernon, Rosemary, The Popularity Plan.