

Young Adult Novel: The Bane of American Gay Fiction?

Roman Trušník

Abstract

This article focuses on the confusion surrounding adult and young adult gay (male) fiction published in America since the late 1960s. This confusion is widespread and has resulted in some notable misunderstandings among both critics and readers. Based on examples taken from coming-out novels, an attempt is made to identify and distinguish young adult (YA) novels using textual criteria rather than publishers' practices and policies.

Keywords: American literature, homosexuality, gay literature, coming out, young adult novels, adult novels

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Any emerging literature dealing with issues of minorities faces the question of the relationship between its literary quality, however vaguely defined, and its social relevance. American gay literature is hardly an exception in this respect. Because gays and lesbians form their identity during the process of coming out (i.e., coming to terms with their sexual orientation), coming out becomes the quintessential theme permeating in one form or another virtually all gay literature. As Robert Friedman notes, "our coming-out stories are our creation myths, the places in our life-narratives where we begin re-inventing ourselves as modern homosexuals" (Saks and Curtis 33). Due to the omnipresence of coming out as a theme in gay literature and the fact that coming out usually takes place during the teenage years, many commentators have wrongly concluded that gay literature should primarily cater to the needs of teenagers.

Quite a few gay novels have been condemned as reading for teenagers, implying inferior literary quality, and this has caused a lot of bad blood among critics, reviewers, authors, as well as readers. The source of the great confusion is obvious: these critics and readers (and sometimes authors as well) are too tightly confined to the field of adult literature and seem to be completely unaware that teenage (or, in the United States, young adult) literature constitutes an independent category, with its own characteristics, features, and development. Indeed, if a young adult novel is judged as an adult title, more often than not it will be judged inferior. On the other hand, expecting all gay literature to be "suitable" for teenagers would lead to conclusions equally absurd.

Such misunderstanding of the goals and forms of gay literature can be best observed in David Leavitt's criticism of Andrew Holleran's *Dancer from the Dance* (1978), a cult novel in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Holleran's novel is set primarily in the New York gay ghetto of the 1970s, and it documents the delayed coming out of Anthony Malone, who comes to New York as a virgin at the end of the 1960s at the age of thirty, his total immersion into the homosexual ghetto, and, in 1977, his attempt to escape New York at any cost.

Despite its importance in the history of gay literature, *Dancer from the Dance* has not always been accepted positively. David Leavitt viewed the novel from the perspective of a young gay man going through his coming out; when he confided to a twenty-one-year-old friend of his that in his introduction to *The Penguin Book of Gay Short Stories* (1994) he was

planning to take on some sacred cows . . . —most notably *Dancer from the Dance*—his response was swift and unhesitant: “Thank God someone’s doing it,” he said; “it’s the first gay book most young American gay men read, and I can’t think of another that’s done as much damage.” (xix)

Leavitt’s criticism was, among many others, repudiated by David Bergman in *The Violet Hour: The Violet Quill and the Making of Gay Culture* (2004). According to Bergman, Leavitt requires literature to be a guide to young men going through their own coming out but this requirement is immature and shows a misunderstanding of the goals of gay literature. Bergman succinctly dismisses Leavitt’s objections in the following words: “Criticizing *Dancer from the Dance* as unsuitable for those coming out is like damning James Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a terrible guidebook for the Dublin tourist” (23).

Leavitt’s condemnation of *Dancer from the Dance* should not be wholly ignored. As I have shown elsewhere, Leavitt’s critique epitomizes the viewpoint of his generation, growing up in the age of AIDS, from whose perspective a description of Manhattan of the late 1970s as “a decadent, sex-soaked, drunken, clothes-conscious orgy of a culture” (Preface to *Penguin Book*, xvi) is indeed accurate. Furthermore, what Leavitt understood quite well was the fact that young readers do have specific needs which *Dancer from the Dance* could hardly fulfill. As Leavitt confesses, he tried to address these needs in his first novel, *The Lost Language of Cranes* (1986), which he wrote in order “to fill a gap: to provide for young readers the very book that [he] never found on the shelf in the gay section of [his] local bookstore, back in the days when the gay section of [his] local bookstore consisted of the collected works of Gordon Merrick” (Preface to *Lost Language*, xiii).

Paradoxically, *The Lost Language of Cranes* did not become such a novel. Both men coming to terms with their homosexuality in the novel are adults and are thus rather distanced from the young readers Leavitt tried to reach. However, the fact that both *Dancer from the Dance* and *The Lost Language of Cranes* are coming-out novels once again testifies to the importance of this experience in the life of any homosexual person. And it is coming-out novels that are largely responsible for the confusion in the goals of gay literature and that contest the border between young-adult and adult literature.

What is typical in the Leavitt-Bergman exchange is that it took place in the context of adult literature, and both authors seemed to be unaware of the very existence of young adult literature and its features. Moreover, Leavitt was not the first author who realized the specific needs of young readers. American young adult literature appeared after the Civil War as a category of books aimed at readers who are no longer children and are not yet adults. Michael Cart, for example, considers Jo, Beth, Meg, and Amy March “America’s first ‘official’ young adults,” making Louise May Alcott’s *Little Women* (1868) the first young adult title (*From Romance* 4). While fiction for young adults has appeared since then, greater production of books focused on teenage readers was initiated by the librarians in the late 1960s. Forty years ago, 1969 marks the appearance of the first young adult title dealing with homosexuality, John Donovan’s *I’ll Get There, It Better Be Worth the Trip*.

The role of librarians and their endeavor to cater to the needs of their young patrons is exemplified in the most comprehensive treatment of YA gay literature to date, *The Heart Has Its Reasons: Young Adult Literature with Gay/Lesbian/Queer Content, 1969–2004* (2006), which was co-authored by a librarian turned university professor, Christine A. Jenkins, and a literary journalist and editor, Michael Cart. At the time of publication, Cart was president of the Assembly on Adolescent Literature (ALAN) of the National Council of Teachers and past president of the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) of the American Library Association.

Cart and Jenkins define young adult literature as “books that are published for readers age twelve to eighteen, have a young adult protagonist, are told from a young adult perspective,

and feature coming-of-age or other issues and concerns of interest to YAs” (1). The monograph is a synthesis of the authors’ research published previously and, in addition to a discussion of the development of YA, it provides an exhaustive annotated list of all YA titles with queer (i.e., gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender) content published in the thirty-five years following the publication of Donovan’s book.

While the authors repeatedly emphasize that young adult readers had always adopted certain adult titles as their own, a distinction between young adult and adult titles is preserved until the end of 1990s when “crossover titles” started to emerge. These books are called “crossover,” because “they crossed over the traditional boundary that had separated YA and adult readerships” (129). They also note that attempts started in the nineties “to expand the retail market for YA books by publishing titles that appeal to readers as old as twenty-four and twenty five” (129). An early example of this trend is Michael Cart’s *My Father’s Scar* (1996), which was first published as a YA title in the Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers series, only to be reprinted two years later as an adult title by St. Martin’s Press.

Given the exhaustiveness of Cart’s and Jenkins’s list, the absence of two titles one would not hesitate to call young adult – John Fox’s *The Boys on the Rock* (1984) and Larry Duplechan’s *Blackbird* (1986) – is surprising. This absence is even more puzzling in light of the facts that both are 1980s titles, pre-dating the crossover phenomenon, and both were published by St. Martin’s Press. This seems to suggest, first, that “young adult fiction” is actually only a label and, second, that from the point of view of YA literature, being published by St. Martin’s Press is a stigma. This is confirmed by the cataloguing practice of circulating libraries: both the Boston Public Library and New York Public Library list these obviously YA novels published by St. Martin’s Press as adult fiction while similar books published by other publishers are listed as young adult titles.

While editorial policies of various publishers are certainly interesting and would constitute a subject for another study, this case emphasizes a need to identify young adult titles purely on the basis of the text, regardless of the publisher. This need for criteria that help to distinguish young adult and adult novels is (or should be) felt by anyone conducting research into gay fiction in order to avoid embarrassing misinterpretations of novels, when young adult titles are taken for adult ones, or vice versa.

An interesting case of this confusion of terms can be found in Gregory Woods’s authoritative *A History of Gay Literature: The Male Tradition* (1998) when the author comments on the 1970s coming-out novels in the following way:

The coming-out novel, in particular, whether lesbian or gay, soon came to rely on stock characters whose individuality was secondary to their social role. A prominent example in gay men’s fiction is the unsympathetic, macho elder brother who eventually marries and has kids. Fathers were often similarly simplistic caricatures: they beat their wives, they drank, they talked about ball games and they despised their pansy sons. The son himself, the central character, was almost invariably good looking.

One began to think that gay fiction’s only purpose was to serve adolescent readers, gently guiding them towards uncomplicated bliss in the arms of their first boyfriend. Far more novels were substantively set in schools and colleges than in the adult workplace. Some writers like David Rees in Britain wrote as much ‘teenage’ as ‘adult’ fiction, and it was generally difficult to tell the difference between the two. Indeed, I am inclined to suggest that the coming-out novel was always teenage fiction, in terms of its ideal readership as well as its central theme. (342)

First of all, the suggestion that the coming-out novel was always teenage fiction (Woods, as a Briton, uses the term “teenage fiction,” rather than “young adult fiction” preferred in the United States) is clearly repudiated both by Holleran’s and Leavitt’s novels. Moreover, the

mention of change of setting to schools and colleges advances doubts about what kind of fiction Woods actually comments on. Yet, Woods's remarks are useful in pointing out that in distinguishing YA and adult titles, it is necessary to delineate YA fiction more formally than Carter and Jenkins do. Only brief comments on narratological aspects of YA fiction are scattered throughout Carter's and Jenkins's text; a large part of their discussion is more devoted to identifying changes in attitudes to homosexuality, and to identifying cases of defamiliarization on the thematic level by pinpointing new themes.

While ways of portraying gays and lesbians in YA fiction have changed (and sometimes have changed considerably) in the last forty years, these developments parallel similar changes in the development of adult fiction, with some notable exceptions. In some rare cases YA fiction was even more progressive than adult titles: while David Bergman contemplates if the first AIDS novel in the US was Christopher Davis's *Valley of the Shadow* (1988) or Robert Ferro's *Second Son* (1988) (228–29), he ignores the fact that the first AIDS novel – M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites* – was published two years before as a YA novel. This fact is only further proof of critics' insufficient awareness of YA literature.

In their definition of YA fiction, Cart and Jenkins, like Woods, point out that teenagers constitute ideal readers. However, the fact that a book is *published* for certain readers falls back on the role of publishers, which is a criterion we strive to exclude from further consideration. On the other hand, a necessary feature of a young adult novel is indeed the presence of a young adult protagonist, usually narrating the story in the first person, which also ensures the "young adult perspective." In connection with gay YA fiction, two points have to be made: the gay person coming out not only does not have to be the narrator, he does not even have to be young. An early and well-known example of the first case would be Sandra Scoppettone's *Trying Hard to Hear You* (1974), in which the narrator is a sixteen-year-old Camilla and it is her best friend Jeff who comes out in the novel. The second case can be observed in M. E. Kerr's *Night Kites*, in which it is the high-school protagonist's brother in his mid-twenties who is dealing with coming out and his impending death from AIDS.

While Cart calls the use of the first-person narrator "one of the most enduring characteristics of the young adult novel" (*From Romance* 18), the choice of the narrative situation is sometimes more sophisticated, especially in more recent fiction. Alex Sanchez in his "Rainbow Series" – *Rainbow Boys* (2001), *Rainbow High* (2003), and *Rainbow Road* (2005) – used three protagonists who rotate in their role of reflector-characters in the figural narrative situation (Franz Stanzel's term for narratives with a heterodiegetic narrator with an internal focalizer). However, this rotational technique had been quite popular in adult titles for some time. Paul Russell's coming-out novel, *The Coming Storm* (1999), utilizes this technique. Likewise, Michael Cunningham used four alternating narrators in his *A Home at the End of the World* (1990), yet in this case there is no strict regularity.

Sanchez's series is also a good example of the use of "stock characters whose individuality was secondary to their social role" (Woods 342). This is obvious in the choice of the three protagonists: a bisexual high-school athlete of Hispanic origin (Jason), a quiet nerd standing outside the crowd, yet a good sportsman (Kyle), and an archetypal flamboyant queen with dyed hair (Nelson). The choice is perceptibly kowtowing to the readers as almost any gay or bisexual reader can easily identify with one of the protagonists.

Another distinctive feature of YA fiction is its use of didactic elements. While in adult fiction any suggestion of didacticism is perceived as negative nowadays, in YA fiction it is quite common and it takes on many forms. After discovering that her best friend is gay, Cam, the narrator of Scoppettone's *Trying Hard to Hear You*, goes to buy Dr. David Reuben's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex, But Were Afraid to Ask* (1969), at that time a popular handbook on sex. However, the author openly criticizes the book, through

other characters, such as Cam's mother, a psychiatrist. The novel is thus used to explicitly educate the readers.

However, Cart and Jenkins are incorrect in arguing that didacticism was primarily a characteristic of the 1970s fiction (17). It is common in quite recent novels as well, and it sometimes goes out of hand, which is what happened in Sanchez's Rainbow series. While other books try to address some of the issues of interest to young readers, Sanchez tries to address them *all*. Not only the questions of safer sex are addressed (Nelson, a self-conscious gay, fails to use a condom in sex with a random man he met on the Internet), but the novel also attends to the issues of smoking, racial issues, the role of support groups, marginalization of gays, the herd behavior in American high schools, the influence of media and of political declarations, ghettoization, suicides of young gays, and other "queer" issues. Such overloading, albeit not atypical, goes so far that even reviewers commented on them. Nancy Garden in her review of *Rainbow High* says that "well-intentioned discussions about HIV occasionally seem more like thinly disguised warnings to young readers than like real conversations between friends" (Garden 31). Michael Cart comments on the didacticism of *Rainbow Road*: "Along the way, the young men encounter a variety of people and situations that occasionally seem clearly designed to educate the reader." The character of Nelson is described as "annoyingly predictable" (Cart, review 113).

From the narratological perspective, YA books prefer a linear narrative line – any experiments are seen in negative terms. As quoted above, Gregory Woods notes that, of the works of British author David Rees, it is difficult to say if his fiction is teenage fiction or adult fiction. Cart and Jenkins comment on Rees as well: they believe that the failure of his *In the Tent* (1979) in America was caused by a complex narrative technique – the novel is made of two parallel stories, one contemporary one, the other one set in 1646 (34). In American YA literature, deviations from linear narratives are only a relatively new invention, as can be observed in Michael Cart's *My Father's Scar*, in which a freshman at a university returns to his childhood and adolescence in a series of flashbacks. This relative complexity may be one of the reasons why the novel belongs to more sophisticated pieces of YA literature, and may be perceived as an early crossover title.

Another defining feature for young adult literature is a high-school (or college) setting, with all the aspects of American high-school life, such as sports, hanging out with the crowd, and the agony of all teenagers – being popular. Novels that have a young adult protagonist but are not set in these environments seem to be extremely rare. *Trying Hard to Hear You*, *Night Kites*, *My Father's Scar* and the *Rainbow* books are indeed all set in high schools or early in college.

The protagonists are not always handsome, as Woods claims, but they always tend to be highly intelligent and are usually well-read. YA novels are full of literary allusions: in Cart's *My Father's Scar* the protagonist, a bookworm, even spends a night with his literature professor, reportedly a descendant of Nathaniel Hawthorne himself. Scoppettone, in *Trying Hard to Hear You*, criticizes Dr. Reuben's book. *Trying Hard to Hear You* also features a theatrical school performance.

Even though YA novels explore the first relationships and first sexual experiences of the characters, the references to sex never go beyond "making out," "petting," or "necking," for obvious reasons. Anything else would disqualify the novel as YA fiction and would certainly warrant exclusion from YA collections in school and public libraries. This lack of sexual detail is pointed out by Cart and Jenkins, both (former) librarians (52).

Last but not least, the length and pace of YA adult novels are also quite important; YA novels tend to be between 150 and 250 pages long and are action-driven. Any philosophizing is perceived as negative and is limited to a few sentences or, at most, paragraphs, and the narrative quickly returns to action.

The use of the criteria listed above helps to safely distinguish between YA and adult novels so that it is not necessary to rely on the I-know-it-when-I-see-it approach, the usefulness of which has nevertheless been acknowledged by Michael Cart (*From Romance* 11). Most “classic” coming-out novels are easily identified as adult: Holleran’s *Dancer from the Dance* cannot be a YA novel because the protagonist is in his thirties, the novel is set in the New York gay ghetto rather than a high school or a college, it treats sex openly and from the narratologist point of view, it is a rather complex novel (actually a novel-within-a-novel, an embedded novel with an epistolary frame). Michael Cunningham’s *A World at the End of the World* is not a YA novel because high school times are covered only in a small part of the plot, the young adult perspective is missing (parts of the novel are narrated by Alice, the mother of one of the protagonists, and Clare, a woman in her late thirties). David Leavitt’s *The Lost Language of Cranes* is not a YA novel because the protagonists are in their twenties or fifties, and even though Owen, the older man going through his rather late coming out, is a high-school teacher, he seems to spend too much time in Manhattan porn theaters.

While these novels are easy to sort out, others may be more challenging. As noted above, novels published by St. Martin’s Press are a special case as the novels issued under St. Martin’s Stonewall Inn imprint are almost universally taken as adult books, which is not always true. John Fox’s *The Boys on the Rock* is a typical example of a YA book masked as an adult title. It includes all the typical features of YA fiction: a first-person teenage narrator, high-school setting, a swim team, the first relationship of the protagonist, even a death of a minor character, providing a titillating ending (there is a suggestion that the protagonist may be starting a relationship with the twin brother of the murdered boy). Furthermore, the length of 147 pages is quite convenient for YA readers.

A bit more complex case is Larry Duplechan’s *Blackbird*, described on the cover of the first paperback edition as “first black coming-out story” (James Baldwin would certainly be surprised). Again, the setting is high school, the protagonist, Johnnie Ray Rousseau, is literate and there are frequent allusions to Mart Crowley’s gay-themed play *The Boys in the Band* (1968). Johnnie Ray auditions unsuccessfully for the lead role in his drama class production of *Hooray for Love*. There are stereotypical unfriendly parents, there is even violence when Johnnie Ray’s best friend is caught in bed with another boy and is beaten up by his father. Even though the novel is more complex than other YA books due to its inclusion of race as another theme, it still relies heavily on the conventions of YA novels.

On the other hand, another Stonewall Inn book, Paul Russell’s *The Coming Storm*, which deals with the coming out of Noah, a troubled high school student in a private high school, and his relationship with one of his teachers (and at the same time revealing the school’s history of student-teacher relationships), could hardly be a YA novel, because for the most part, it lacks YA perspective. Russell narrates the story through four rotating reflector-characters and three of them are adults (Tracy Parker, the teacher in his mid-twenties who has a relationship with Noah, Louis, the principal of the school, and his wife, Claire). The description of the sexual part of the relation is also well beyond what is accepted in YA titles, and with its 371 pages the novel fails even the most primitive criterion, this being the length of a typical YA book.

One of the more challenging titles published by other houses would be Edmund White’s *A Boy’s Own Story* (1982). While the protagonist is a teenager and the story is narrated in the first person, it is obviously narrated by an older person who is capable of analytical reflections of past events and in this way it loses the YA perspective. Moreover, its treatment of teenage sexuality goes much beyond what would be acceptable in a YA book as White describes everything from masturbation, “cornholing” with a friend, to seducing an adult man. Despite

its reported popularity among teenagers, these features unambiguously classify the novel as an adult title.

This article summarizes and pinpoints the most frequent criteria for distinguishing between young adult and adult gay novels. There seem to be two types of criteria which do not always coincide. First of all, YA titles are identified based on extratextual issues, such as the publisher or imprint (Simon & Schuster for Young Adults signaling a YA title, St Martin’s Press and/or its Stonewall Inn Editions as an ostensible imprint for adult titles). As information from the publishers does not seem to be a reliable source, the distinction has to be made based on textual criteria. While this idea is not totally original or yet complete, such a distinction is important, as excluding YA novels from an analysis of adult titles helps to avoid any inappropriate evaluation of an independent category of young adult literature with its own history, development, and features. At the same time, it also helps to reduce the number of seemingly inferior adult gay novels.

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Address:

Tomas Bata University in Zlín
Department of English and American Studies
Faculty of Humanities
Mostní 5139
760 01 Zlín
Czech Republic
trusnik@fhs.utb.cz