



Adult Books Teenagers Read

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Julia Eccleshare on the books that attract teens.

The jump from children's books to adult books is now increasingly enabled by 'crossover' titles. But what sort of adult books attract teenage readers and why? **Julia Eccleshare** explores.<!--break-->

If the notion that children's books can be 'crossover' fiction - ie read by all ages - is a relatively new one, the idea that adult books can - and moreover should - be read by children is ages old. In fact, the idea of a separate teenage literature, though first put forward by the educationalist Sarah Trimmer in 1802 (she defined 'young adulthood' as the years between 14 and 21), only really took hold in the 1960s when being a teenager became defined as a time of separation from both childhood and full adulthood in behaviour, taste and, above all, consumer spending.

To meet the new demand for teen titles, British publishers began to publish first liberal Swedish imports such as Gunnel Beckman's **Mia** which were soon followed by American and even home grown 'daring' teenage novels such as Judy Blume's **Forever**, Honor Arundel's **The Longest Weekend**, K M Peyton's 'Pennington' series and Aidan Chambers' **Breaktime**.

But for teenagers novels such as these were only ever a stopgap before moving onto adult literature, making the jump from children's books to adult reading seem easier. 'Teen' books were tailored to their audience: fashioned and intended to deal with much the same matters as many adult books - most notably relationships and even sex - but in an 'appropriate' way. There was a kind of *cordon sanitaire* which controlled the risks. Perhaps only Melvin Burgess's **Junk** has truly broken out - though even that quickly became a stepping stone to Irvine Welsh's **Trainspotting** which adolescents embraced wholeheartedly, despite the qualms of their parents.

These books were useful, certainly, but not the same as adult books and especially the kind of adult books that teenagers most like to read.

What do teenagers read?

So what do teenagers read and why? Interestingly, despite changing fashions and the perception that 'teenagers are so different nowadays', the reasons that teenagers enjoy reading adult books have remained remarkably constant. Not only that, but even some of the titles have remained the same.

Though often depicted as demons of destruction and revolt, teenagers are people, too and their prime motive for reading is to be entertained and/or informed. They read to find out about what matters to them and changes in their reading tastes mark the shift from childhood perceptions and interests to adult ones. In his recent book, **The Child that Books Built** [see review on p18], Francis Spufford describes some of the changes that occur in the move from children's to adult books in the following way: 'Fiction recomplicates itself for you: you step up a whole level of complexity. Suddenly you are surrounded anew by difficulties and riches commensurate with your state of mind. From an exhausted territory, you have come to an unexplored one, where manners and conventions are all to find, just like the rules of your

own new existence in your own new lurch-prone adolescent body.?

But the shift is not perfect or complete which is why only some adult books appeal. And this is where teenagers become a particular category. The immediacy of what matters to them is different from what matters to the child they have left behind or the adult they will become.

Sexual knowledge and romance

The easiest shift to chart is the need for greater sexual knowledge. The one governing reason why teenagers once read **Fanny Hill**, **Lady Chatterley's Lover** or even **Lolita** so eagerly was simply the sex. Now, though there are still remarkably few children's books which include even mildly explicit sex, every aspect of sex is on display in every other medium. But blatant display is different from the hot heat that print can give, so maybe reading about sex ? especially as it can be done privately ? remains an important consideration.

But, even more than sex, adult books provide romance. For those who like the predictable and don't mind the stereotyping of women, Georgette Heyer, Catherine Cookson and more recently Jilly Cooper fulfil that need. For older and more sophisticated readers, the nineteenth-century classics **Jane Eyre** and **Wuthering Heights** (though I defy most teenagers to have full understanding of what was going on in these two, given the need to know more about jealousy than one hopes most teenagers will) mark the transition into adult readers. Jane Austen's **Pride and Prejudice** with all its delicious irony ? something almost entirely lacking in children's books ? still inspires huge affection in teenagers who identify with the jigs and reels of the formal courtship of the day. From the early twentieth century, Daphne du Maurier's **Rebecca** stands out as an example of romance blended with mystery and malevolence that seems to touch adolescents deeply.

Yearning, that state of longing and being ?in between?, still seems as prevalent in teenagers as when Carson McCullers captured it so accurately in **The Member of the Wedding** in which the motivation of the adult world is only partly understood and decoded. Before her, L P Hartley wrote with the same half-informed perspective in **The Go-Between** while most recently, Ian McEwan's **Atonement**, the story of how 13-year-old Briony Tallis misreads the behaviour of the adults around her and so sets off a chain of disastrous events, captures the same mood.

In contrast, for those who prefer a more up-front view of life, the burgeoning ?chick lit? field led by Helen Fielding's **Bridget Jones's Diary** and Arabella Weir's **Does My Bum Look Big in This?** gives an up-to-the-minute view of how life might be giving ?guidance? ? or what to avoid, depending on your inclination.

Male role models

Contemporary male role models are harder to find. Alex Garland's **The Beach** celebrates the appeal of the travelling culture with its largely hedonist values. Nick Hornby offers much more, giving about the best young male characters in his novels **Fever Pitch**, **High Fidelity** and **About a Boy** which capture various aspects of masculinity in a responsible and thoughtful way.

Me and not-me

Developmentally, as readers, teenagers are able to think about other people's motives and aspirations ? to move from thinking about ?me? to ?outside me? and even teenagers are not so self-centred that they only want to read about themselves and their own preoccupations. Now, and always, teenagers also have interests far beyond sex and romance. GCSE examiners are quick to identify the kind of literature that appeals. The repeated appearance of both Harper Lee's **To Kill a Mockingbird** with its theme of small town racial prejudice and Atticus's fight for justice which teenagers find inspiring and William Golding's **Lord of the Flies** which explores what happens when teenagers are unsupervised by adults, indicates that justice ? however that may be achieved ? is an important preoccupation of the age group.

And beyond the particular, socially aware teenagers have a strong sense of the ills of the world. Issues of poverty, race and social exclusion appeal again and again. Classics of the American depression such John Steinbeck's **Of Mice and Men**

, political satires such as George Orwell's **Nineteen Eighty-Four**, memoirs of growing up poor in Liverpool in the depressions as in Helen Forrester's **Twopence to Cross the Mersey** or growing up in the face of racial prejudice as in Alice Walker's **The Color Purple** ? all of these, though written for adults, appeal to teenagers curious about other childhoods at other times and how individuals came through them.

In a world of instant gratification and immediacy, adult books such as these provide teenagers with a slower and calmer world; a world in which the hectic condition of teenage is considered from the perspective of having passed it. By this means it is modified and refracted making it no less intense but just a little bit more controlled. Teenagers like to read the adult books that understand their urgency and help them to make something constructive of it.

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