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Narratives of Sexuality in the Lives of Young Women Readers

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Graduate Program in Library & Information Science
A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of
Philosophy
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Abstract

In recent years, research on adolescent sexuality in Young Adult (YA) Literature has included a discussion of its potential role in sex education. Based on the extensive yet problematic presentation of sexuality within these texts, it has gained both support and opposition. However, very few empirical studies have been done on how readers say YA Literature has informed their sexual lives. This thesis investigates how narratives of sexuality found within YA Literature may inform the sexual lives of young women readers by examining both readers' experiences and YA texts. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 11 female participants (aged 18 to 24) on their experiences reading sexually-themed YA Literature. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report themes found within the interview data. Second, a sample of YA texts of different genres and formats was closely read for presentations of adolescent sexuality. Textual analysis was used to analyse themes within four texts that were thematically significant in relation to readers' experiences. This study found that YA Literature has the potential to give a more nuanced portrayal of sexuality than traditional sex education, but it also lacks content that appeals to some readers' sexual curiosities and information needs. The readers reported that YA Literature informed them on many aspects of sexuality, including the biological, social, emotional, pleasurable, and painful aspects of sexual relationships. However, in many cases, these readers also "read up" or turned to online fiction to read more complex, erotic, or diverse stories. Along with these responses, the author uses YA texts to demonstrate how themes, tropes, and codes about sexuality may inform the sexual lives of young readers, sometimes in ways that were unexpected or have yet to be examined. The findings both support and refute previous studies on sexuality in YA Literature, revealing that although there are many positive qualities of YA Literature when informing young readers on sexuality, improvements need to be made in the areas of female character development, descriptive sex scenes, and positive representation of LGBTQ relationships. The author also makes recommendations for how librarians can help to improve access to sexually-themed materials for young people.

Summary for Lay Audience

In recent years, research on adolescent sexuality in Young Adult (YA) Literature has included a discussion of its potential role in sex education. Based on the extensive yet problematic presentation of sexuality within these texts, it has gained both support and opposition. However, very few studies have been done on how readers say YA Literature has informed their sexual lives. This thesis investigates how narratives of sexuality found within YA Literature may inform the sexual lives of young women readers by examining both readers' experiences and YA texts. First, interviews were conducted with 11 female participants (aged 18 to 24) on their experiences reading sexually-themed YA Literature. Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyse and report themes found within the interview data. Second, a sample of YA texts of different genres and formats was closely read for presentations of adolescent sexuality. Textual analysis was used to analyse themes within four texts that were thematically significant in relation to readers' experiences. This study found that YA Literature has the potential to give a more nuanced portrayal of sexuality than traditional sex education, but it also lacks content that appeals to some readers' sexual curiosities and information needs. The readers reported that YA Literature informed them on many aspects of sexuality, including the biological, social, emotional, pleasurable, and painful aspects of sexual relationships. However, in many cases, these readers also "read up" or turned to online fiction to read more complex, erotic, or diverse stories. Along with these responses, the author uses YA texts to demonstrate how themes, tropes, and codes about sexuality may inform the sexual lives of young readers, sometimes in ways that were unexpected or have yet to be examined. The findings both support and refute previous studies on sexuality in YA Literature, revealing that although there are many positive qualities of YA Literature when informing young readers on sexuality, improvements need to be made in the areas of female character development, descriptive sex scenes, and positive representation of LGBTQ relationships. The author also makes recommendations for how librarians can help to improve access to sexually-themed materials for young people.

Keywords

Reading, Everyday Life, Information Sources, Young Adult Literature, Sexuality, Public Libraries, Collection Development.

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|------|
| Abstract | ii |
| Acknowledgments..... | v |
| Table of Contents | vii |
| List of Tables | xii |
| List of Figures..... | xiii |
| List of Appendices | xiv |
| Chapter 1..... | 1 |
| 1 Introduction..... | 1 |
| 1.1 Positionality Statement | 4 |
| 1.2 An Initial Focus on Young Adult Literature..... | 7 |
| 1.3 Presenting a Solution | 11 |
| 1.4 The Current Definition of Young Adult Literature..... | 13 |
| 1.5 The Problem of Young Adult Literature..... | 15 |
| 1.6 Redefining Young Adult Literature | 18 |
| 1.7 An Example: <i>And Every Day Was Overcast</i> | 19 |
| 1.8 Re-Envisioning Young Adult Literature..... | 25 |
| 1.9 Conclusion | 27 |
| Chapter 2..... | 30 |
| 2 Conceptual Framework | 30 |
| 2.1 Sexuality and Critical Youth Studies..... | 30 |
| 2.2 Sex Education and the <i>Discourse of Desire</i> | 36 |
| 2.3 Sexuality in Young Adult Literature..... | 43 |
| 2.4 Reading Studies | 46 |
| 2.5 Library and Information Science | 52 |
| 2.6 Conclusion | 57 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| Chapter 3..... | 58 |
| 3 Methodology | 58 |
| 3.1 Approach to Inquiry | 58 |
| 3.2 Part One: Interviews with Young Women Readers | 63 |
| 3.2.1 Phenomenological In-Depth Interviews | 63 |
| 3.2.2 Interview Schedule..... | 65 |
| 3.2.3 The Interviewing Relationship: Reciprocity, Rapport and Reflexivity | 67 |
| 3.2.4 Sample..... | 71 |
| 3.2.5 Sampling Strategy | 75 |
| 3.2.6 Access and Recruitment..... | 76 |
| 3.2.7 Final Sample | 77 |
| 3.2.8 Ethical Issues | 78 |
| 3.2.9 Data Analysis | 81 |
| 3.2.10 Final Themes..... | 83 |
| 3.2.11 Additional Instruments..... | 84 |
| 3.3 Part Two: Textual Analysis of Sexually-Themed Young Adult Literature | 84 |
| 3.3.1 Sample of Texts | 85 |
| 3.3.2 Textual Analysis | 88 |
| 3.4 Limitations of the Project..... | 89 |
| 3.5 Conclusion | 93 |
| Chapter 4..... | 94 |
| 4 Reading the Efferent Romance | 94 |
| 4.1 Young Adult Efferent Romance | 95 |
| 4.1.1 Qualities of Efferent Romance..... | 95 |
| 4.1.2 Readers of Efferent Romance | 99 |
| 4.2 Sexual Relationships in Efferent Romance..... | 103 |

| | | |
|-----------|---|-----|
| 4.2.1 | <i>I Never</i> by Laura Hopper | 103 |
| 4.2.2 | Key Messages about Sexual Relationships in Efferent Romance | 105 |
| 4.3 | Developing Sexual Subjectivities Through Efferent Romance | 124 |
| 4.4 | Conclusion | 129 |
| Chapter 5 | | 132 |
| 5 | Reading Difficult Stories..... | 132 |
| 5.1 | Difficult Stories and Readers | 134 |
| 5.1.1 | What is a Difficult Story? | 134 |
| 5.1.2 | Readers of Difficult Stories | 135 |
| 5.2 | Young Adult Literature, the Realities of Risk, and the Difficulty of Desire | 140 |
| 5.2.1 | An Example: <i>The Diary of a Teenage Girl</i> by Phoebe Gloeckner | 140 |
| 5.2.2 | Encountering Sexual Realities for the First Time..... | 144 |
| 5.2.3 | The Difficulty of Desire..... | 148 |
| 5.2.4 | Interpreting Difficult Content | 153 |
| 5.3 | The “Fury of Affect”: Should Young People Read Difficult Stories?..... | 156 |
| 5.4 | Conclusion | 158 |
| Chapter 6 | | 161 |
| 6 | Reading the Erotic..... | 161 |
| 6.1 | Erotica and Readers | 162 |
| 6.1.1 | What is Erotica? | 162 |
| 6.1.2 | Readers Experiencing Pleasure..... | 164 |
| 6.2 | Young Adult Erotic Romance..... | 166 |
| 6.2.1 | <i>A Court of Thorns and Roses</i> by Sarah J. Maas..... | 167 |
| 6.2.2 | Sarah J. Maas | 169 |
| 6.2.3 | The Ideal Romance | 170 |
| 6.2.4 | Femininity in Romance..... | 171 |

| | | |
|----------------|--|-----|
| 6.2.5 | Masculinity in Romance | 175 |
| 6.2.6 | The Sex Scene..... | 177 |
| 6.2.7 | Romance and Violence | 181 |
| 6.2.8 | The Happy Ending | 187 |
| 6.3 | An Erotic Education..... | 190 |
| 6.3.1 | Supplying and Applying Fantasies | 191 |
| 6.3.2 | How Much Sex Do is Needed?..... | 193 |
| 6.4 | Conclusion | 196 |
| Chapter 7..... | | 199 |
| 7 | Reading for Alternatives | 199 |
| 7.1 | Online Amateur Fiction and Readers..... | 200 |
| 7.1.1 | The Online Difference: Fans, Sites, and Fanworks | 200 |
| 7.1.2 | Readers of Online Fiction | 206 |
| 7.2 | Young Adult Slash Fiction, Queer Relationships, and Teen Relationships | 209 |
| 7.2.1 | Young Adult Slash Fiction..... | 209 |
| 7.2.2 | Queer Relationships: Love is Possible in Any Form | 214 |
| 7.2.3 | Teen Relationships: Sex for the First Time | 221 |
| 7.2.4 | Comments Sections: Information, Community, and Queer Spaces..... | 227 |
| 7.3 | Ethnicity: An Alternative Unexplored..... | 230 |
| 7.4 | Conclusion | 232 |
| Chapter 8..... | | 236 |
| 8 | Conclusion | 236 |
| 8.1 | Summary of Key Findings | 236 |
| 8.1.1 | Summary of Chapters | 236 |
| 8.1.2 | Summary of Fiction as an Information Source on Sexuality..... | 239 |
| 8.2 | Transforming Young Adult Literature..... | 244 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| 8.3 Implications of the Project | 247 |
| 8.3.1 Implications for Library Practice | 247 |
| 8.3.2 Implications for Young Adult Writers | 252 |
| 8.3.3 Implications for Researchers of YA Literature and Teen Readers | 253 |
| 8.4 Conclusion to the Project | 254 |
| References | 257 |
| Appendices | 271 |
| Curriculum Vitae | 287 |

List of Tables

| | |
|--|----|
| <i>Table 1.</i> Demographic information on participants..... | 78 |
|--|----|

List of Figures

| | |
|--|-----|
| <i>Figure 1.</i> A sample of images from <i>The Diary of a Teenage Girl</i> (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 212, p. 236, p. 143, p. 79) | 132 |
| <i>Figure 2.</i> Minnie tells Monroe how she feels. (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 199)..... | 144 |
| <i>Figure 3.</i> The last time Minnie meets Monroe. (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 290)..... | 153 |

List of Appendices

| | |
|---|-----|
| Appendix A. Booklists..... | 271 |
| Appendix B. Recruitment Materials | 278 |
| Appendix C. Letter of Information | 280 |
| Appendix D. Interview Schedule | 284 |
| Appendix E. Research Ethics Board Approval Notice | 286 |

Chapter 1

1 Introduction

A lot of [YA books] are somebody's first gateway to understanding relationships. Sure there are relationships "on screen" or in person. But there's something about books. They give you the inner-workings of a character's mind in the way that TV shows and observing your parents don't really do.

Participant Kelly

In recent years, research on adolescent sexuality in Young Adult (YA) Literature has included a discussion of its potential role in sex education (Bittner, 2012; Gillis & Simpson, 2015; Pattee, 2006b; Kokkola, 2013). It has drawn both support and opposition, with the most critical of treatments asserting that a multitude of repressive strategies employed across most YA Literature renders it inadequate for this purpose. However, very few empirical studies have been done on how readers say YA Literature has informed their sexual lives. This thesis investigates the value and impact of sexually-themed YA Literature in the lives of young women readers. It is about how fictional narratives of sexuality have informed their lives: their relationships, actions, fantasies and sense of self. Specifically, it aims to examine, in-depth, how sexuality is presented in sexually-themed YA Literature and how readers may respond to and, in turn, incorporate the information they have gained into their everyday lives. Three research questions were asked to investigate this phenomenon and to relate the findings to library practice:

RQ 1: What are the experiences of young women who read sexually-themed Young Adult Literature and how might they be informed about relationships and sex when engaging with sexually-themed Young Adult Literature?

RQ 2: What narratives of sexuality are present in sexually-themed Young Adult Literature and how might these narratives potentially inform young women readers about relationships and sex?

RQ 3: How can the knowledge gained by this investigation directly inform and improve library collections and service practices?

The major theoretical underpinnings of this study come from the fields of Reading Studies, Sex Education, and Children's Literature. As this study is about young women readers in particular, many of these works also examine sexuality, education, and reading with young women and/or women as their subjects. Therefore, they provide a specialised framework for studying this group of readers by outlining the sexual, educational, and reading contexts that are unique to young women and women. Predominantly, this thesis contributes to a genealogy of research on YA Literature, such as the works of Linda Christian-Smith (1990), Roberta Seelinger Trites (2000), Amy Pattee (2006), and Lydia Kokkola (2013), that have closely examined sexuality in YA Literature. It also contributes to research on readers and reading such as the works of Louise Rosenblatt (1938, 1978), Janice Radway (1987), Catherine Ross (1999, 2000) and Paulette Rothbauer (2004a). These studies tend to highlight the experiences of readers in making meaning of texts, and they inform both my interview methodology and the analysis of the texts themselves. Seminal works from Sex Education provide a framework for analysing codes of sexuality found within sexually-themed fiction and evaluating texts as positive sources of information on sexuality. In particular, this study is informed by the research of Michelle Fine (1988), Deborah Tolman (2002), and Louisa Allen (2004) on the *discourse of desire*, which identifies the discourses of sexuality that either disenfranchise or empower young people (especially young women) as they learn about their sexuality. In addition, the work of Linda K. Christian-Smith (1990), Roberta S. Trites (2000), and Lydia Kokkola (2013) in the field of YA Literature studies provide this study with an approach to understanding sexuality in YA Literature that is situated within theories of childhood, adolescent sexuality, and gender. From a critical perspective, these works identify the existing patterns of power, repression, and socialisation found within sexually-themed YA Literature. Lastly, works in Library and Information Science, such as Amy Pattee's (2006b) article on sexually-explicit YA Literature, have helped to bridge a gap between Library and Information Science (LIS) and Children's Literature.

In this thesis, I take two approaches to answer my research questions: interviews with young women readers and the textual analysis of examples of YA Literature. Louise Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading emphasises the necessity of considering the author, text, and reader in understanding the experience of reading –

reading is an *event* where the interpretation of a text is wrought within a matrix of the author's words and the reader's own life experience. Therefore, two primary methods of data collection were used to study this topic. It includes responses from interviews that were conducted with 11 female participants between the ages of 18 and 24, which were analysed for major themes surrounding their reading experiences (including dimensions of reading such as reading motivations, interests, and practices). It also includes a textual analysis of four examples of YA Literature that correspond to the major themes identified in the interview data to exemplify the type of content that participants read. The texts are: *I Never* by Laura Hopper (2017), *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner (2002), *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas (2015), and *Helix* by Sara's Girl (2015).¹ In addition, I also analyse a text for this introductory chapter, *And Every Day Was Overcast* by Paul Kwiatkowski (2013).

This project is specifically about young women readers. As such, it examines their unique experiences with the literature that has often been written about and written for young women in particular. The young women who volunteered to participate in this study are diverse and unique in their own ways: they came from different ethnic backgrounds, had different kinds of sexual experiences, claimed varying sexual orientations, and read many different kinds of texts. One thing they did have in common was that they were passionate about reading stories about relationships and sex. In her manifesto *Uses of Literature* (2008) Rita Felski writes:

...one motive for reading is the hope of gaining a deeper sense of everyday experiences and the shape of social life. Literature's relationship to worldly knowledge is not only negative or adversarial; it can also expand, enlarge, or reorder our sense of how things are. (p. 83)

Through the voices of these young women readers, this study describes the value and impact of sexually-themed fiction and argues that although YA Literature is far from perfect, it has the potential to provide rich and varied reading experiences that contribute to young people's everyday sexual lives.

¹ A detailed description of the methodology used for this project can be found in Chapter 3 - Methodology.

1.1 Positionality Statement

One of my favourite stories that I like to tell people about my youth is that when I was a teen, I used to regularly skip class to go read books at the public library. This is, of course, ridiculous to me now. Who would skip school – something only “bad kids” do – to go read at the library – a place where only “good kids” go to? I feel like this story sums me up pretty well as a teen. I did many of the “bad” things teens are not supposed to – skipped school, got mediocre grades, went to parties, stole my parents’ homemade wine, dressed in all-black, had friends my mom did not like, and was sexually active. But I was also very interested in literature and it was this pursuit, not necessarily my formal education, which carried me through high school and into higher education. Now, I’m a fairly ordinary graduate student and I think that most people would assume I have always been studious, responsible, and productive – not exactly true. In order to better understand many of the viewpoints expressed in this thesis, it is essential to know about me as a person as well a researcher – it is undoubtedly informed by my own reading, life, and relationship experiences as a teen and an adult.

I grew in a quiet, middle-class neighbourhood in a suburban city in Greater Vancouver, Canada. I am of white-European heritage and I am predominantly heterosexual. White, middle-class, and heterosexual – I am the target audience for most YA Literature. Even still, YA Literature is often so homogenous that I rarely see my youth reflected in its pages. I would say the thing that struck me the most while reading for this project was how many YA novels feature the same kind of heroine: white, middle-class or upper-middle class, and embodying all the signs of good-citizenship – studiousness, lawfulness, inexperience/innocence, polite sociability, responsibility, and productivity. These characters are what Michael Cart (2007) describes as “cardboard characters who only skate across the surface of reality” (p. 19). My experiences as a teen were a lot more severe than the lives I continue to read about in popular YA Literature. Through word-of-mouth, the Internet, pornography, and, most of all, first-hand experiences, there was little mystery about sex, violence, drugs, alcohol, and delinquency for me as a teen. I do not believe this is an uncommon way of growing up. However, these topics are seldom addressed with complete honesty in YA Literature or they are depicted as strictly

dangerous. My experience as a teen is not everyone's, but it acts as a point of reference for me during this project when speaking on certain topics. My experience also helps me to remember that there are likely other teens out there who do not see themselves in YA Literature and feeling, quite frankly, Othered by it.

What my experiences as a teen meant for my reading at that time was that I was most drawn to the limitlessness and complexity of Adult Literature. What was I reading when throughout my adolescence? The first book I remember reading that addressed the topic of sexuality was *Are You There God It's Me Margaret* (1970) by Judy Blume. This text is not about sex, but the onset of puberty. I remember reading it and feeling like I was being exposed to some kind of secret knowledge. Nowhere had I ever heard or read anything that described the onset of puberty, and periods, in such personal detail. I was eleven or twelve at the time and was terrified and in anticipation of my own period. I felt unsettled about the knowledge I gained from that book. I was in conflict because I knew the topic was taboo, but I was also hungry for more. I did not just want to know about periods, I wanted to know about sex, love, and relationships. At around the age of twelve, I started to read novels voraciously. They were mostly Young Adult series such as romantic thrillers by Christopher Pike. I was also very into reading Fantasy novels, my favourite being *On Fortune's Wheel* (1990) by Cynthia Voigt. Also around this time the film adaptation of J.R.R Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954) was released and I consumed a great number of Adult fantasy series. Some of them contained vivid and violent depictions of sex.

Then when I was fifteen, I met a friend from Ottawa who was very different from me. He was studious, never went to parties, had never kissed, and read Classics instead of popular fiction. He suggested that I read, among other books, Leonard Cohen's novel *Beautiful Losers* (1966). To this day, this book is probably one of the strangest, most sexual, obscene, disturbing and structurally complicated books I have ever read. What I remember most from the book is that the main characters partake in an orgy with someone who seemed to be Adolf Hitler and then afterwards bathe in a bathtub full of soap made from human flesh. I thought it was really, really "fucked up" but I loved it. Like many teens, I also had a deep love of Jack Kerouac. The sheer level of hedonism in

Beatnik literature makes me wonder how books like *On the Road* (1957) have become a widely accepted teen read. Maybe it is cliché, but Kerouac instilled in me a great enthusiasm for travel, adventure, and freedom. Reading as widely as I did as a teen, especially Adult Literature, definitely gave me a more diverse perspective on sex, love, friendship, beauty, chaos, and darkness. And of course, reading Literature had taken such a profound role in my life that I chose to study it at university.

I have been working up to this project for a long time, but the majority of the work for this thesis was conducted when I was between 26 and 31 years old. During my undergraduate degree I studied English Literature. I was particularly drawn to literature about women's lives or conducting gendered analysis of texts. I did not turn my attention towards YA Literature until my Masters of Library and Information Science degree, where I discovered that YA Romance was rife with anti-feminist representations of young women. This, of course, had already been critiqued by scholars for decades. What interested me about that was how little narratives of sexuality had changed in this regard over the course of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. I have always been inclined to humanities-style research, but when I came back to school to do a PhD in LIS I began to view literature through the lens of information studies. It seems to me that when YA Literature researchers critically analyse YA Literature, the goal is to expose the messages that young people may or may not learn from and how these messages may affect their lives. In the context of LIS, the goal is the same, but the focus of research is not on the messages sent by a text but in the messages that are received by readers. I see Reading Studies research as a way of testing the potential effects of messages in YA Literature by asking readers about their experiences. I wanted to know about both the messages in the texts and how readers were informed by them. Under the direction of my supervisor, Dr. Paulette Rothbauer, I created a project that combines the analysis of the content of YA Literature with how readers experience this content. Combined in this way, I believe that a more complete picture is drawn in how young women readers are informed by YA Literature.

As an interdisciplinary project, this thesis will be both recognisable and foreign to readers from different fields of study. The humanities-style components of this research may be

subject to epistemological scepticism within LIS in particular. This thesis *is* an LIS project, but it is primarily meant to engage with the scholarship being done in YA Literature studies. Foremost, this thesis may contribute to developing theories of sexuality in YA Literature and also how it is analysed, critiqued, embraced, and valued. The information gathered here has relevance to other fields such as Sex Education and Library and Information Science due to its focus on sexuality, information, reading, literature, youth, intellectual freedom, and libraries. My basic assumption is that those reading this thesis will have an interest in sexuality in YA Literature and/or library engagement with youth. I approach this study as both a YA Literature scholar and a librarian. At times, I speak to both of these communities that I belong to throughout this thesis. I also speak as a woman reader – a reader of YA Literature, romance, and erotica – who is still learning about love, sex, care, desire, and pleasure. This thesis is, in many ways, made up of stories of reading. It is also generally meant for anyone who is interested in knowing more about their own stories of reading YA Literature.

1.2 An Initial Focus on Young Adult Literature

Beyond a brief summary of the entire project, the conceptual framework, and the methodology, I would like to open this thesis with a discussion on one of the subjects of this project: YA Literature. Over the course of this study, one of the most tumultuous tasks that I was faced with was defining what YA Literature is. From the earliest stages, I was in conflict over the differences and similarities between the texts that I knew were specifically marketed and classified as YA Literature and the books in my reading repertoire that I would consider YA but were not officially included in the YA canon². This was a real problem in multiple stages of this project because some of the sexually-themed texts about teens that I myself, as well as participants, read and discussed were technically classified as Adult Literature but could also be interpreted as YA Literature. In addition, some sexually-explicit texts, like online erotica, are treated as pornography (for adults) regardless of other genre markers like intended audience, theme, or

² Defined broadly as the entire scope of literature that has been widely accepted as Young Adult.

perspective. During interviews, participants also wanted to talk about the Adult Literature they had read as children, teens, and young adults because those experiences often shaped their sexually-themed reading practices and experiences. At first, this really concerned me; this project is about YA Literature, not Adult Literature, and this occasional shift in focus made responding to and analysing results more complicated. But one thing was clear, what was YA Literature and what was not became somewhat arbitrary within the reading practices of these young women. They wanted to talk about the sexually-themed literature that was important to them as teens and young adults. In response, I interpreted their experiences in relation to YA Literature. But what this ambiguity over genre and the variance in the age-range of texts read by teens and young adults really made me think about more and more was, what really constitutes YA Literature?

During interviews, there were apparent differences between participants on what they considered to be YA Literature. Some of the participants were themselves confused as to what YA Literature is and on more than one occasion participants, such as Scarlet, asked me to clarify with a definition. Conversely, some of them, such as Madeline, had a standard understanding of the genre based on how the texts were marketed or classified (*i.e.*, where they were located in the bookstore or library). But as participant Kelly noted, YA is a “vague” genre and the age range associated with YA is not necessarily accurate or consistent. She said, “...in reality most YA readers start when they turn age 10. 10 or 11 is when I started and when most people in my age range started reading YA”. In other cases, the standards of the genre seemed quite arbitrary to participants: if the story was about a teen and they read it and enjoyed it as a teen, it was YA Literature. For example, when I was interviewing Sarah, the fourth participant, I was completely unfamiliar with the texts she was reading, so I asked her to define the texts in terms of a teen or adult audience. The conversation went as follows:

Davin: So, these Japanese comics, they were specifically for teens would you say? Or was it more about adult relationships?

Sarah: Well, a lot of stories are in the school settings so I presume it's for teens. But then I bet because it's a same-sex relationship in the actual country the age range for reading it must have been much higher.

Sarah's comment about the discrepancy between who is the most logical audience and how this can be obscured by societal values concerning sex was something that I was also encountering while I was searching for texts to read for this project. There are relatively few YA novels that contain explicit sex, making locating them difficult, and in many cases, it was impossible to identify the level of sexual content or genre without reading the book first-hand. Reader reviews and metadata did not always present this information in enough accurate detail. For example, I found *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner lumped in with other YA-sounding books in a *Huffington Post* article entitled "8 Books That Don't Sugarcoat Teen Sexuality" (Crum, 2015) without any specification whether it was YA or not. Even though I would foremost consider this book YA, it is technically "American Literature"³ (*i.e.*, Adult), and it only seems to appear as YA in library catalogues as if by mistake. Not to mention that all of the *Harry Potter* fanfiction I read for this project came first with an explicit, on-page disclaimer that you must consent to read "adult" content to gain access to sexually-explicit stories. This was a pattern I saw while reading texts for this project – some of the texts I read that contained sexually-explicit content or had more complex narratives of sexuality, although about teens and were written in a teen voice, were technically categorised as Adult Literature. Other than differences in the level of detail in descriptions of sexual acts, vulgar language, and ambiguity in terms of "right" and "wrong", I could see very little difference between many official YA texts and some other texts about teens that are marketed or classified as Adult.

I was reluctant to make any concrete decision about what is definitely YA Literature and what is not until I found and read Paul Kwiatkowski's novel *And Every Day Was Overcast*, a semi-autobiographical novel about a teenage boy growing up in South Florida. This book was identified as sexually-explicit for me by *School Library Journal*, and was deemed by them as inappropriate for a teen audience even though the book does an extraordinary job of documenting the (at least partially factual) sexual realities of the teen protagonist. For most of this project, I read and selected texts for analysis that either

³ LCC number in the front pages is: PS3557.L635D5 2002

feature a female protagonist or are meant for a female audience because this project purposely focuses on young women as its subject.⁴ However, *And Every Day Was Overcast* is an important addition to this project, as there is really no other book that could take its place in this discussion because of the intensity of the content, its use of photographic images, and the autobiographical nature of the story. To me, this is a book that perfectly exemplifies and accentuates the dilemma of YA Literature/Adult Literature and sexual content. This book captures the lived experience of some – if not many – teens. In fact, its contents, although sometimes difficult to read, are very familiar to me because of my experiences as a teen. Despite its closeness to the “truth” of some teen lives, the type of content in this book is rarely made available to teens in YA fiction. This is what ultimately persuaded me to create and use a new definition of YA Literature for this project that would allow for more authentic narratives of teen sexuality to be included as YA Literature, but still ensure that the unique features of the genre that make it especially relevant to a teen audience were maintained.

For this project, redefining YA Literature as a genre was a necessary step in the research process and warrants a more extensive explanation here in this chapter. When it comes to highly sexual content in stories about teens, some texts (novels, graphic novels, comics, and online amateur fiction) have been defined as something other than YA because they are deemed inappropriate for or not especially relevant to a teen audience. This made only relying on how texts are marketed and classified unreliable criteria for selecting texts for this study and doing so would have severely limited the scope and richness of the texts under examination.

Within this project, I have chosen to identify YA Literature as: literature in any form that is “Written About Teens” and is “Written in a Teen Voice”. My main intention with using this definition is to start a process of distancing from the genre the idea that YA Literature is not just written *about* teens, but it is written *for* teens. In an afterward to

⁴ See Chapters 2 and 3 which discuss the *Discourse of Desire*

Breaktime (1978), author Aiden Chambers talks about the ground rules he sets for himself as a writer. He writes:

...I will not compromise with language or subject, just because some people regard them as “too difficult” or “too controversial” (that is, taboo) or too long or too anything...I will only write scenes for which I have “a reference point for the truth,” by which I mean that I have evidence they have happened or can happen. And I do not write *for* anyone or any particular readership... (p. 182).

As Chamber’s have done, I believe that writing literature that is especially relevant to young people starts with absolving the writing itself from the politics of writing *for* a particular audience. I believe this is the heart of why YA Literature often falls short on diverse representations of teen lives; it does not necessarily match the audience that it attempts to portray due to limitations on what is considered culturally appropriate for young people. If it did match the audience, I think YA Literature would actually look more like Adult Literature in theme, content, and structure. In my experience as a teen, “adult” content was already an everyday component of my life. In sum, I am using this definition to expand the scope of the genre to include narratives of teen sexuality that are typically (wrongly) excluded from the YA canon and to begin a process of change in how YA Literature can be defined without as many culturally imposed restrictions.

Above all, YA Literature should reflect the lived experience of teens and this means pushing boundaries of what is currently considered appropriate or relevant content for teens. As you will see in the following chapters, some of the participants in this study were consuming erotic and/or pornographic materials as early as twelve years old in a positive, not a detrimental, way. Highly sexual content needs to be considered as legitimate reading for teens who are interested in sexuality. In this way, reframing YA Literature is necessary to legitimising a more diverse array of sexual content within the genre.

1.3 Presenting a Solution

I became acquainted with Paul Kwiatkowski’s novel *And Every Day Was Overcast* through *School Library Journal*’s “Adult Books for Teens” blog where the book was the topic of discussion in a post entitled “Explicit Content” (Flowers, 2013). In this post, the

author, librarian Mark Flowers, poses the question: “When is a book too sexually explicit to recommend to teen readers?” Undeniably, Kwiatkowski’s book would raise a number of red flags with many reviewers who have a teen readership in mind. It follows the story of a sex-obsessed teenage boy whose primary focus in life seems to be getting high on LSD and losing his virginity. It contains photographs of what appear to be nude teenage bodies and a possible depiction of bestiality. And generally, the narrator’s longing for human connection, to be loved amidst an onslaught of torturous sexual desire, violence, questionable morality, and the spoilage of South Florida swamps makes for a vulgar, bleak and worrying book. However, I would argue that it is also genuine and truthful about the heavier side of the sexual culture of teens. Scholars such as Jeanie Austin (2016) have pushed for centring the lived experience of teens within library practice, which recognises teens as experts on their own lives and aids in abating problematic approaches to adolescence that guide teens towards what adults think they ought to become. Kwiatkowski’s book, drawn from his own memories and personal collection of photographs from when he was a teen, is as close as one can come to recording in print what it can be like to be young and sexual. My question is this: how can this content be too sexually-explicit for teens when it reflects the lived experience of some, if not many, teens?

Ultimately, *And Every Day Was Overcast* was rejected from being recommended by *School Library Journal* as an “Adult Book for Teens.” A line was drawn: *And Every Day Was Overcast* is too sexually-explicit for teen readers. To be fair, even the many librarians who staunchly defend teens’ intellectual freedom may find themselves hesitating over this particular book; it does affront a boundary. Regardless, teens should have unfettered access to books, like Kwiatkowski’s, that encourage a critical reading of complex narratives of sexuality, as opposed to a reading that assumes a simplistic transmission of what adults consider to be legitimate sexual knowledge for teens. Using Kwiatkowski’s novel as an example of a book that captures the lived experience of teens⁵

⁵ This statement does not assume that all teens live the same experiences. However, Kwiatkowski’s experiences as a teen can be considered, at least in part, universal.

yet has been deemed unsuitable for a teen readership, the following discussion seeks to reframe what is considered to be legitimate sexual content for teens and, by extension, to redefine the boundaries of what is considered to be YA Literature.

1.4 The Current Definition of Young Adult Literature

What is YA Literature? In reality, there is no singular definition of YA Literature as there is little consensus on how broadly or narrowly it should be defined. As Michael Cart (2008) indicates in his treatise “The Value of Young Adult Literature” written for the American Library Association (ALA), the term “Young Adult Literature” is “inherently amorphous, for its constituent terms ‘young adult’ and ‘literature’ are dynamic, changing as culture and society — which provide their context — change” (para. 2). Some scholars, such as Alleen Nilsen and Kenneth Donelson (2009), describe YA Literature as loosely as possible: as any literature that is read by teens. I do agree with this to a certain extent and tend to side with this definition when young readers identify certain texts as YA. However, I also think that there is a distinct difference between YA Literature and the broader scope of all literature that is read by teens. YA Literature, as it is currently defined, is a specific genre with a unique set of characteristics and conventions. The following section of this chapter examines how YA Literature as a genre is defined in our current historical moment.

YA Literature is:

1. Written For a Teen Audience

As Nilsen and Donelson (2009) demonstrate, the most reliable way to identify a YA book is to see if it has been marketed by publishers as YA. This signals to the reader and/or purchaser that a book has been written or marketed with a specific audience in mind and the content likely follows the conventions of the genre. There is no definite consensus on who or what *young adults* are. Young adults have been defined as persons anywhere between the ages of 12-25. This age range, however, is too broad considering the actual content of YA Literature, which typically focuses on *teen* protagonists who are between the ages of 12 and 18. Although many readers of YA Literature are 18 and over, the

typical audience is considered to be between 12 and 18. As Amy Pattee (2017) asserts, the New Adult genre has recently emerged as a separate body of literature intended for young adult readers aged 18 to 25. However, I would consider New Adult as a sub-genre of YA Literature and not totally a separate genre. I say this because it is still largely marketed as YA, the readership itself may not be so different than YA, and the spirit of YA Literature is still present in many New Adult narratives.

2. Written About Teens

This criterion is relatively straightforward and easy to identify: the protagonist is a teen (12-18 years old). While YA Literature can include adult characters, the main story deals with the experiences, perspectives and emotions that are unique to teens (Nilsen & Donelson, 2009; Stephens, 2007). In certain sub-genres or particular novels, it may include characters outside of this range, but the general age range is between 12 and 18.

3. Written in a Teen Voice

What exactly constitutes a teen voice is difficult to narrow down, can at times broach on the stereotypical, and as noted by Caroline Hunt (1996), because language especially is culturally situated, it can become quickly outdated and inconsistent with teen culture across time. Jonathan Stephens (2007) describes a teen voice as: “The lingo is modern. The pace, fast. The desires, youthful. The observations, distinctly teen” (p. 41). YA Literature is most often written from the first person and in the immediate past tense (Pattee, 2017; Stephens, 2007). Amy Pattee (2017), following Andrea Schwenke Wylie, identifies the unique type of narration found in YA Literature as immediate-engaging-first-person narration. Distinct from Adult Literature, this type of narration positions the narrator just within the immediate future of the story that they are describing. Due to the frequent use of immediate past tense, Holly West (2014, October 28), editor at Children’s and YA imprint *Feiwel and Friends*, also notes that a teen voice does not usually come from a place of nostalgia. What a teen voice can most directly apply to is the protagonist’s unique “observations”, the first person narration that allows the reader into the heart and mind of the teen protagonist.

4. Concerned with Shaping Identity/Subjectivity as a Defining Theme

Shaping identity/subjectivity is a significant theme that has been identified within YA Literature (Green-Barteet, 2014; McCallum, 2006; Nilsen & Donelson, 2009; Pattee, 2017; Stevenson, 2011; Trites, 2000). As Robyn McCallum (2006) argues, most of the themes present in YA Literature are underpinned with the journey towards subjectivity (individuality, autonomy, and agency). Pattee (2017), in line with the work of Roberta S. Trites (2000), describes this journey as an emotional coming-of-age that prepares the protagonist for the realm of adulthood. West (2014, October 28) defines this theme as an engagement with “firsts”: first love, first sex, first tragedy.

5. Didactic

YA Literature educates and socialises young readers through lessons of morality (McCallum, 2006; Pattee, 2017; Stevenson, 2011; Trites, 2000). As McCallum (2006) has written: “The educative and socializing potential of such fictions is a central concern that also shapes these fictions at the levels of both story and theme” (para. 20). Although YA Literature deals with a wide variety of complex real-life problems, a simplistic right or wrong answer is often written into the story to school teen readers on how to become good citizens. As Deborah Stevenson (2011) acknowledges in her historical examination of Children’s and YA Literature, “We’ve never been in it just for the fun” (p. 181).

1.5 The Problem of Young Adult Literature

The problem with YA Literature is that it is assumed to be the “best” literature for teen readers. However, while the genre sets out to be a catch-all for the reading interests of teens, underlying cultural assumptions about what is considered appropriate content for teens severely limits its scope. The characteristic “Written for a Teen Audience,” is where the nuances of what is considered appropriate for teens manifests. As McCallum (2006) writes:

Fiction for young adults is, in general, informed by the values and assumptions about adolescence that are dominant in the culture at the time of its production: cultural assumptions about what adolescence is or should be, what adolescents are like or should be like, what they should be reading, and why. (para. 1)

Guided by adults' values and assumptions, their fears and moral panics, YA Literature does not always reflect the lived experience of teens, nor what is especially relevant to them, but what are considered safe and legitimate concepts for teens to be exposed to. Nancy Lesko (2001) argues that, "adolescence can be glimpsed as a *technology* to produce certain kinds of persons within particular social arrangements" (p. 50). In turn, fictional narratives of adolescence, especially surrounding sexuality, often uphold dominant ideals concerning gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and culture (Christian-Smith, 1990; Kokkola, 2013; Trites, 2000). As Emily Knox (2014a) explains in her analysis of book challenges, moral panics related to "harmful" reading materials are often driven by a prevailing sense that society is in a state of decline, deviating from an ideal, and that objectionable books can have a direct effect on young people's behaviours, emotions, character and soul. For this reason, counter-hegemonic content in literature becomes overly mitigated and controlled, especially because teens are often thought to be impressionable, turbulent, and easily corrupted and, therefore, untrustworthy with complex or ambiguous content and ideas. Operating under this knowledge, the main function of classifying a book as YA can be viewed in this light: it is not just to label that book as being relevant to a teen audience, but to label it as being "appropriate" for them as well.

As a result, the characters, storylines, themes, and language that make up YA Literature as a genre often look very narrow in comparison to what I would consider the wider array of content in literature that is especially relevant to teens. Despite this, the assumption across YA Literature is that teens are "knowable" by adults (Pattee, 2017) and therefore it is possible for adults to create a "best" Literature for teen readers – and YA Literature is that literature. This assumption surfaces in practice when considering the Teen section of the public library. Is it a space that contains the literature that is especially relevant to teens? Or is it really just a collection of YA Literature? One would assume that the two are conflated, but they do not always overlap. How do librarians decide what belongs there and what does not? And what does it signify to teens when a certain book can only be found in the adult section? The problem is not necessarily with YA Literature itself, but how its existence contributes to defining what is appropriate for teen readers. Many books are excluded from the YA canon because they do not conform to the rigid and

conservative criteria of what is considered YA Literature. Because of this, YA Literature should not be a guide for what teens should or should not be reading. And it should not be considered a catch-all for the fictional reading interests of teens. It should be considered one genre of many that teens enjoy reading, not necessarily the dominant literature or the default choice. Given the problematic aspects of this genre in relation to its readership, it is simply too restrictive otherwise. For libraries, this would mean that the Teen section would include much more than YA Literature or that more book recommendations for teens would include Adult Literature.

In light of this, one might think that it would be better to return to the world of pre-YA Literature where there was no literature specifically written with a teen readership in mind. However, it is still important for readers to see themselves reflected in the literature that they read. For teens, reading about characters their own age, in the same stage of life, in the same environments, and dealing with similar issues, is undoubtedly important. As Michael Cart (in Nilsen & Donelson, 2009) has written:

Teenagers urgently need books that speak with relevance and immediacy to their real lives and to their unique emotional, intellectual, and developmental needs and that provide a place of commonality of experience and mutual understanding, for in so doing, they bring the outsiders out of the darkness and into the light of community. (p. 5)

There needs to be a literature for teens that is different in some ways from Adult Literature. For teen readers, having a literature that highlights the experiences of teens provides a means for a greater understanding of themselves and others and can affirm their sense of value and belonging within society (Baxley & Boston, 2014; Cart, 2007; Kaplan, 2011; Landt, 2006; Nilsen & Donelson, 2009). This is a strength of YA Literature for teen readers. Where the problem begins to manifest is when it needs to be decided what a literature “Written for a Teen Audience” looks like. What should it embody? For decades YA Literature has embodied the values of adults, one of which is the desire to see teens grow up into “good” citizens. Legitimising traditionally “adult” content in YA Literature has the potential to free the genre to include more authentic, and diverse, stories of adolescence. In essence, there still needs to be a body of literature that

is written about teen lives, but it needs to be considerably more radical, and consistently closer to the lived experiences of teens, than it is in our current historical moment.

1.6 Redefining Young Adult Literature

Looking critically at the characteristics of YA Literature has allowed for the identification of problematic aspects of the genre, but little has been written on how to transform YA Literature. For example, the ALA recommends *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* as a source of determining genre when cataloguing. The entry for “Young Adult Literature” by Robyn McCallum (2006) is a brilliant critical analysis of the genre that every professional working with YA Literature would benefit from reading.⁶ Yet, as a designated source for classifying fiction, what it effectively tells the reader is this: YA Literature is highly problematic, yet many of the same questionable markers continue to be used in its classification. How can librarians get beyond this?

As literary gatekeepers, librarians do have an incredible amount of power to make change, even if it is in small ways. Librarians have a place in the line of production and distribution of books and contribute to the legitimisation of content and knowledge, both accepted and controversial. Redefining the boundaries of what is considered YA Literature and using it in daily practice is one of the ways in which librarians can begin to transform YA Literature into a genre that better reflects the lived experience of teens. For example, classifying a book such as *And Every Day Was Overcast* as YA Literature would be a small radical act. But this cannot be done haphazardly. There needs to be standards for defining what YA Literature is that also help to bypass the problematic aspects of the genre. As an institution, libraries need to look closely at who is classifying fiction, especially for teens, and there needs to be consistency across the field.

What is YA Literature? I redefine it here again as such: it is a story “Written About Teens” that is “Written in a Teen Voice”. To a certain extent, it may also be whatever

⁶ See also McCallum's seminal work on Young Adult Literature and identity: McCallum, R. (1999). *Ideologies of identity in adolescent fiction: The dialogic construction of subjectivity*. New York: Garland Pub.

teens themselves say it is, influenced by the market or not. However, the point here is that by shedding many of the other characteristics that are discussed above, the genre can bypass problematic by-products of didacticism and stereotyping of teens and provides more opportunity for grounding narratives in the lived experience of teens. It also works to maintain the distance needed to separate YA Literature from Adult Literature. For example, there are many coming-of-age stories that are rightly placed in the Adult Literature section, and this is because the voice, language, and spirit that is distinctly teen is not present. There is also some flexibility to each of these characteristics. Although I would typically categorise teens as between the ages of 12 and 18, if a protagonist's age does not fall under this range, it does not have to be automatically excluded from being YA Literature as long as the text fits within the sub-genres it ascribes to. This includes New Adult Literature, which may feature older young people and the specifics of their lives, but still reflects the content and spirit of YA Literature. In regard to voice, YA Literature is often polyphonic (McCallum, 1999), which means that there will often be an implicit adult voice intruding on the teen voice. Some kind of adult voice, implicit or explicit, seems inescapable, but as long as the main narration is a teen voice, then it still fits within the genre.

Classifying YA Literature as “Written About Teens” and “Written in a Teen Voice” does very little to change what is already considered YA Literature, but goes a long way toward including materials that have been previously excluded from the YA Literature canon. One of these excluded books is the text I have selected to analyse for this chapter, *And Every Day Was Overcast* by Paul Kwiatkowski. This book represents a tension: although the content is realistic in relation to the lived experience of many teens it also falls well outside what is generally considered to be legitimate sexual content, behaviour, or knowledge for teens. Using this text as an example, I will argue that this content *is* appropriate for teens and that it should actually be considered a part of the YA canon under a less-restrictive definition of the genre.

1.7 An Example: *And Every Day Was Overcast*

Growing up in Florida was like developing in an afterlife, a different kind of paradise. A place where clouds lingered, passed slowly like giant Mickey Mouse

gloves sweeping over my eyelids, hands masquerading as a shade, casting a spell. Everything about it felt alive, slow, brutal, seething, and batshit crazy. I thought of how much effort it took to recall a single memory of blue skies, and despite the years of constant sunshine, whenever I thought back to a specific memory, it seemed as though every day was overcast. (Kwiatkowski, 2013, p. 276)

And Every Day Was Overcast is a semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story that uses a combination of documentary photography and prose to candidly express what it was like to grow up in suburban South Florida during the 1990s. It was published in 2013 by Black Balloon Publishing, a critically acclaimed independent publishing company in New York that includes in its mission statement a commitment to "...champion the unconventional and believe in the meaningful above all" ("Who We Are," n.d., para. 1). Before its official release, this arresting novel was read and favourably reviewed by Ira Glass, the host of *This American Life*, in the *New York Times Book Review*. The book is described as an illustrated novel, containing 180 pages of photographs and roughly 50 pages of text. Although it is not always clear which is which, many of the photographs were taken by Kwiatkowski when he was a teenager (Kwiatkowski, 2013, December 19). The more recent photographs include his documentation of the South Florida landscape and a number of portraits of adult subjects that have been staged to fit within the story. The remaining images are digitised artifacts such as professionally shot school photographs, family photographs, hand-written letters, and metal mixed-tape jackets. All of these images, taken at different points in time and representing either fact or fiction, hang loosely from the written narrative to create the atmosphere of Paul's story of adolescence.

After reading *And Every Day Was Overcast*, I could understand why there was conflict over recommending this book to teens. By the third page, Kwiatkowski had already revealed his early hard-ons for cartoon characters, his desire to "face-fuck" Stephanie from *Full House*, and his up-until-dawn obsession with catching a glimpse of pornographic images in mid-90s television static. By the end of the novel, I definitely had questions about whether or not some of Kwiatkowski's photographs could be considered obscenity, pornography, or were taken without consent. As obscenity and pornography represent the legal limits of intellectual freedom of minors (ALA, 2007, May 29), the content does need to be reviewed and questioned. Kwiatkowski's photographs fall within

these legal limits. For one, the images that appear glued to the covers of mixed-tapes are pornography, but they are not meant to be titillating. They are meant to capture and expose the memory of being young and becoming involved with pornography for the first time. One of these photos is an image of a pig “penetrating” a woman, but it is grainy and there is no definite proof that anything illegal is happening. There are also a few photographs of naked young-looking women in a school locker room, preceded by text that reads “God bless the girl who’d use my disposable camera to take photos of girls I liked in the locker room” (Kwiatkowski, 2013, p. 187). But considering the legitimacy of the publisher, it is assumed these photographs were taken by the author as an adult and that the subjects are over eighteen and consenting to being photographed. This is not always readily apparent, but there are clues that point to these purely curated elements of the story. For example, Karley Sciortino, known for her sex-positive blog turned *Viceland* television show *Slutever*, makes an appearance clad in a yellow bikini pointing to a poster of a 90s heartthrob hung above her bed (p. 200). For legal reasons, the inclusion of adult subjects in this book about teens is both practical and necessary, but because the photos appear to be taken candidly, are gritty and imperfect, they also fit seamlessly into the narrative.

Based on the content of the book, it is likely that *And Every Day Was Overcast* was at least partially rejected for the “Adult Books for Teens” blog because of the potential uproar this book would cause with parents or conservative librarians if it appeared as a recommended teen read.⁷ Regardless, the more I read, the more I was convinced this novel was entirely appropriate for teens. The level of sexual content in this book is not and should not be an issue. Teens have sex. They are sexual beings who act on their sexual desire. At least some of them do. Approximately 43% of teens have had sexual

⁷ Although librarians are generally well-schooled on intellectual freedom, there is lack of education on sexuality in LIS education, which may account for this oversight. See Heather Hill and Marni Harrington (2014) “Beyond Obscenity: An Analysis of Sexual Discourse in LIS Educational Texts”.

intercourse by the time they are 19 years old (Abma & Martinez, 2017)⁸ with similar numbers reported for oral sex (Copen, Chandra, & Martinez, 2012). It seems counter-productive to deny this or to try and protect them from something that is already a part of their lives. Here, in Kwiatkowski's photographs, whether fact or fiction, there are images of teens living realistic sexually-aware lives: for instance, a couple embracing at school; a young man touching a young woman's breast over-the-shirt while she laughs; snapshots of pornography that are shared amongst friends; someone jokingly performing fellatio on a cucumber; and a shirtless young Paul holding a young woman close on a sofa. This content may make adults uncomfortable, but it is relatively ordinary behaviour for some teens.

How sexuality is presented, not how much of it is revealed, should be the main subject of criticism when it comes to fiction about adolescent sexuality. YA Literature scholars such as Roberta S. Trites (2000) and Lydia Kokkola (2013) have rightfully critiqued that too often teen sexuality is over-accentuated in fiction and not situated within the full context of teens' lives. Doing so plays into the stereotyping of all teens as sexually-charged beings and not dynamic, autonomous, capable individuals. The narrator's hypersexuality is an overwhelming focus of *And Every Day Was Overcast*; however, this story is such a rare example of an unrestrained narrative of teen sexuality (something that is sorely lacking in YA Literature) that this critique needs to be forgiven in order to assess the radical potential of this book. The novel is perhaps written about an unproductive, delinquent, hypersexual, morally-questionable teen, but its defining quality is that it also reveals the heart of a dynamic young man who feels a depth of emotion and is driven by empathy to decide for himself, somewhat experimentally, the rights and wrongs of the world. The presence of hypersexuality does not overshadow these nuances of character in this case, but accentuates them by making it known that the narrator's thoughts and feelings are coming to the reader undiluted.

⁸ For younger teens, this report also shows that 13.5% of teens had sexual intercourse by age 15. In Canada, a 2009/2010 Statistic Canada survey showed that 30% of 15 to 17-year-olds and 68% of 18- to 19-year-olds reported having had sex (Rotermann, 2012).

Aside from the graphic nature of Kwiatkowski's book, I do not see a major difference between this novel and many other vetted YA novels. Like the YA genre itself, *And Every Day Was Overcast* occupies an erratic and amorphous space in terms of genre, format, tone, voice, and theme. A review of the metadata assigned to Paul Kwiatkowski's novel shows that it is consistently classified and catalogued as a work of Adult Fiction. Its official Library of Congress Classification number⁹ designates it as "American Literature, 2001-." In addition, catalogue records from major public library systems in the United States and Canada show its holdings in the Adult Fiction section or as a generic e-book.¹⁰ Officially, this book is intended for an adult audience. However, it is important to note that perceived audience is not always an absolute measure when it comes to defining genres of literature. As Stevenson (2011) reflects on the issue with audience and children's literature:

It's interesting that [some historians] would rather include texts that don't fit their initial definition (books designed for children to read for pleasure) than change their definition – there is something so pervasive about that essential belief of children's literature as designed for children, not adults...that historians are resistant to finding a definition that encompasses the materials they actually view as important. (p. 181)

Classification and marketing that identifies intended readership are some things that needs to be questioned, as they may represent imposed restrictions to certain groups of readers and not necessarily relevance. For example, when Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975) first hit the shelves it was marketed by its publisher, Bradbury Press, as Blume's first "adult novel" (Foerstel in Yampbell, 2005). In the case of *And Every Day Was Overcast*, what matters most in its classification is that it is, or could be, especially important or relevant to teen readers. *And Every Day Was Overcast* is just a book that might be relevant to anyone who is or has been young and had intense sexual feelings or is curious about those feelings. That, to me, makes this book an example of YA Literature even if adults are assumed to be its intended readership because of its typically "adult" content.

⁹ PS3611.W53 A53 2013

¹⁰ United States: Boston, New York, Los Angeles. Canada: Winnipeg, Hamilton.

But in addition to this, as I will demonstrate, the content of *And Every Day Was Overcast* also embodies the two major and essential characteristics of YA Literature that I have highlighted above: “Written About Teens” and “Written in a Teen Voice”.

Is *And Every Day Was Overcast* “Written About Teens”? Ironically, the Library of Congress Subject Headings have helped significantly in the determining this criterion:

- Teenagers--Florida--Fiction.
- Teenagers--Sexual behavior--Fiction.
- Teenagers--Drug use--Fiction.
- Nineteen nineties--Fiction.
- Suburbs--Florida--Fiction.
- Photography, Artistic.
- Florida--Fiction.

The first photograph in the novel shows a young Paul, approximately eight years old, but the majority of the book centres on his teenage years. It starts with his early sexual awakenings and ends with Paul mutedly disquieted by the tragic deaths of his peers that are happening around him, including the Columbine High School victims. Kwiatkowski unquestionably writes about teens and some of the highly-relevant (albeit disturbing) issues teens face and cope with in their everyday lives.

Is *And Every Day Was Overcast* “Written in a Teen Voice”? Matching this criterion is significantly more complex and open to interpretation. The voice of the narrator is thick with adolescence, but it is a retrospective account of the author’s experience. The opening line of the book reads:

Memories of childhood humanize us as adults. With age, our version of that time is deformed then reassembled. What fragments bleed through are tailored to a narrative designed to hide vulnerability. (Kwiatkowski, 2013, p. 14)

In contrast to his words, Kwiatkowski’s book does the opposite of what he claims. It is a careful interrogation of vulnerability. Beyond this first line, that positions a very adult Paul as the teller of this story, the rest of the story follows the experiences of the very teen protagonist with such clarity, specificity, and honesty that immediacy becomes the most dominant perspective in the storytelling, not retrospection. The photographs in the book are also a major factor in the teen voice as a portion of the photographs were taken

by Kwiatkowski as a teen. They ground the story in lived experience that cannot be replicated through fiction alone. The text and curation of photographs may be altered by the perspective of an adult, but the photographs that were clearly taken by Kwiatkowski as a teen are artifacts of a real, complex, flawed, and troubling but rich life that was lived.

All YA Literature written by adults contains a certain amount of retrospection and reflection, but it is often hidden behind narrative techniques that distance the author's personal experiences from that of the main character's. For the most part, adult writers of YA Literature construct their subjects and, therefore, narratives of adolescence can never truly be authentic or taken as a direct factual representation of all teen lives (Pattee, 2017). What is unique about autobiographical fiction is that it makes the relationship between adult writer and their construction of the teen protagonist more explicit. Kwiatkowski never attempts to hide the relationship between his adult self and the memories he has of being a teenager. In an interview with *Seeking Photography Magazine* Kwiatkowski (2011) states:

I'll never fully be able to express how I felt during the formative moments of my teenage years but I can articulate how I felt the last time I thought of a specific event or how the narrative behind an image resonated with me in hindsight. (para. 23)

Acknowledging this relationship does not necessarily remove a text from being YA, and I would argue that it can actually play an important role in making explicit the unavoidable fragmented and reassembled adult construction of the teen protagonist. As I stated previously, most YA Literature is polyphonic, but only some narratives make this explicit. Cart (2007) has written that fiction "...enables us to eavesdrop on someone else's heart" (p. 16). *And Every Day Was Overcast* allows the reader to eavesdrop on the intimate details of the heart and mind of the teenage protagonist of this novel and that in itself makes this story indistinguishable from other vetted YA novels.

1.8 Re-Envisioning Young Adult Literature

I think what concerns literary gatekeepers the most about a book like *And Every Day Was Overcast* is whether or not the narrator provides a "good" example for teens. Is young Paul a model for what every teenager should conform to be? Definitely not. His character

and behaviour do instil a sense of bleakness and worry. But he is also likeable, charming, admirable, and familiar. There is merit to reading his story. It has nothing to do with learning how to be a good citizen, but that is far from the point of this book. The point is, essentially, to engage the reader emotionally, intellectually and aesthetically in finding beauty, empathy, and hope in a place which is otherwise severe, but also, just to enjoy a unique story. It is not meant to teach; didacticism is absent from this story, and that should not be something to fear. As best-selling author of YA fiction John Green (2013, February 27) declared in an interview with *The Guardian*: “I’m tired of adults telling teenagers that they aren’t smart, that they can’t read critically, that they aren’t thoughtful...” (para. 13). In YA Literature, writers, characters, and stories that show a world that exists beyond heteronormative ideals are needed. Kwiatkowski is a writer that fits this criteria. He describes himself as “someone participating in life from the periphery,” (Kwiatkowski, 2011, para. 27) and the story of his teenage life on the fringe is very much like reading a confirmation that there are multiple ways of how a person should be. Not to mention, despite his misadventures as a teen, he seems to have turned out just fine as an adult.

What does this mean for this project? I want to exemplify that when examining sexual content, it makes more sense to define YA Literature as something other than it is conventionally wrought. As this project will reveal, the sexual content in what is traditionally considered YA Literature is often too restrictive within the context of the actual reading interests of some teens and young adults. In essence, and to also answer the initial question posed in this chapter: is a book like *And Every Day Was Overcast* too sexually-explicit for teens? Generally, no, it is not. For some teens it will be. Others may identify with it completely. Because this kind of narrative does exist in real life. Paul Kwiatkowski and the other figures in his story are a testament to that. I think the question best asked by librarians is not “Is this appropriate for teens?” but, “Could this be especially relevant to and enjoyed by teens?” If the answer is yes, then the book belongs to them too.

1.9 Conclusion

Reading histories are complex. Teens do not just read YA Literature, even though it is the literature that is specifically intended for them. In fact, some of the participants in this study read barely any at all when they were teens. What this has established is that, especially in terms of sexually-themed literature, teens read across age-level regardless of what is considered appropriate. This reveals much about YA Literature as a genre, what it does and does not contain, and how it fails to fulfil the reading interests of some teens and young adults. There is quite clearly a disconnect between how sexuality is presented in the vast majority of YA Literature (*i.e.*, conservatively) and what some young readers actually want to read. In many cases, the participants in this study had to look outside of YA Literature to find the texts that spoke to them. These readers searched and hoped to find narratives of sexuality that were presented within the stories that better reflected their immediate lives (YA Literature) and were often left feeling unrecognised. It does not have to be this way. My hope for this project is to show how important narratives of sexuality in literature have been to these young women readers, how YA Literature can transform to better meet the needs and interests of readers like them, and how the librarians, educators and scholars who are reading this thesis can help to support this transformation. The body of this thesis (Chapters 4-7), organised around the major themes identified in the interview data, describes and analyses the reading experiences of the young women I interviewed in relation to the kinds of texts they chose to read. They are as follows:

Chapter 4: Reading the Efferent Romance – This chapter investigates readers’ assertions that YA Literature provides a standard for what a relationship should be like. It analyses *I Never* by Laura Hopper (2017) as a quintessential example of YA romance fiction, what I call Efferent Romance, which reads like a manual on relationships and sex. My analysis of this text focuses on the key messages that it conveys to the reader about sexual relationships. I argue that Efferent Romance presents a comprehensive introduction to sexual relationships for young people, but it does little to inspire positive change in regard to greater female sexual autonomy and subjectivity. I conclude that in order to do so less didacticism, more diversity, and more complex female characters are needed.

Chapter 5: Reading Difficult Stories - This chapter analyses more complex narratives of sexuality than one can observe in Efferent Romance and examines the experiences of participants who interacted with these kinds of narratives, what I am calling *difficult stories*¹¹. A difficult story is where characters engage in amoral, unethical, or illegal sexual behaviour, but the story is not told as a cautionary tale. In other words, the story is not overtly didactic and does not present a clear right and wrong or lessons to be learned. In this chapter, I examine *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner (2002), a graphic novel about a fifteen-year-old young woman who has a sexual relationship with her mother's boyfriend. This story acts as a site for examining the complex and contradictory nature of erotic desire and how young readers may respond to dark, disturbing, or negative portrayals of sexuality in absence of didacticism. In this chapter, I show that despite the perplexing and unsettling nature of stories like *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, reading difficult stories can be a site for positive change.

Chapter 6: Reading the Erotic – This chapter focuses on the experiences of participants who read for sexual pleasure. It examines Sarah J. Maas' novel *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015), a fantasy romance novel about a strong, independent young woman who has a sexual relationship with a fairy-male. Here I highlight both the problematic and positive aspects of romance novels when considering them as a source of information on relationships and sex. While many of the participants reported that they did not read romance novels because they felt they did not reflect real life, just as many were attracted to romance because they provided optimism and hope about relationships. Maas' book is also a rare example of YA erotica and includes a sex scene that is focuses on female pleasure, includes a moment of consent, and is meant to be titillating to the reader. This chapter explores a dimension of reading sexually-themed YA Literature that is often left unexamined – reading to be aroused – and argues that arousal is an important part of sexual education.

¹¹ See Chapter 5 for a full definition of this term.

Chapter 7: Reading for Alternatives – This chapter discusses the experiences of readers who searched for narratives of sexuality outside of printed texts, namely online in the form of fanfiction, amateur fiction, and pirated digital copies of foreign comics. These readers reported that, from an early age, they sought out literature online that had explicit sexual content or focused on non-normative topics such as LGBTQ relationships. In this chapter I analyse *Helix*, a novel-length fanfiction written by Sara’s Girl housed on *Archive of Our Own*. This is an example of *Harry Potter* fanfiction that is centred on the romantic relationship between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy (Drarry). Through this analysis I show how online amateur fiction, slash in particular, presents a greater variety of positive narratives of sexuality than conventional YA Literature. In conclusion, I argue that for young women who feel as though their reading interests surrounding the topic of sexuality are not addressed within conventional published YA Literature, online fiction can be a liberating alternative.

Chapter 8: Conclusion – The conclusion for this project summarises the broad range of information on sexuality, as identified by participants, that can be found in sexuality-themed YA Literature. It also makes suggestions for how libraries can continue to support the sexual reading interests of young people.

Chapter 2

2 Conceptual Framework

My approach to this study has been informed by seminal research in the fields of Critical Youth Studies, Sex Education, Children's Literature, Reading Studies, and Library and Information Science. The following conceptual framework contains a genealogy of research that has formed specific traditions within each of these fields and highlights the individual researchers and their works that have framed this project theoretically, conceptually, and methodologically. A common thread that runs throughout this research is an emphasis on discourse, power, and gender in relation to sexuality and reading. This project focuses specifically on young women readers. Therefore, gender is a key component of the framing, methodology, and analysis for this project and many of the works discussed in this chapter highlight sexuality and/or reading as they relate to young women or women specifically. These authors and their work are foundational to this project, which is a continuation of the findings, theories and objectives that have been developed over a number of decades by these influential researchers. My work for this project is indebted to, and belongs to, these traditions. Together they have provided a framework for how I approach and understand young people, their sexuality, their reading, and the texts that convey to them information about sexuality. Many other important works are referred to within individual chapters to address more specific themes, but the following works stand out to me as especially fundamental to this project. As such, it is not a traditional literature review, but it identifies the major works that weave their way throughout every chapter of this thesis regardless of theme. Although I do make brief references to methodological influences, a more detailed description of works used for methodological purposes will follow in Chapter 3: Methodology.

2.1 Sexuality and Critical Youth Studies

In this section, I bring together the works of major scholars who analyse the concepts of (hetero)sexuality and adolescence from sociohistorical perspectives. These works expose these concepts as culturally constructed, as *technologies* designed as a means of social control to secure the future of the nation by promoting certain kinds of people – usually

white, middle-class, heterosexual men – as beneficial for progress in society. This applies to both sexuality itself, adolescence, and adolescent sexuality.

I begin this conceptual framework with Michel Foucault because his theories on sexuality, power, and discourse are woven throughout most of the works discussed in this chapter. Many of these works are centred on the power and function of discourse in society and these scholars use Foucault's theories to explain how dominant discourses ultimately shape individual identity and experience. In *Critical Youth Studies*, the works of Nancy Lesko (2001) and Mary Louise Adams (1997) both take a sociohistorical, discourse analysis approach to analysing the emergence and function of adolescence and heterosexuality. According to Foucault (1978), discourses “crystallize into institutions, they inform individual behaviour, they act as grids for the perception and evaluation of things” (quoted in Adams, 1997, p. 6). These authors' analyses align with Foucault's, investigating turn of the 20th century scientific discourse and cultural anxieties about the progress of the nation as one of the root motivators for the crystallisation of the institutions of adolescence and heterosexuality in 21st century North America. In the Sex Education literature on the *discourse of desire*, Foucault is used extensively to make a connection between power, discourse, and sexuality. In effect, these authors argue that the present discourses surrounding adolescence and (hetero)sexuality in sex education shape, limit, and control young people as sexual subjects. Louisa Allen (2004) in particular maintains that the discourses of sexuality in sex education, sanctioned by public institutions, serve to micro-manage young people's sexual practices. When Allen (2005) writes of sexual subjectivity and agency, she also writes about power and discourse. She explains that the “...sense of self is always limited by language and by the particular discourses to which we have access” (p. 10). The point of promoting the *discourse of desire* is to introduce a discourse that allows young people to claim their feelings of sexual desire and pleasure, thereby empowering them to name and embody their desire within a positive framework. In Young Adult (YA) Literature studies, Foucault's works on power are used as a model for analysis. For example, Roberta S. Trites (2000) uses Foucault's definition of power to analyse YA Literature as both a container for textual discourses about institutional politics and social construction. She also identifies YA Literature itself as an “...institutional discourse that participates in the

power and repression dynamic that socializes adolescents into their cultural positions” (p. 54). Indeed, this reinforces the importance of analysing “textual discourses” surrounding sexuality in YA Literature, because of their socialising potential.

All of the authors mentioned above subscribe to the theory that language shapes society, institutions, and the self. According to Foucault (1978), sexuality itself is also a construct:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasure, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, and the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power. (pp. 105-106)

Through my use of these works, Foucault’s theories manifest tacitly throughout this thesis and more directly when I speak about sexual “deviance”. *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1* (1978) speaks periodically of children’s (including adolescents) sexuality and how, along with homosexuality and women’s sexuality, it has been pathologised and considered unnatural. Foucault offers a convincing explanation for cultural anxieties surrounding sexual activity, and in particular, sexual deviance. Foucault (1978) describes the ways in which sexuality is known and regulated not as the enslavement of others, but as a political “ordering of life” that became prominent in the Victoria Era:

This purpose for which the deployment of sexuality was first established, as a new distribution of pleasures, discourses, truths, and powers; it has to be seen as the self-affirmation of one class rather than the enslavement of another: a defense, a protection, a strengthening, and an exaltation that were eventually extended to others – at the cost of different transformations – as a means of social control and political subjugation. (p. 123)

According to Foucault, the sexual activity of children in particular “posed physical and moral, individual and collective dangers; children were defined as ‘preliminary’ sexual beings, on this side of sex, astride a dangerous dividing line” (p. 104). Therefore, children needed to be protected, cultivated and preserved from the dangers of sex and schooled into beings that would follow this new ordering of life. He argues that the discourses and procedures that are recognised as repressive are actually this ordering of life that is meant

to preserve the body, maximise life, and secure the future of the nation. Foucault also outlines what he calls the “hysterization of women’s bodies”, where women’s bodies were qualified as being “thoroughly saturated with sexuality” (p. 104). Women’s bodies, because of their connection to reproduction, were also placed within the sphere of public interest and imbued with conjugal and parental obligations that were tied to national interests. This particular text informs my approach to understanding sexuality, the threat of unrestrained pleasure, and how power is created through discourse. It also explains why children, adolescent, and especially women’s sex, is heavily pedagogised within Western society with an emphasis on health, purity, heterosexuality, matrimony, and good mothering.

I also look to Foucault’s work “What is an Author?” (1980), which is concerned with “the singular relationship that holds between an author and a text, the manner in which a text apparently points to this figure who is outside and precedes it” (p. 115). In particular, I refer to Foucault’s argument that for literary texts, the name of an author is not just a name, the “author function” adds meaning, value and authority to texts. This idea supports the inclusion of the author in Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of reading (see below), where the author is considered an integral part of the reading experience. In turn, author biographies are included in each chapter where appropriate in this thesis.

Nancy Lesko’s book *Act Your Age!: A Cultural Construction of Adolescence* (2001) is a sociohistorical analysis of adolescence and informs this project by providing a background and critique of the concept of adolescence. This book is a widely accepted examination of the historical and contemporary contexts in which the concept of adolescence was developed and normalised. Lesko argues that adolescence is a relatively recent concept which began to appear in early 20th century North America. Of particular interest to this study, Lesko analyses the “storm and stress” model of adolescence based on the work of psychologist and educator G. Stanley Hall. Often credited as the “father of adolescence” (Adams, 1997), Hall popularised a romanticised notion of adolescence with his publication *Adolescence: Its Psychology* (1904) and is said to have principally contributed to the systematic portrayal of adolescence as the period of human development between the onset of puberty and the start of adulthood. Hall’s work

emphasised two main points: (1) that adolescence was a time of “becoming” and therefore susceptible to risk; and (2) that adolescents were of great importance to maintaining national ideals concerning ethnicity, gender, and culture. In a postwar environment, amongst fears of degeneration, Lesko describes Hall as depicting adolescents as having great potential for securing a future of progress, but he also imagined them as “...ships without stable moorings or rudders, sexually charged beings who needed to develop character, responsibility, manliness, and focus” (p. 49). It was this growing emphasis on adolescents to uphold national ideals that led to carefully constructed practices within institutions, educational and other, that aimed to contain and monitor adolescents. Although young men were privileged as the future of progress, Lesko also explains the role of young women as well. Lesko outlines how Hall’s recommendations for the education of young women focused on preparation for matrimony and motherhood. During this time, young women were penalised by the court system if they had sex, appeared to have had sex, masturbated, used “vile” language, or had sexual thoughts. Lesko explains that sex education was deployed as a means of preventing “female delinquency” by encouraging young women to resist becoming romantically or sexually involved with men, who could not control their desire. In this book, Lesko aspires to change assumptions that adolescents are immature, irresponsible, irrational, uncritical beings and promote adolescents as capable, autonomous beings that should not be defined by social problems. Lesko proposes that in order to do this, greater society needs to a break away from visualising adolescent development as a unilinear, step-by-step process in favour of seeing adolescence as a recursive space.

Lesko’s work challenges normalised assumptions about teens in terms of their development, behaviours, and roles in society. I include these challenges throughout my thesis in the context of YA Literature and young readers. The same assumptions that Lesko identifies are well ingrained in YA Literature and ideas about teen readers. This can be seen particularly in regard to the view of teens as “becoming” and the notion that teens are susceptible to risk and therefore need to be directed by adults into becoming good citizens. Like adolescence itself, YA Literature can be seen as a technology to produce certain kinds of persons within particular social arrangements. In line with Lesko, I also resist the assumption that “biology is destiny”, that physiological age

defines who a person is, what they are capable of, and how they should be treated. This stance is infused in my perspectives on sexual materials for young readers, especially surrounding texts that contain explicit, taboo, and ambiguous presentations of sexuality. Lesko's work also informs my understanding of the cultural, scientific, and social reasonings behind the moral panics that take teens as their subjects and how these are reflected in YA Literature. In regard to gender, Lesko also explains the discrepancies between the expectations and responsibilities placed upon male and female adolescent sexuality.

Mary Louise Adams' *The Trouble with Normal: Postwar Youth and the Making of Heterosexuality* (1997) also examines adolescence as culturally constructed, with a particular focus on adolescent (hetero)sexuality as a marker for progress or decline. Adams argues that a focus on controlling and monitoring the sexual practices of adolescents was an integral part of securing the "future of the nation" post-World War II. Concepts of normality, rooted in heterosexual ideals, kept a firm boundary around what was considered "natural" and beneficial to society. According to Adams:

Heterosexuality is a discursively constituted social category that organizes relations not only between women and men, but also between those who fit definitions of heterosexuality and those who do not, and between adults and youth. Heterosexuality also helps to constitute relations between class, ethnicity and race. (p. 166)

Adams observes that in the post-World War II environment, adults' "...fears about social change and about future security were crystalized in discourses about sexuality that took teenagers as their objects" (p. 135). As a result, discourses about adolescence and discourses about sex became perceptibly linked. Adolescents, and their expressions of "sexual delinquency", became known as a national social crisis. This was predominantly caused by equating uncontrollable sexual behaviour with negative aspects of intercourse – sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unwanted pregnancy, even death) – which in turn roused adults to associate adolescence with emotional and economic distress. Subsequently, adults' reactions to what they viewed as delinquency reinforced a cause to regulate adolescents' behaviour in order to guide them towards more accepted social norms. Adams argues that, for many, the extent to which heterosexuality was adopted and

reinforced in North America was read as a “marker of national stability”. According to Adams, the concept of ideal sexual knowledge was aimed to produce “parents of the future” whose sexuality would be expressed as married, monogamous, heterosexual adults. To be marked as sexually “abnormal” (by means of homosexuality, “unusual” expressions of gender, or unwanted pregnancies) called into question the ability to be a responsible citizen. In regard to gender, Adams explains that being “properly gendered” was part of having a “normal” sexuality. For young women especially, Adams argues that young women who engaged in “abnormal” or “immoral” sexual behaviour were perceived as:

...not just violating the expectations that were attached to their gender, they were also threatening notions of the adolescent as not yet sexually mature, notions of sex as something to be experienced only by adults. Here, the so-called immoral behaviour of delinquent girls left girls’ own claims on sexual “normality” open to question. (p. 66)

Adam’s explains that, historically, although young men have also been subject to charges of immorality based on sexual conduct, young women have been treated far more harshly. Adams also specifically discusses sexually-themed literature as a site that was considered to be a threat that could corrupt the innocence of young people.

Adams’ work informs my understanding of anxieties about teen sexuality, especially that which is considered “abnormal”. Alongside Foucault (1978) and Lesko (2001), it explains why there is such a fervent need to harness and control young people’s sexuality. Adams specifically illustrates heterosexuality as an organising principle, which defines what it means to be a good citizen. Heterosexual ideals manifest often in YA Literature, where the white, middle/upper-class, heterosexual, studious, chaste young woman dominates (see especially Chapter 4). This work also informs the analysis of LGBTQ YA Literature, where queer texts often fall short of presenting queer relationships as more than a social problem.

2.2 Sex Education and the *Discourse of Desire*

In this section, I outline the key figures who contribute to a body of work on the *discourse of desire*, a feminist framework from Sex Education that promotes a need for a

discourse around female entitlement to desire and pleasure. This body of work focuses specifically on the education of young women and women and was therefore uniquely relevant to this study. These researchers argue that when young women feel entitled to desire and pleasure it may encourage them to have a greater sense of sexual agency that would enable them to better navigate the joys and dangers of sexual relationships. I use this body of literature as a framework for how I analyse the presentation of sexuality in YA Literature and how I interpret interview data. Specifically, I use it as a touchstone for what would be considered negative, positive, and ideal representations of sexuality or information on sexuality.

It was Michelle Fine (1988) who originally claimed that a *discourse of desire* was missing from sex education curricula in her article “Sexuality, Schooling, and Adolescent Females: The Missing Discourse of Desire”. In her analysis of sex education curricula and interviews with adolescents, Fine argued that sex education is dominated by a discourse of sexuality as victimisation and that talk about desire and pleasure, especially female desire, is but a “whisper”. She argued that without the presence and acknowledgement of female sexual desire, women are presented as victims of predatory male desire instead of autonomous beings entitled to sexual desire and response. She writes:

The language of victimization and its underlying concerns – “Say No”, put a break on his sexuality, don’t encourage – ultimately deny young women the right to control their own sexuality by providing no access to a legitimate position of sexual subjectivity. (pp. 36-37)

This limitation placed on the development of a sexual sense of self, she argues, may actually put young women in greater risk of pregnancy, STIs, violence, and harassment. What Fine ultimately points out is that including a *discourse of desire* in sex education may not only allow young women to feel a sense of entitlement over their bodies, but may also contribute to a greater sense of social entitlement. Fine writes that a genuine *discourse of desire* would:

...invite adolescents to explore what feels good and bad, desirable and undesirable, grounded in experiences, needs, and limits. Such a discourse would release females from a position of receptivity, enable an analysis of the dialects of

victimization and pleasure, and would pose female adolescents as subjects of sexuality, initiators as well as negotiators. (p. 33)

Since the publication of this piece, it has acted as a foundation for many prominent sex education scholars in their discussions of adolescent sexuality and the problem of sex education. Nearly twenty years later, Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine (2006) further articulated and expanded the conceptualisation of desire as *thick desire*, a wanting for sexual, economic, social, physical, and psychological health. They theorised that sexual desire is situated within larger structures that enable a positive and hopeful future for young people, where they feel entitled and empowered to want in their lives. Since then, McClelland and Fine (2014) have worked to create a framework for understanding *thick desire*, which includes sexual desire. They encourage researchers and educators to look beyond the individual and to look towards the social constructs that shape, surveil, and control desire:

...it is not merely about the missing discourse of an *individual*...In addition to the person-level, the missing discourse framework encourages us to turn our gaze upwards and outwards, towards the *policies, relationships, ideologies, and institutions* which house these bodies. (p. 5)

Deborah Tolman is another *discourse of desire* scholar who is powerhouse in the investigation of female adolescent desire. In particular, her book *Dilemmas of Desire: Teenage Girls Talk about Sexuality* (2002) presents a detailed and intimate look into how teenage girls talk about experiencing and negotiating their sexual feelings. Through the stories of teen girls' sexuality, Tolman describes different embodiments of gendered sexuality – from young women whose desire is silent to those who are defiant about their desire. Their talk outlines what Tolman discusses at length, a socially manufactured dilemma of desire, which:

...pits girls' embodied knowledge and feelings, their sexual pleasure and connection to their own bodies and to others through their desire, against physical, social, material, and psychological dangers association with their sexuality. (p. 188)

Through young women's talk, Tolman describes how society creates an impossible situation for young women: "Healthy sexuality means having sexual desire, but there is little if any safe space – physically, socially, psychologically – for these forbidden and

dangerous feelings” (p. 22). Following in the tracks of Michelle Fine (1988), Tolman advocates for strategies that result in young women’s entitlement to both feel and act upon their sexual desires without the burden of undue and unfair consequences and risks. Tolman also notes a pattern of the pathologising of adolescent sexuality so that some are seen as victims or predators, positioning young women as vulnerable and young men as monstrous. Tolman argues that just saying “no” to sex denies young women as sexual beings and that feeling sexual desire may enable young women to make active choices in their relationships. This change may also relieve how male desire is depicted, which as Tolman notes, is often seen as monstrous and uncontrollable. In response to her findings, Tolman proposes the following as a framework for promoting a healthier sexuality, which closely resembles that of the *discourse of desire*:

- Girls as well as boys have sexual desire, which should be acknowledged and respected by both partners;
- That boys can be responsible for their sexual behaviour;
- That sexual intercourse is not the only “adult” form of sexual expression;
- That sex is not a commodity or thing to get but a way to express one’s feelings for another person;
- That masturbation and phone sex are safe sex. (p. 204)

While Deborah Tolman has produced a substantial amount of scholarly works before and after *Dilemmas of Desire*, I look to this one especially to inform my understanding of the sexual dilemmas that young women encounter and what “socially manufactured constructs” at play ultimately lead to sexual repression. Tolman’s findings also work to explain so-called “mixed messages” about sexual desire and actions that have been found in YA Literature. As Roberta S. Trites (2000) famously wrote, in discourses of sexuality in YA Literature, “sexuality is both liberated and repressed” (p. 90). Another aspect of Tolman’s work, seldom discussed elsewhere, is the policing of sexuality between young women, which ties into the view of sex as a social commodity. This permits an analysis of not just heterosexual relationships between young women and young men, but also the platonic relationships between young women.

Louisa Allen is also one of the major researchers and advocates that support the inclusion of desire and pleasure in sex education. Her doctoral research, formally published as *Sexual Subjects: Young People, Sexuality and Education* (2005), explored through

ethnographic methods how young people conceptualise, embody, and practice sexuality. Through the analysis of their talk, Allen's research positions young people as sexual agents, practicing physical and emotional desire and pleasure within the context of complex individual and interpersonal relationships. In relation to sex education, this work argues that young people's information needs/interests and conceptualisation of sexual knowledge do not match traditional forms of sex education (*i.e.*, their idea of sexual knowledge extended beyond information about pregnancy and STIs). Of particular interest to this project is Allen's research on the *discourse of erotics* (2004, 2005) and its need to be included in sex education. Allen argues that for education to be effective in producing sexually healthy individuals, schools need to create spaces that acknowledge young people as active sexual beings that navigate relationships within the social bonds of gender and heteronormativity. Building off of Michelle Fine (1988), Allen argues that sex education curricula need to be "enfleshed" with specific information about erotics, or, sex in practice. She argues that this inclusion would not only promote greater sexual health but also better interpersonal relationships.

In this facet of her work, Allen clearly articulates what including a *discourse of erotics* into sexuality education means for both young women and men. Allen (2004) affirms that the *discourse of erotics* automatically seeks to recognise the sexual agency of young women and those who perform gender and sexuality on a greater spectrum than the heterosexual male/female dichotomy, thereby breaking down heterosexual biases that disenfranchise these groups (including young men). She argues that young women are particularly disadvantaged by the missing discourse of erotics and desire, because they are already culturally predisposed to not feel power or entitlement over their own sexuality. As a means of legitimising desire and pleasure in young people's lives, Allen (2004) advocates for sex educators to acknowledge and promote:

- a need for knowledge about the body, as related to sexual response and pleasure;
- a need of recognition of the value of sexual pleasure enjoyed throughout life in safe and responsible manners within a values framework respectful of the rights of others;
- a need to foster the practice and enjoyment of consensual, non-exploitative, honest, mutually pleasurable sexual relationships. (p. 158)

Allen's work provides a foundation for understanding how young people understand, embody, and practice sexuality. Her work also provides a greater articulation of the *discourse of desire* and a framework for what constitutes positive, empowering sexual knowledge. I rely on this framework throughout this thesis when analysing sexual relationships, themes, and experiences in both the interview data and texts. Taking into consideration critical perspectives on the *discourse of desire* (see especially Sharon Lamb but also Allen (2014) and McClelland and Fine (2014) themselves), Allen's work is a lens through which I observe the nuances of sexuality and sexual knowledge most prominently.

Jen Gilbert's research also belongs to the body of work on the *discourse of desire* in sex education, but what makes her work unique is that she has a very realistic, often pessimistic, view of what one can expect of human beings in the context of desire, pleasure, and love. Gilbert's work (2002, 2004, 2012, 2014) consistently emphasises the affective dimensions of sexual relationships, which allows for a space to contemplate the wonders of love and pleasure but also the enormity of human failings that drive human development. Gilbert (2012) reminds us that desire, pleasure, and love are not necessarily always positive, and while one can hope for the best, that erotic love is also a source of "considerable ordinary suffering" (p. 294). She argues that love, hate, loss, and mourning are part of the "ordinary work of growing up" (2002, p. 131). Gilbert, with a background in English Literature, often takes texts (books and films) as subjects of analysis when talking about adolescent sexuality. In particular, her doctoral thesis (2002) and related article "Literature as Sex Education" (2004), highlights literature as a means of introducing new narratives about sexuality into sex education. Most recently, Gilbert's article on "Contesting Consent in Sex Education" (2018) talks about the "unruliness" of sexuality, which "ventures into the realms of surprise, uncertainty, ambivalence, love and violence" (p. 277) and complicates the process of affirmative consent. Her book *Sexuality in Schools: The Limits of Education* (2014) also contributes an extensive discussion of sex education and queer youth.

Gilbert's work has influenced my own perspectives on the vicissitudes of sexuality, especially as it relates to human failings. As a result, I am more forgiving and open to

moral ambivalence if it means that sexuality is presented realistically as opposed to idealistically. Gilbert is not particularly concerned with realism in narratives of adolescence. I also believe that it may be most useful to be less concerned with critiquing literature that does not conform to realistic forms of sexuality and a lot more concerned with how well narratives engrain a sense of hope within readers. Gilbert's analysis of negative affect in sexual relationships is significant when applied to YA Literature, because narratives of sexuality that contain suffering are typically considered to be repressive as opposed to part and parcel to growing up. Throughout this thesis I argue, with evidence from readers' experiences, that the negative and even dangerous aspects of sexuality have a place in literature for teens and can result in positive transformative experiences.

Scholar Sharon Lamb participates in the discussion of the *discourse of desire* as a voice of critique. Lamb (2010) argues that the presence of pleasure is not necessarily the best marker for "healthy" relationships because pleasure can be elusive, even to adults, and can exist in negative sexual situations. Instead, Lamb (2010, 2013) argues that sex education should be ethics based, because an underlying ethos of care, compassion, fairness, equality, and mutuality is a better measure for healthy relationships. Lamb's perspective come to life most clearly in Minnie's story of heartache in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Chapter 5), where carnal desire overpowers the need for much needed care. While I do maintain that desire/pleasure/erotics are vital to healthy relationships and that this discourse is exceptionally important because it is sorely missing in YA Literature, I frequently employ Lamb's argument when speaking about qualities of a "good" sexual relationship. In accompaniment to Gilbert's rhetoric, I extend Lamb's discussion by speaking about the pitfalls of erotic love (*eros*) and the importance of human connection in the face of the indifference that is often encouraged in society. Following Lamb's work, I also offer an alternative to love as the only valid context for sex to take place in YA Literature (Christian-Smith, 1990). I emphasise *agape* love as a type of feeling that could be present within any type of sexual relationship, from the purposely ephemeral to the committed, and is more conducive to ethical and caring relationships than erotic love alone. This type of love can be observed in the Drarry

fanfiction that I analyse in Chapter 7, which presented the most ethical, caring, and pleasure-filled relationships of the texts that I read for this study.

2.3 Sexuality in Young Adult Literature

In this section, I have grouped together the three most authoritative and comprehensive texts on sexuality in YA Literature that I examined for this study. These texts all take a critical approach to YA Literature and identify codes of romance, relationships, and sexuality that are repressive in nature. I use these texts extensively throughout this project as a foundation for analysing the problematic aspects of YA Literature related to sexuality.

To begin, Linda K. Christian-Smith's *Becoming a Woman Through Romance* (1990) examines the presentation of femininity in YA Romance in relation to romance, sexuality, beauty, and power. The title of this book is apt, because it lays out the socialising potential of YA Literature and how it communicates what it means to be a young woman, as both a sexual subject and as a member of society. Of particular interest to this study is Christian-Smith's identification of codes of romance and sexuality. Christian-Smith argues that romance is a regulating power of femininity and relationships with young men are coded as key components of heroine's lives, providing meaning in their lives where there was little before. Christian-Smith describes the codes of romance as a space of power/repression and heteronormativity:

1. Romance is a market relationship.
2. Romance is a heterosexual practice.
3. Romance manages sexuality while privileging nongenital forms of sexual expression.
4. Romance is a transforming experience giving meaning to heroines' lives and endowing heroines with prestige.
5. Romance is about the dominance of men and the subordination of women. (p. 17)

According to Christian-Smith, codes of sexuality in YA Romance set the stage for heterosexuality where pleasure and sexual activity are both defined and regulated:

1. Romance is the only proper context for sexuality.
2. Genital sexuality is mostly reserved for adults.
3. Girls respond to boys' sexual overtures but do not initiate any of their own.

4. Resistance to genital practices is encouraged.
5. Sexual definitions reside within a network of power based in romance and the family. (p. 32)

Although this text is nearing forty years of age, these codes identified by Christian-Smith are still extremely relevant and remain significant in the analysis of many contemporary YA romances. While there have been changes, especially in novels published after 2010, this text cannot be overlooked as a comprehensive and foundational text in the study of YA romance. *Becoming a Woman Through Romance* was one of the initial inspirations for this project. Early in my academic studies, I spotted and became engrossed in this book while on-shift working as a page at my university library. I was dumbfounded by both the date of publication of this book and how it quite neatly mapped onto a recent series I had just finished, Stephenie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga*. In particular, very little had changed in terms of representation of female sexuality and gendered dynamics of relationships since the publication of her book in 1990. Not an aficionado of YA Literature at the time, this book threw me into the scholarly examination of narratives of sex and relationships in YA Literature published in the 21st century. This book remains a touchstone in my work. Christian-Smith also incorporated interviews with young readers into her work. Although this component of the study does not comprise a significant portion of the book, or provide the most interesting observations, it acknowledges the reader-text relationship. I use Christian-Smith's text prominently in Chapters 4 and 6 when analysing "standards of a relationship" and codes of romance that are embedded in narratives of young women's sexual lives in YA romance. Many participants in this study looked to YA Literature to provide examples of what relationships were like in practice. I use Christian-Smith's framework as a guide to identifying problematic gendered codes alongside my own analysis and observations of contemporary narratives of sexuality.

Roberta S. Trites' book *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Young Adult Literature* (2000) is one of the most widely cited texts in YA Literature studies. Trites' book describes the socialising potential of YA Literature, the institutions it upholds, and the messages that it sends to readers. Trites' chapter on sexuality in particular informs this study. By analysing books such as Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975), one of the most well-known and read YA novels about a sexually-explicit relationship, this chapter

exposes the ways that YA Literature upholds repressive ideology surrounding sexuality.

Trites writes:

Teenage character's in YA novels agonize about almost every aspect of human sexuality: decisions about whether to have sex, issues of sexual orientation, issues of birth control and responsibility, unwanted pregnancies, masturbation, orgasms, nocturnal emissions, sexually transmitted diseases, pornography, and prostitution. The occasional teenage protagonist even quits agonizing about sexuality long enough to enjoy sex, but such characters seem more the exception than the rule. (p. 84)

Here, Trites describes a scenario which echoes Foucault's (1978) assessment of sexuality in Western culture: that discourse around sexuality is abundant, not silenced, and it is this discourse that both creates and regulates sexuality. Trites argues that discourses of sexuality in YA Literature frequently depict sexuality as displeasure, instead of pleasure, in an attempt to repress adolescent sexuality lest teens become too aware or involved in the power of sexuality. She writes, "Some YA novels seem more preoccupied with influencing how adolescent readers will behave when they are not reading than with describing human sexuality honestly" (p. 85). This text is foundational to this project. It draws attention especially to the didactic nature of YA Literature, exposing "adultist" views and agendas that revolve around the socialising of young people through dominant discourses of sexuality and good citizenship. It also draws attention to the different ways that the class, race, or gender of characters can determine their "access" to power in narratives. For example, this can be observed through the relationship between gender and characters' power to freely experience pleasure. This is at the heart of many of the arguments that I make in this text about the presentation of adolescent sexuality across genre and form. In particular, it gives me a platform from which to formulate how YA Literature can go beyond didacticism and get at the root of human sexuality. This includes how to include realities of sexual relationships, such as displeasure, danger, and negative consequences, without subscribing to repressive strategies.

Lydia Kokkola's text *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality: Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants* (2013) is one of the most comprehensive analyses of sexuality in literature about teens since Trites' *Disturbing the Universe* (2000). Kokkola demonstrates throughout her text that very little has changed in regard to how teen sexuality is

presented in YA Literature since the turn of the 21st century, and condemns most of the texts in her corpus to similar failings identified by Trites. She argues that many novels for teens, even texts which attempt to be very liberal and depict controversial topics in affirming ways, portray teens as “sexy sinners or delinquent deviants” (p. 214). This portrayal acts to reify stereotypes and normative constructions of gender and sexuality. Kokkola argues that this quality exists because, for the most part, YA Literature is written by adults and as a consequence, many representations of teens are what adults think they should be. Kokkola (2013) writes that:

...fiction for teens is a place where adults can communicate directly with adolescents...many of the novels are committed to maintaining this discourse of panic and crisis...[and] reflect a desperate desire to hold on to the last dregs of hope that the innocence of childhood can be shored up and protected. (p. 210)

One of the main components of Kokkola’s work that I look to is her conceptualisation of what a “better” sexually-themed literature for teens would look like. What Kokkola suggests is to provide what she describes as a “radical” literature about teen sexuality and carnal desire. She writes, that a “radical” literature for teens about teenage sexuality and desire would be:

...a literature that tries to get at the root of the phenomenon of desire and would situate that desire within the entirety of the society they inhabit. It would be a literature that endeavours to speak honestly and openly to its readers, which invites dialogue and refuses to either condescend or to pander to the youngster’s lack of experience and/or knowledge. (p. 211)

Kokkola’s vision provides me with a starting point for both the evaluation of narratives of teen sexuality and my own suggestions about changes that could be made to these narratives. It also ties into resistance to didacticism in YA Literature, which is one of the underlying problems of YA Literature both in terms of sexuality but also broader categories such as identity development and good citizenship.

2.4 Reading Studies

In this section, I describe the major works from the area of Reading Studies that have shaped this project conceptually and methodologically. They are all tied together by their emphasis on studying the value and impact of fiction through the reader’s perspective.

These works have provided a foundation for my approach to studying YA Literature as an information source on sexuality. In addition, the findings from these studies also inform my analysis, especially in regard to readers of romance and LGBTQ readers.

Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading is the main theory of reading used in this study. Rosenblatt was a prominent reading theorist and a steadfast advocate for literature as a means of understanding ourselves and the world. For Rosenblatt, reading was an intimate, personal experience that could have a powerful influence on our lives. She wrote in her seminal work, *Literature as Exploration* (1938):

Is not the substance of literature everything that man has thought or felt or created?...The joys of adventure, the delight in the beauty of the world, the intensities of triumph and defeat, the self-questionings and self-realizations, the pangs of love and hate – indeed, as Henry James has said, “all life, all feeling, all observation, all vision” – these are the province of literature. (pp. 5-6)

Literature as Exploration is a guide for teachers of literature to encourage qualities in adolescents such as critical thinking, emotional intelligence, empathy for others, and determination of will through engaging with texts of both aesthetic and social value. Here, Rosenblatt discourages any kind of prescribed reading or forced interpretation by the teacher, highlighting the theory that every student brings their own personal experience of life to the reading of a text and benefits most when they explore this interaction within themselves. In this text, Rosenblatt outlines the transactional theory of reading, explaining that:

The novel or poem or play remains merely inkspots on paper until a reader transforms them into sets of meaningful symbols. The literary work exists in a live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and emotional meanings into the patter of verbal symbols, and those symbols channel his thoughts and feelings. (p. 25)

Her later publication *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978) further defines the transactional theory of reading, where reading is an *event* where the interpretation of a text is wrought within a matrix of the author's words and the reader's own life experience. These works are highly relevant to this project in two ways. One, Rosenblatt emphasises the necessity of considering the author, text, and reader in understanding the experience of reading. While many scholars,

according to their disciplines, study these actors separately, I follow the position that it is important to understand each of these actors to fully examine the phenomenon of learning from literary works. This provided a framework for my methodology as well as a lens for my analysis of texts and reader experiences. Second, Rosenblatt highlights two different types of reading and their crossover: aesthetic reading and efferent reading. In *aesthetic reading*, “the reader’s attention is centered directly on what he is living through during his relationship with that particular text” (p. 25) and is typically associated with reading literary works of art. In opposition, *efferent reading* is where the reader’s attention is directed outward towards “concepts to be retained, ideas to be tested, actions to be performed after the reading of the text” (p. 24). However, Rosenblatt is quick to note that aesthetic and efferent reading are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Rosenblatt’s theories of reading set the stage for many works in the field of reading studies. In my work, one of my main assumptions is that readers participate in both aesthetic and efferent reading when learning about sexuality from texts, either purposely or spontaneously (also see below for Ross’ work on *finding without seeking*).

Janice Radway’s study of romance readers informs this thesis work on both a theoretical and methodological level. In her highly-influential text *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, originally published in 1984, Radway investigates the motivations and practices of female romance readers. In particular, her study investigates the interstices between typically conservative, repressive ideology found in romance novels and how romance readers may both accept and dispute this ideology through their reading practices. Her analysis found that the women readers in her study turned to romance to help fulfil deep psychological needs that she attributes to the conditions of patriarchy, and more specifically, to the overwhelming obligation to care for others. Through their reading, these readers carved out a space of their own to “escape” the stress and minutia of their daily lives. Radway concludes that although it would be difficult to show any long-term positive or negative effects of romance reading, romance has the potential to be a site for naming dissatisfaction with patriarchal culture for women readers, despite highly-critiqued anti-feminist content in romance. She iterates that although romance reading may have no significant effect on women’s roles in patriarchal culture, it “...may very well obviate the need or desire to demand satisfaction

in the real world because it can be so successfully met in fantasy” (1987, p. 212). For this reason, Radway argues that readers need utopic literature, so that they may live out these experiences vicariously and fulfil a deep longing, but also to provide a vision of a hopeful future. In this way, Radway shows how romance reading has both the potential to be repressive, and to be a catalyst for protest. I incorporate Radway’s analysis of romance and its readers at several points throughout this study, especially in Chapter 6, where conventional romance takes the stage and I deconstruct both the presentation of contemporary YA Romance and reader’s interactions with these kinds of texts.

Radway also emphasises how methodological choices regarding the study of reading can lead us to draw different conclusions. Like Rosenblatt, Radway (1983) describes reading as the interaction between text and context; reading is an *event* where readers construct the meaning of a text from “within a particular context and on the basis of a specific constellation of attitudes and beliefs” (p. 55). Throughout *Reading the Romance*, Radway demonstrates that readers may interact with texts in unexpected and contradictory ways, especially in regards to content that may be perceived as harmful to women. She writes, “We must not, in short, look only at mass-produced objects themselves on the assumption that they bear all of their significances on their surface, as it were, and reveal them automatically to us” (1987, p. 221). In a follow-up article to *Reading the Romance*, Radway (1983) further emphasises the need to investigate the women’s reading experiences within the context of everyday life in addition to textual analysis by arguing that previous studies of romance novels:

...fail[ed] to detect the ways in which the activity [of reading practices] may serve positive functions even as the novels celebrate patriarchal institutions. Consequently, they also fail[e] to understand that some contemporary romances actually attempt to reconcile changing attitudes about gender behavior with more traditional sexual arrangements. (p. 54)

In sum, regardless of the objective meaning of a text, the transaction between text and reader renders the experience as more than a common sense interpretation of a text. Radway’s findings are an exceptional example of the transactional theory of reading at work. In this regard, Radway’s study acts as methodological guide for my project, as it

provides an example of a study that incorporates an analysis of reader experiences, texts, and authors that results in a rich presentation of the phenomenon under examination.

Approaching reading from an LIS perspective, Catherine Ross' (1999, 2000) seminal research on *finding without seeking* was the first to draw links between fiction reading and Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS). Ross found that although readers of fiction did not necessarily see themselves as actively seeking information, they were able to find valued information in fiction that informed their everyday lives. Ross takes a similar perspective to the reading experience as Rosenblatt by stating: when reading narratives, "readers bring to the texts their own individual concerns and interests, which act as a filter to highlight those aspects of the text that speak to their concerns" (Ross, 1999, p. 785). Ross (2000) stresses that laying behind each book is a story situated in the context of the reader's life, one that turns the narrative into a powerful source of information. In line with Rosenblatt's work, Ross explores this relationship between aesthetic and efferent reading that appear latent in the context of pleasure reading. Ross' work is significant in the context of reading studies because it systematically outlines the phenomenon of fiction as a source of information. Ross (2000) found that reading for pleasure had an observable effect within the lives of readers. Readers reported that books informed their lives in the following ways:

- Awakening/new perspective/enlargement of possibilities;
- Models for identity;
- Reassurance, comfort, confirmation of self-worth, strength;
- Connection with others/awareness of not being alone;
- Courage to make a change;
- Acceptance;
- Disinterested understanding of the world.

While these dimensions of reading may have been known, felt, or assumed previously, the significance of Ross' work is that it confirms these dimensions through rigorous empirical research and offers a model for pleasure reading that situates it within the realm of information. Ross offers a concise roadmap as to the roles that pleasure reading, both fiction and non-fiction, takes on in the lives of readers. It positions pleasure reading as a rich, transformative source of information. This work is extended in her article with

Lynne McKechnie and Paulette Rothbauer and (2007) on the affective dimensions of reading, which specifically discusses the emotional responses to reading and the effects that they have on identity and personal relationships. I approach YA Literature from this perspective as well, that literature is a source of valuable information in the context of everyday life. Incorporating Ross' work into this thesis also places it firmly within the field of LIS.

Paulette M. Rothbauer's research in the sub-field of Reading Studies builds a foundation for understanding young people, their reading, and the services that libraries provide to them. Chiefly, her doctoral research *Finding and Creating Possibility: Reading in the Lives of Lesbian, Bisexual and Queer Young Women* (2004a) informed both my methodological framework for this study as well as the analysis of the themes in both the interviews and texts. Following Rothbauer's approach to studying reading with a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, I am assuming the position that individual experience is a means of understanding the world. This is reflected in my approach and my choice to conduct interviews for this study, which are based on Rothbauer's interview schedule (see Chapter 3 for more explanation). Thematically, Rothbauer's dissertation research is also one of the most comprehensive and large-scale studies on LGBTQ young women and their reading. This has provided me with insight into the ways lesbian and queer young women interact with literature about queer relationships, particularly in regard to how they would envision more positive and empowering narratives.

Rothbauer is also an advocate for teens and their reading in the context of libraries. For example, Rothbauer's chapter in *Reading Matters: What the Research Reveals about Reading, Libraries, and Community* (2006) on teens breaks down stereotypes about teen readers and outlines their reading practices and interests. She also provides suggestions for libraries and parents to support young people's reading that takes into account their unique reading context. Rothbauer has also investigated how adult readers treat controversial YA Literature in review and in library collections. For example, Paulette Rothbauer and Lynne McKechnie (2000) analysed professional reviews of LGBTQ YA Literature to determine how they were described/evaluated and also determined the prevalence of LGBTQ YA texts held within Canadian libraries (1999). More recently,

Rothbauer's (2013) chapter in *Transforming Young Adult Services* draws a link between research in critical youth studies done by scholars such as Nancy Lesko (2001) on the construction of adolescence based on age/developmental theory and transposes this information into the library context. This paper in particular informs both theory and practice. It draws attention to library policy and practice that utilises developmental theory and brings into question the assumptions made about teens and their behaviour. These works inform my understanding of the reading practices and interests of teens and how they are viewed in a library context. They also provide me with a framework for bridging theories of adolescents/ce from different fields and translating this knowledge into practical suggestions for library professionals.

2.5 Library and Information Science

In this section, I draw together the works done in Library and Information Science that intersect with the other major components of this research. Foremost this includes studies done on YA Literature that come from a distinctly LIS perspective. This situates YA Literature within the context of ELIS, reading, education, libraries, and topics of particular interest to LIS such as censorship and intellectual freedom. These perspectives provide different insights into YA Literature than you would find in Children's Literature, for example. As Shelby A. Wolf, Karen Coats, Patricia Enciso, and Christine A. Jenkins state in their *Handbook of Research on Children's and Young Adult Literature* (2011), LIS research is often located...“...between intellectual worldviews of either end of the text–reader continuum, because their professional work is located precisely in the intersection between texts and young readers”. In other words, LIS research is uniquely positioned to bridge the gap between English Literature, LIS, and Education. The following works provide a model for this type of interdisciplinary research that also examine similar topics covered by this thesis.

The subject and approach for this thesis project closely mirror the work of Amy Pattee, as they each span both the fields of Children's Literature, LIS, and Education. Pattee's research contributes to the rich but narrow field of YA Literature studies by examining topics such as the cultural construction of adolescence, political economics, and sexuality in popular YA texts such as the *Sweet Valley High* (2011), *Gossip Girls* (2006a), and *Boy*

Meets Boy (2008). More broadly, Pattee's work also expands on the ways in which YA Literature is conceptualised and studied. For example, her article on Young Adult Literature and New Adult Literature (2017) describes and defines these two distinct yet overlapping genres. This rigorous examination of the historical and contemporary theory on literature written for young people culminates in a refined articulation of the nuances of each group of literature and reveals much about both through their juxtaposition. Pattee's study of YA Literature is also translated into her publications in the field of LIS. In particular, her expertise is applied to her work on collection development and service practices surrounding YA materials. This includes conversations about collection development and readers' advisory services, especially involving sexual materials, and a practical guide for *Developing Library Collections for Today's Young Adults* (2014).

Most prominently, Pattee's article in YALSA's *Young Adult Library Services* entitled "The Secret Source: Sexually Explicit Young Adult Literature as an Information Source" (2006b) was a key piece of literature that informed this project. This article claims YA Literature specifically as an "alternative information source" on sexuality and places it within the context of sex education, reading studies, and information seeking. Unlike other prominent YA Literature scholars who critique presentations of sexuality in YA Literature, Pattee emphasises the serious positive potential of YA Literature as an alternative resource on sexuality for young people. She highlights the use of non-clinical language, eroticism, lived experience, and factual information as unique to the genre and argues for the inclusion of sexually-explicit scenes in narratives of teen sexuality. This piece acts as a gateway for my thesis research, providing scaffolding for a deep discussion of these qualities of sexually-explicit YA Literature in relation to the experiences of young readers and a wider variety of texts.

Similar to Amy Pattee, Loretta Gaffney approaches her study of YA Literature from a distinct Library and Information Science perspective. Her text *Young Adult Literature, Libraries, and Conservative Activism* (2017) has informed this project broadly as it is a comprehensive examination of the spaces where YA Literature and its readers intersect with library theory, research, policy and practice. First, Gaffney pays special attention to

teen readers themselves in this text: who they are, what they read, and how they fit into the cultural and political landscape of YA Literature. This approach provides a good example of how to include readers in an analysis of literature but also provides information on teen readers in the context of libraries. Second, Gaffney identifies approaches to reading YA Literature as aesthetic, pedagogical, and recreational. In particular, her analysis of the “problem novel” has been informative to this project as it further describes the issue of didacticism in YA Literature and contextualises it within readers’ advisory practices such as “prescribed reading”. Throughout her book, Gaffney suggests that it is unnecessary for librarians to justify the presence of YA Literature based on its literary or educational value – as reading for pleasure (typically associated with popular “junk” literature) is equally legitimate and supports readers’ freedom to read. I tie this into chapters where I talk about the importance of including pleasure in narratives, such as LGBTQ novels, when there is typically too much emphasis on the “problems” of everyday life. Third, Gaffney’s chapter “‘No Longer Safe’: Young Adult Literature and Conservative Activism”¹² animates contemporary censorial initiatives against sexually-themed reading materials for young people. Using a case of controversy that arose in the community of West Bend over a collection of LGBTQ books for teens at the local library, Gaffney describes conservative moral and political resistance to sex in literature and the statements these initiatives make about how desire should be controlled in society, literature, and libraries. Gaffney also acknowledges gender by acknowledging that moral panics over teens and their reading “...are usually framed around readers deemed to be reluctant, deficient, or otherwise weak: young readers, certainly, but also women, immigrants, and working people” (p. 24). This positions young women in particular as the audience of conservative content in YA Literature or subjects of concern from conservative challengers of YA Literature. In Gaffney’s (2012) dissertation research on conservative activism and libraries, she extends her scope from challenges to materials to challenges to libraries, as public institutions, and their policies directly. She conceptualises conservative censorial acts as based in a fundamental conflict over the role

¹² Also published separately as: Gaffney, L. M. (2014). “No longer safe”: West Bend, Young Adult Literature, and conservative library activism. *Library Trends*, 62(4), 730-739.

of “information, curiosity, and pleasure in human life” (p. 115). Gaffney explains that this conflict arises from competing worldviews, where sexual conservatives believe that too much information about sexuality may lead young people into moral turmoil and sexual liberals believe that young people need more information to make good decisions about their lives. Gaffney articulates:

...what is at the root of [conservative activists’] objections is a model of reading that demands pleasure and curiosity be carefully monitored and controlled. In this sense, conservative activists frame sex in much the same light as they do reading, as a source of pleasure and distraction that can, without moral strictures and clear educational utility, easily lead vulnerable young people astray. (p. 152)

These works inform my understanding of recent censorial practices and how “information, curiosity, and pleasure in human life” that are related to sexuality create tension in the context of YA Literature.

Emily Knox’s works on censorship and intellectual freedom provide some of the most comprehensive and precise investigations into the motivations, justifications, and worldviews of book challengers. Her monograph *Book Banning in 21st-Century America* (2015) echoes that of Nancy Lesko (2001), which grounds anxieties about young people’s exposure to topics such as sex, drugs, violence, or profanity in moral panics about the decay of society and preserving the innocence of young people. What makes Knox’s work unique is that she focuses her analysis on the discourse of challengers themselves, sourced from documents from challenge cases and interviews conducted by Knox, to explain the phenomenon of book banning. This method results in empirical evidence that is framed by Knox in such a way that it offers a grounded and comprehensible explanation for why controversial materials are targeted by challengers and why public institutions are often the point of contact for these challenges.

Knox (2014a, 2015) argues that in a time when access to books has never been easier, censorship cases are largely symbolic and have more to do with how collections reflect community norms than they have to do with access. In other words, the act of removing a text from a library itself is unlikely to prevent young readers from accessing these texts elsewhere. A challenge is more an effort to have public institutions, as proxies for

community opinion, align with particular worldviews through the processes of selecting materials, which works to legitimise or reject certain types of knowledge. According to Knox (2014b), for libraries, who have long been committed to intellectual freedom, as evident in LIS policy, practice, and research, the library itself is often in direct conflict with the (mostly) conservative worldview of censors. Knox (2014a, 2015) also examines challenger discourse around books and reading. She explains that challengers often apply a common sense interpretation to literature, where the words in the text “say what they mean and mean what they say” and can only be interpreted one way. A common sense interpretation of texts feeds into challengers’ claims that young people lack the critical thinking skills to decode complicated narratives. Reading is also seen by challengers as a powerful relationship between reader and text, where reading can have a considerable effect on one’s path in life. In this discourse, reading harmful material may lead young readers to act out what they have read or, in the long-term, lead them towards moral decline. In regard to gender, Knox observed that among censors, the extent to which gender roles were adopted is still considered a marker for the health of society. She writes:

The themes of the moral drift of society...are often strongly yoked with ideas concerning sexual morality and gender roles for many of the challengers’ understanding of social and moral order. The structures of many challengers’ worldviews in these areas tilt toward what one might call a traditional morality wherein the proper outlet for sexuality is within a heterosexual married, family unit. (p. 125)

This, coupled with the idea that young people cannot distance themselves from the content they read, helps to explain why sex, homosexuality, and ambivalent gender roles are *still* controversial within the context of YA Literature. Knox also confirms the power of books in society. Foremost, she explains that censors regard printed materials as significant cultural artifacts and the act of publishing is a process of legitimisation.

I use these findings at multiple points throughout this thesis. First, Knox’s work informs my understanding of the issues at the heart of challenges to YA Literature and the worldviews of censors. Second, it informs my analysis of YA Literature as a genre and how fear of content that is considered harmful for young people, especially surrounding

sexuality, shapes and limits teen content. Third, Knox's findings support an argument that the publication of and presence of YA texts within libraries are a political statement and as such contribute to the legitimisation of what is considered appropriate content for teens in greater society.

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined the major works that form the conceptual framework for this project. In each section, I have identified the seminal, dominant or unique works from numerous fields that have had significant impact within their areas of research and this project. Although I have highlighted the influence of these major works here, many other works have informed my analysis and are referred to within each individual chapter. In the next chapter, I describe the methodology used to study the value and impact of sexually-themed YA Literature, which includes interviews with young women readers and an analysis of YA texts.

Chapter 3

3 Methodology

“The poem” comes into being in the live circuit set up between the reader and “the text”... We cannot simply look at the text and predict the poem.

Louise Rosenblatt (1978, p. 14)

This thesis project is driven by three main research questions:

RQ1: What are the experiences of young women who read sexually-themed Young Adult (YA) Literature and how might they be informed about relationships and sex when engaging with sexually-themed Young Adult Literature?

RQ2: What narratives of sexuality are present in sexually-themed Young Adult Literature and how might these narratives potentially inform young women readers about relationships and sex?

RQ3: How can the knowledge gained by this investigation directly inform and improve library collections and service practices?

In order to answer these questions, this project consists of two research components: (1) interviews with young women on their experiences reading sexually-themed YA Literature and (2) the textual analysis of a selection of sexually-themed YA Literature. Each component of the project informs the other simultaneously to answer one overarching question: what is the value and impact of sexually-themed YA Literature in the lives of young women readers? In conclusion to this project, the findings are used to make informed suggestions as to how libraries can improve access to sexually-themed texts for young readers.

3.1 Approach to Inquiry

Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Feminist Inquiry are the two main approaches to inquiry that direct and inform this project on epistemological, methodological, and theoretical levels. In this section, I describe how each of these approaches have informed each stage of the project.

Hermeneutic phenomenology. A basic definition of phenomenology is the study of lived experience, an approach to understanding phenomena through human beings' subjective experience. Or, as Rita Felski (2008) writes, "Phenomenology insists that the world is always the world as it appears to us, as it is filtered through our consciousness, perception, and judgment" (p. 17). The central figures of phenomenology (Edmond Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Jean-Paul Sartre) sought to emphasise subjective experience as a way of understanding the world, rejecting "scientific realism...and the empiricist idea that genuine legitimate knowledge can be had only by rejecting the way we perceive the world of everyday life as 'mere appearance'" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 225). As Susann Laverly (2003) outlines, Hermeneutic phenomenology, as developed by Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, has specific characteristics within phenomenology and emphasises:

- historicity – a person's history or background is inseparable from how they make meaning in the world;
- phenomena are understood through the study of language – this includes cultural texts such as written and verbal communications, visual arts and music;
- interpretation is critical to meaning-making – all human experience involves interpretation that is influenced by a person's history and background and interpretation is an ever evolving process.

Methodologically, hermeneutic phenomenology is typically associated with qualitative inquiry and with in-depth interviewing as the main method for gathering data. According to April Morgan (2011), a phenomenologically informed methodology embodies the following characteristics:

- accepts that human experience is dynamic and its meaning is not always clear;
- employs disciplined forms of dialogue as a primary means of gathering and assessing information about human experience;
- is sensitive to the possibility that initial understandings often evolve, allowing subsequent understandings to be incorporated as they appear. (p. xiii)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is also not concerned with one "correct" or "valid" interpretation of a text. Rather, it considers each interpretation of a text as an interaction

between historically produced texts and readers (Allen, 1995). Although rigour, credibility, and trustworthiness are essential in assessing the validity of the interpretations of the data, meeting criteria such as internal/external validity, objectivity, and reproducibility are not (Lavery, 2003). Phenomenology also allows for a variation of values and interpretations to occur and acknowledges the subjectivity of the researcher as playing a role in this analysis.

A hermeneutic phenomenological approach to inquiry is especially appropriate for studies of readers and reading because it often underscores descriptions of how meaning is made within the context of reading. In fact, phenomenology as both epistemology and methodology has strong roots in studies of readers and reading (see: Cedeira Serantes, 2014; Christian-Smith, 1990; Felski, 2008; Radway, 1987; Rosenblatt, 1938, 1978; Ross, 1999; and Rothbauer, 2004a). As a prime example, Louise Rosenblatt's (1938, 1978) transactional theory of reading explicitly recognises the reader's historicity as a major factor in how readers make meaning of texts. Essentially, texts are interpreted differently based on a reader's own unique life experience. This theory of reading is echoed throughout many studies of reading. For example, Janice Radway (1983) describes the experience of reading as the interaction between the text and the reader's unique life context. In Rita Felski's manifesto *Uses of Literature* (2008) she writes that, in using phenomenology to study the value and impact of literature, "We are called on, in other words, to do justice to how readers respond to the words they encounter, rather than relying on textbook theories or wishful speculations about what reading is supposed to be" (p. 17). Moreover, in his article "Phenomenology and Information Studies", John Budd (2005) draws a direct link between phenomenology and reading by emphasising that a work of literature is always more than the text alone, it also includes the interpretations made by the reader.

As an epistemology and a methodology, hermeneutic phenomenology informs the interview methodology and data analysis used for this study. In this thesis, I look specifically to Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of reading to justify the necessity of examining both the words of a text and readers' experience of a text. As a result, the voices of readers and the details of their experience come into play when evaluating YA

Literature as an information source on sexuality. As part of this, I treat readers' thoughts, criticisms, and ideas as just as significant as scholarly criticism. Felski (2008) writes that "A phenomenology of reading calls for an undogmatic openness to a spectrum of literary responses; that some of these responses are not currently sanctioned in the annals of professional criticism does not render them any less salient" (p. 18). In this study, the result is that readers' voices are not only the subject of study but also voices in the analysis of the texts themselves. In keeping within the framework of phenomenology, I also want to acknowledge that my own historicity – my background, academic training, reading preferences, and personal experiences with love and sex - are undoubtedly inseparable from this project and have had an impact on the findings of this thesis. In effect, this means that the answers to my research questions are answered through the interplay between the researcher (myself), participants, and the texts themselves within this thesis.

Feminist inquiry. This thesis takes a feminist approach to interviewing methodology and data analysis. There is no one single methodology, method, or epistemology associated with feminist research. Rather, it is a "holistic endeavour" that underpins all stages of the research process with criticisms of the social and cultural structures that oppress women and other marginalised groups (Hesse-Biber & Brooks, 2007). A feminist approach to research aims to: draw attention to gender-based stereotypes and biases, promote the empowerment of women and other marginalised groups, and apply research findings in a way that encourages meaningful social change (Hesse-Biber & Brooks, 2007). One of the advantages of approaching research from a feminist perspective is that it may contribute to minimising power imbalances and the exploitation of marginalised groups during the research process. Since this project involves interviewing on a sensitive topic and involves women of diverse sexual orientations and ethnicities, this was something that I paid close attention to during the interviewing stage. However, it is important to be aware that there are still issues of power in the relationship between researcher and participant, regardless of approach, which need to be continually acknowledged. As Judith Stacey (1988) points out in her essay "Can There Be a Feminist Ethnography?", interviewing methods are conducive to the principles of feminist research, but inequality, exploitation, and even betrayal surface as inherent parts of this kind of research during fieldwork and

the reporting of data. She recommends “rigorous self-awareness of the ethical pitfalls in the method” (p. 17) to be able to monitor and mitigate any harm to which the researcher may expose their participants. Feminist methodology also shares many commonalities with hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. Both operate under the same rejection of pre-defined structures and privilege a focus on lived experience (Maynard, 1994). The use of qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviewing, is often preferred. There is also a heavy emphasis on the practice of *reciprocity*, *rapport*, and *reflexivity* (Laverty, 2003). Especially in regard to self-reflexivity, both approaches are sensitive to the position of the researcher, their history, and how their world-view influences every stage of the research project.

These characteristics of feminist research are an explicit part of this research project since I place great weight on the voices of the young women I interviewed, often approach the analysis of texts through the lens of gender, and ultimately suggest practical ways to improve narratives of sexuality that may inform the sexual lives of young women. In terms of the analysis stage of research, I worked with many feminist texts which have had a profound impact on the way that I interpreted both interview data and the texts themselves. These are outlined in detail in Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework. At times throughout the work for this thesis, I have interrogated my own understanding of feminist readings on difficult topics, such as statutory rape or violent sex, and I did not always take a hard stance against situations or relationships which are generally seen as harmful, especially for women. I have a positive reading of many texts that have been written-off as too problematic to be valuable as sources of information on sexuality for young people. Here, I turn to Rita Felski (2008, 2015) for support, who has written that in literary criticism “[t]he negative has become inescapably, overbearingly, normative...at this point, we are all resisting readers; perhaps the time has come to resist the automatism of our own resistance, to risk alternative forms of aesthetic engagement” (pp. 3-4). Although I do take a largely critical stance when analysing YA Literature and especially the codes related to heteronormativity and patriarchy, I am also often unbothered by them or I have felt that the issues are too complicated to have a concrete answer attributed to them. In this thesis, I have criticised where I thought it was due but I have also celebrated texts in ways that they have not necessarily been celebrated before. The readers in this

study also saw positive qualities in texts that I would normally disagree with, and I have reflected these as well throughout this thesis.

3.2 Part One: Interviews with Young Women Readers

RQ 1: What are the experiences of young women who read sexually-themed Young Adult Literature and how might they be informed about relationships and sex when engaging with sexually-themed Young Adult Literature?

In this section, I describe the methodology used for the interviews that I conducted with young women readers. For the purpose of this chapter, I have written the interview methodology first and the textual analysis methodology second. In fact, these were simultaneous and overlapping processes.

3.2.1 Phenomenological In-Depth Interviews

Phenomenological in-depth interviews were used to study readers' experiences with sexually-themed YA Literature. According to Irving Seidman (2006), "At the root of in-depth interviewing is an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (p. 9). The interview questions for this project were designed using two guiding strategies for phenomenological interviewing (Seidman, 2006; Creswell, 2013) and examples of hermeneutic phenomenological interview schedules developed by Paulette Rothbauer (2004a) and Lucia Cedeira Serantes (2014) during their work interviewing teen and young adult readers.

First, the following two broad questions developed by John Creswell (2013) provided an underlying structure that informed the basic *theme* of each individual question:

1. What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon?
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon. (p. 81)

By using these questions as a guide, Creswell suggests that they "focus attention on gathering data that will lead to a textual and structural description of the experiences, and ultimately provide an understanding of the common experiences of the participants" (p.

81). This aided in focusing and formulating each question to adhere to phenomenologically based inquiry.

Second, I used an adapted version of Irving Seidman's (2006) "Three-Interview Series" structure for in-depth interviewing to guide the *content* of each question. The three-interview structure puts an emphasis on developing the context of the experience, the details of the experience, and the meaning of the experience:

1. Focused Life History: establishes the context of the participant's history in light of the topic.
2. The Details of the Experience: allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience in the topic area.
3. Reflecting on the Meaning: encourages participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them. (pp. 16-19)

Originally separated by Seidman into three separate interviews, I condensed the three-interview series into a single 60 to 90 minute interview. The bulk of the interview questions were weighted towards the details of the experience, past and present.

Lastly, I used examples of hermeneutic phenomenological interviewing schedules from the doctoral research of Rothbauer (2004a) and Cedeira Serantes (2014) to guide the construction of questions that would uncover specific facets of the reading experiences of participants. Rothbauer's (2004a) work looked at the reading practices and experiences of self-identified gay, lesbian, and queer young women. In a similar study, Cedeira Serantes (2014) explored the role of comics in the lives of young readers. A number of the questions they created¹³ were directly applicable to my project. For example, Rothbauer used questions that accentuated voluntary reading practices and preferences with words such as "for pleasure", "choose", "favourite", "do not enjoy" (p. 221). Cedeira Serantes asked questions that were intended to probe the participants to relate their experiences in meaningful detail and aimed to uncover the value of an underappreciated medium (in her

¹³ Also derived from Ross (1999).

case, comics) by asking participants to explain what is “special” about those materials (p. 347). Additionally, both researchers also used questions such as “Where do you get your books to read?” (Rothbauer, 2004a, p. 221) to uncover through which community sites, such as bookstores, friend groups, and libraries, participants were gaining access to materials.

3.2.2 Interview Schedule

The final interview schedule consisted of 18 questions (see Appendix D for complete interview schedule).

Focused life history. Questions 1 through 4 asked participants about their early experiences learning and reading about sexuality. They also aimed to identify specific memories in their reading history that were especially significant to them as early readers of sexually-themed literature. Although these questions did not specifically ask about participants’ background or family history, they often led to quite detailed descriptions of these aspects of their lives. In this part of the interview, participants often described where they grew up, what kind of education they have, their family dynamics, any religious affiliations, their ethnic background, their friendships, their sexual and relationship history, and more. These questions led to some of the richest details about participants’ reading experiences. For example, one of the findings that came from this section was that many participants described themselves as coming from a conservative family and that reading YA Literature was one of the only safe and private sources of information on sexuality they had because their parents never questioned the content of the books they were reading.

The details of the experience. These questions (5 through 12) aimed to uncover what genres of sexually-themed literature participants were reading, how often they read, where they get their materials, and their different interactions with texts. Questions 5 through 8 focus on reading preferences and access. This information has mostly been used in discussion of genres (see Chapters 4 and 6 especially). The latter questions in this section (9 through 12) all focus on participants’ interactions with texts and how narratives of sexuality have informed or transformed their lives in different ways. Each of these

questions are based on themes from sex education and YA literature studies that either act to uncover what information about sexuality has been learned through reading (e.g., information about sexual acts, social/emotion aspects of sexual relationships, healthy relationships) or to further investigate codes of sexuality found in YA Literature. These questions were broad, but participants often gave nuanced and rich descriptions of their experience. For example, when asked “Have you ever read a book about a relationship that you felt strongly against?” participants usually talked about abusive relationships and through these discussions they often revealed strong feminist perspectives on relationships that focused on female empowerment, autonomy, and pleasure.

Reflecting on the meaning. Questions 13 through 16 asked participants to draw connections between their reading experiences and their life experiences and to reflect on YA Literature as an information source on sexuality. For example, Question 13 asked participants to give examples of how they have applied information about relationships or sex from a story to their own lives. Questions of this nature were also asked throughout the interview in the form of follow-up questions. Participants often had revelations about their reading history and practices during the discussion. For example, Scarlet had a tendency to read stories about teenage girls who have illicit affairs with older men. Yet, when she faced a similar situation in her real life, she failed to draw a parallel between what characters experienced and what she was experiencing. She found this a very interesting circumstance, which led her to reflect on how exactly these stories have informed her life, if not as a warning against potentially harmful relationships. This question also led to reflection on how reading narratives of sexuality has influenced participants’ actions, either consciously or subconsciously. Question 14 asked about the social aspects surrounding their reading practices. Questions 15 and 16 specifically asked participants to identify unique characteristics of YA Literature as an information source on sexuality and to reflect on what information could be learned about sexuality from sexually-themed literature.

Other questions. Question 17 was asked to gauge interest in or opinions on participating in a book club where members read sexually-themed literature and discuss the content openly with their peers. This question was asked in part to present the idea of using

literature in the sex education classroom. It also asked participants if they thought the public library would be a good setting for this kind of book club. This led to further discussion about the role of the public library in society, access to sexual materials, their relationship with the library, and also the atmosphere of the library and conflicts surrounding hosting discussions on sexuality.

The last question of the interview (18) asked the participants if there was something they felt I forgot to ask about. For the most part, participants did not have anything more to share. One participant, Madeline, suggested that I ask a specific question about sexual violence or rape culture in YA Literature.

Additional questions and modifications. After conducting the first few interviews I added one question which I asked all of the subsequent participants: “What kind of Young Adult Literature do you read?”. This ended up being the first question I asked participants because what they read played a large role in how I asked the interview questions. The original interview schedule was created with mostly novels in mind, as I predicted that most of the participants would be reading YA novels. However, this was not always the case, and I found that it made the interview process easier if I had a good grasp on the type of stories they were reading to start with. For example, in the second interview I conducted, with Juliet, she read stories in a format with which I was completely unfamiliar. She is one of the anomalous cases included in this study (see pp. 66-67 for explanation). She primarily read amateur online fiction in the form of short stories on *Literotica* and short descriptive erotic “scenes” posted on *Tumblr*. The latter especially is more like pornography than erotica, and this made some of my questions difficult for Juliet to answer because they were just not applicable. With more knowledge of what each participant was reading to start with I was able to tailor some of the questions to allow for these differences.

3.2.3 The Interviewing Relationship: Reciprocity, Rapport and Reflexivity

Seidman (2006) describes in-depth interviewing as both a methodology and a social relationship. Therefore, developing a positive personal relationship with participants was

an integral component of the interview process. Feminist researchers often argue that a personal connection to participants “enhances subjects’ trust and researchers’ empathy, producing better research” (Sprague, 2005, p. 134). However, working towards building a relationship with a participant is a complex process which requires careful consideration involving reciprocity, rapport, and reflexivity.

Reciprocity. A large part of developing a personal relationship with a participant is achieved through reciprocity, where the researcher becomes an equal participant in the interview. Ultimately, this creates an environment where the exchange is more like a conversation and less like an interview (Seidman, 2006). Feminist inquiry advises that researchers should carefully consider the extent to which they talk about themselves as this may limit the opportunities for participants to speak. Or, if the relationship becomes too close, it may limit participants’ willingness to discuss topics that may be seen as socially distasteful (Sprague, 2005). Reciprocity is important as it helps to maintain a certain degree of equality, where researchers and participants share a sense of authority and knowledge on the topic. Common practices in feminist research emphasise respect and acceptance of participants’ experiences when conducting interviews (Raby, 2007).

I practiced reciprocity on multiple occasions during interviews. I occasionally described my own reading experiences, related similar experiences I had to participants, recommended books that I thought participants might enjoy, shared some of my thoughts on particular books, and told them about previous research of mine. I approached each interview with the mindset that each participant was an expert on their own experiences. I told them this outright in the introduction to the interview, and I sometimes asked them for their informed opinions on certain topics to which I could not find an answer. While I did participate in this fashion, I left most of the talking up to the participant. Overall, my participation in this way did help to create a more relaxed, friendly environment.

Reciprocity is also concerned with creating more equal gains between researcher and participant. As the researcher, whose career depends on specialised knowledge and publications, I gain considerably from this research project. Although I personally benefit more from this research project than the participants, through participating in this study

interviewees often gained new perspectives on sexually-themed literature and reading, were able to share their thoughts and interests on a taboo topic in a safe space, and gained the potential to have their existing concerns and criticisms reach a larger audience through publications. Many of the participants gained a better understanding of the literature they read and how it informed their everyday lives. In such cases, curiosity drove many of the interviewees to participate, to see what exactly there was to say about the literature they read, and our discussions often led them to think about topics they had never considered before. This study also helped to validate some of these young women's reading interests. Some participants expressed that they felt like a "weirdo" because of their reading tastes. They felt alone in their desires and did not feel comfortable talking to their friends or family about what they read. This study gave them an opportunity to share this part of their lives with someone who is open-minded, is genuinely interested in their thoughts and practices, and will keep their identity confidential. Although these participants will never know each other's identities, they are now aware that they belong to a reading community and are not alone. Lastly, some participants had concerns about harmful messages in YA Literature, such as rape culture, and this study provided them with a venue to express their opinions in way that may reach a larger audience and inform future research.

Rapport. Rapport refers to "the positive feelings that develop between the interviewer and the subject" (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 137). While developing rapport with a participant is important, Seidman (2006) recommends that a certain degree of distance should be maintained. According to Seidman, an appropriate balance is where the researcher says enough about themselves "to be alive and responsive" but little enough "to preserve the autonomy of the participant's words and to keep the focus of attention on [the participant's] experience rather than [the researcher's]" (p. 96). Developing rapport is also an important part of feminist inquiry as it allows for feelings of empathy and other emotions to be felt and expressed, which can help provide insight into the details of participants' lives.

I started to develop rapport with my participants before the interviews. While scheduling interviews over e-mail I was friendly, used casual language, and was considerate and

flexible when it came to participants' schedules. When they came to the interview, I usually made small-talk with them and expressed my genuine delight that they had agreed to participate. Generally, I was close enough in age to this group of participants that we already shared a common culture and for the most part I treated the participants as I would a peer that I had just met. I often laughed with participants, and used casual language, slang, generational patterns of speech, and swear words as opposed to more sterile, professional, academic language. This was especially true when participants spoke naturally and casually or swore or said crude things. I also found using casual language helpful when participants were nervous or tongue-tied when put on the spot. Keeping equality and shared authority in mind, I hoped that it would make me appear more approachable and receptive rather than closed-off and judging. Acting as a member of a peer group, and not as just a researcher, has its advantages when it comes to rapport. However, as Gesa Kirsh (2005) has pointed out, there is a difference between friendliness and friendship. Developing close relationships with participants increases the potential for them to feel disappointed, alienated, misunderstood, or betrayed by a "friendship" that has been initiated by a researcher with their own agenda (Kirsch, 2005). There was not a big potential to develop a "friendship" with participants over one interview session, but it was still important to maintain a respectful distance from participants and not abuse the boundaries of friendliness. I did this by focusing on the content of the interview, which allowed me to get to know about the participants' lives within the context of reading, but not to know them personally as a whole.

Reflexivity. The process of developing a positive interviewing relationship with a participant brings into view many of the issues surrounding inequality and power imbalances that feminist methodology seeks to minimise. This is especially true for research involving marginalised groups, as power structures present within an interview can have an effect on participants. Seidman (2006) posits:

The interviewing relationship is fraught with issues of power...[t]o negotiate these variables in developing an equitable interviewing relationship, the interviewer must be acutely aware of his or her own experience with them as well as sensitive to the way these issues may be affecting the participants. (p. 99)

Here, Seidman is referring to a common feminist research practice: reflexivity. Practicing reflexivity in research means “attempting to make explicit the power relations and the exercise of power in the research process” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 118).

During interviews and data analysis it was essential to be aware of my position and experiences as a young (but still older), white, middle-class, predominantly heterosexual, female, expert on YA Literature in relation to the participants. I consider myself to be a progressive person, experienced with diversity, and informed about social injustices and imbalances of power when it comes to marginalised groups. However, even extensive preparation or experience cannot prepare one for the different people and life experiences you encounter during interviewing or erase certain biases that come with your own history or background. It was inevitable that I would be confronted with a topic or situation that was outside of my knowledge and experience. One of the ways that I prepared for this inevitability and to limit bias as much as possible was to make most of my questions open-ended and avoid unnecessary questions that may have been exploitive to particular groups of people. During the interviews, before I asked a follow-up question, I often interrogated the assumptions that I was making about lives that were so different from my own. As much as possible, I allowed the participants to speak freely about their own experiences and express what was relevant to them in relation to their own experiences. Throughout data analysis and the writing of the report, I often put my own biases or perspectives aside to honour the viewpoints these participants shared even if I was in scholarly disagreement.

3.2.4 Sample

A total of 11 participants were interviewed for this project. For phenomenology-based research, Creswell (2013) recommends that between 5 and 25 participants who have experienced the phenomenon under investigation are interviewed. Because this project does not seek to generalise, but to highlight the experiences of individuals, a range of 8-10 participants was considered sufficient to provide me with a rich data-set.¹⁴

¹⁴ Achieving saturation is an unnecessary marker in this case.

Summary of inclusion criteria:

1. Identify as female
2. 18-24 years old
3. Like to read Young Adult Literature (erotic/romance/sexually-themed)

Identify as female. Only participants who identified as female were sought for this study. While male perspectives may be sought in the future for a similar study, much of the theory and research that informs this project takes young women as its focus. For example, the body of sex education literature that relates to the *discourse of desire* (e.g., Michelle Fine, Deborah Tolman, and Louisa Allen) focuses predominantly on the education of young women. The scholars in this area believe a discourse in sex education that supports the sexual empowerment and liberation of young women could significantly improve the sexual lives of all citizens. Additionally, research on sexuality in YA Literature (Christian-Smith, 1990 especially) tends to focus on the conventions in literature that reflect sexual injustices against young women and women, partly due to the amount of romance novels that are skewed towards female protagonists and female readers. Working together, these factors pointed towards a need to investigate narratives of sexuality in YA Literature and how they inform the lives of young women specifically, as the nuances of the sexual schooling of young women at this point in time is a site of considerable importance for people of all genders. For this reason, it was decided that interviewing young women only would be the most effective in interrogating the relationship between text and reader within this context.

18-24 years old. The age range for this study, 18 to 24, was chosen for a number of reasons. For this study, it was necessary to consider time and difficulty in gaining access to participants. Age was a considerable factor in this. Teens aged 14-18 years were initially sought for this study, but access to this age group would have been incredibly difficult given the nature of the study and the limitations in working cooperatively with schools and libraries in the area to find this population of readers. Difficulties of this kind include: gaining ethics approval, accessing teen populations to properly recruit, earning the trust of young readers who may feel uncomfortable talking to an adult about sex, and

finally, obtaining parental consent. This project was approached from the mindset that further studies can be conducted with different age groups and genders following the results of this study.

The age range of 18-24 falls within the range of young adults, the closest age to teens. While I did expect that the young women in this age group would be considerably more mature, sexually knowledgeable or experienced, and have different reading practices than 14-18 years old age range, participants varied considerably in these regards. Some of the participants had no sexual or relationship experience, others had been in long-term relationships for a number of years. Some read exclusively YA Literature in their teenage years and continued to do so, while others had always preferred a mix of genres. Additionally, it was important that participants would be able to reflect meaningfully on their past experiences. Unlike teens, who would be reflecting more on their current reading experiences, the 18-24 age group requires more memory work to reflect on their experience. There are advantages and disadvantages to this. Participants in this study had sometimes already reflected on their reading experiences, which allowed them to describe in detail the impact that certain texts had on their lives as teens and young adults. These are the experiences that stood out to them over time and were rich examples of the impact of literature on their lives. However, it was sometimes difficult for participants to recall their memories or they could not remember titles or authors. Interviewing teens (12-18) may produce more accurate descriptions of memories, but perhaps not as detailed reflections. I also asked participants about their current experiences with YA Literature to provide some continuation from their reading as teens and encourage reflections on their entire reading histories.

Like to read Young Adult Literature. Experience reading YA Literature was required for this study. However, during the interviews participants were not limited to talking strictly about YA Literature. To varying degrees, all of the participants read YA Literature as teens and young adults but many of them also read Adult Fiction and other formats such as Japanese comics or online amateur fiction, which often have no explicit age recommendations. For example, nearly all of the participants talked about *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James (2011), an New Adult/Adult erotica novel that has been appropriated

by teens. Many of the “adult” oriented texts they spoke of were read throughout their teen years, not just in the upper age ranges. These participants made it clear that they were reading across age recommendations, content and theme. As this research project is exploratory in nature and uses a bottom-up approach to understanding this phenomenon, being flexible on this criterion was appropriate. Limiting participants to only speaking to one genre of literature would not have yielded an accurate representation of the literature that these young women read about relationships and sex. Although the interview questions were directed towards a discussion of YA Literature, what also became important throughout the duration of the study was identifying the different kinds of literature that these young women chose to read. In this regard, this research project is still about YA Literature, but at the same time it is also about the literature that is being read by teens and young adults regardless of genre or age limitations. Being flexible on this criterion has proven necessary for me to understand the type of information about sex and relationships that the participants sought when reading fiction and also how YA Literature either meets or fails to meet these general information needs. It also brings into question, what is YA Literature? How does it differ from the literature that is relevant to and widely read by teens? This was a conflict that kept emerging throughout the study, and early on in the interviews it was clear to me that it was not possible to limit participants to only talking about YA Literature because their reading histories were much more complicated. During data analysis, as well as reporting, I have separated and acknowledged themes that are not specifically relevant to YA Literature as much as possible.

Two of the participants, Juliet and Christina, were not avid readers of YA Literature. Even though they did not read much YA Literature, they talked about the influential texts that they read as teens and young adults even if they did not fall into the category of YA Literature. For this reason, I have two anomalous cases where these particular participants chose to read adult novels about relationships and sex over YA Literature throughout their teenage years. I chose to include these cases because their reading experiences provide unique insight into the reading practices of teens and young adults who seek more advanced levels of sexual content in fiction and to explain why they chose to bypass YA Literature completely. This is similar to general studies of reading,

where the experiences of non-readers are also considered a form of reading. These participants were fully informed about the nature and scope of the study in advance, yet Juliet and Christina freely volunteered their time to talk about how reading sexually-themed stories has informed their lives since early young adulthood. It was clear to me that they felt strongly about reading sexually-themed literature and so I have honoured their contributions despite being anomalous cases within the context of this study. The details of these cases are also separated from themes relevant to YA Literature when appropriate.

3.2.5 Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited based on nonprobability sampling strategies recommended for difficult to locate populations and projects dealing with sensitive topics. Sampling of this kind generally consists of studying any and all participants that can be identified and are willing to participate (Singleton & Straits, 2010). Difficulty in locating and attracting participants was expected for this project. There was no definite way to readily identify and directly recruit this subgroup of fiction readers in the surrounding area. Additionally, social sensitivity to openly discussing topics of sexuality may be a factor in dissuading young women from participating. In fact, some of the participants were really private people who never talked about sex. One even admitted to me that she volunteered to participate as a personal challenge to herself, to see if she could talk about sex with a complete stranger. Therefore, it was probable that only a few cases would voluntarily come forward. For this reason, it was necessary that the sampling strategies I employed helped to ensure that I located participants who were able to provide information-rich accounts of their experiences and to also achieve my desired sample size.

I used two different sampling strategies for this project: convenience and snowball sampling. Convenience sampling was the main strategy I used for sampling. Convenience sampling is a strategy where participants are “chosen simply because one was allowed access to that case” (Schwandt, 2007, p. 271). Although Bloomberg and Volpe (2012) describe this sampling strategy as the “least desirable” because it relies heavily on availability and may not produce information-rich cases, it is an appropriate strategy for the early stages of research and where generalisability is not an issue (Singleton &

Straits, 2010). Convenience sampling also matches the suggested sampling requirements for hermeneutic phenomenological research. Laverly (2003) writes:

The aim in participant selection in phenomenological and hermeneutic phenomenological research is to select participants who have lived experience that is the focus of the study, who are willing to talk about their experience, and who are diverse enough from one another to enhance possibilities of rich and unique stories of the particular experience. (p. 27)

Through recruitment using posters, I connected with approximately 90% of the participants using this strategy.

To further identify and include potential participants I also used a snowball sampling strategy. For difficult to reach populations, snowball sampling is appropriate as a basic assumption is that “members of the target population often know each other” (Singleton & Straits, 2010, p. 178). I employed this strategy at two points in the data collection process: during in-person recruitment and at the end of individual interviews. I did this by asking potential recruits and participants to forward my contact information to anyone they may know who fit the inclusion criteria and would be interested in participating in the project. Additionally, this strategy may also take the form of referrals through personal contacts (*i.e.*, personal contacts of mine who know about the project may ask potential participants to contact me if they are interested). Overall, I only connected with one participant using this strategy.

3.2.6 Access and Recruitment

The majority of recruitment for participants took place on the Western University campus, but also in community sites such as bookstores and online. Recruiting mainly on the Western University campus allowed access to a large body of young women who met the age requirements for the study. Recruitment strategies consisted of:

Posters. Recruitment posters were placed at various sites across the Western University campus and the local *Indigo!/Chapters* bookstores. Placement on campus included all high-traffic areas and in relevant faculty buildings such as Information and Media Studies, Social Sciences, and Arts and Humanities. None of the participants interviewed responded to posters placed on off-campus sites.

Classroom visits. I visited a number of first and second year classes in departments such as Information and Media Studies, Women's Studies, and Social Science to introduce the study to potentially interested students. Students were made aware that the choice to participate/not participate would not affect their grade in the course in any way.

Online. I also received ethics approval to recruit participants online on sites such as *Facebook* and *Goodreads*, but I did not recruit any participants through this strategy. One drawback to recruiting online on sites such as *Facebook* is that it required me to gain permission from page administrators before posting a recruitment message and some administrators simply did not respond to these kinds of requests. This considerably limits access to large groups of readers. Successful use of this strategy would have allowed for more diversification in my sample in terms of non-university populations. My recruitment period ended before I amplified the reach of online recruitment, but this strategy may prove successful if greater access is gained to the users of these pages and sites.

Over the period of eleven months (March 2016 – January 2017) I conducted recruitment for participants. I did not contact any potential participants directly. I advertised the study to a general population and relied on any interested participants to contact me for further details. Most of my recruitment was done on the Western University campus, and all but one of the participants attended this institution.

3.2.7 Final Sample

I interviewed all of the young women who got in touch with me about the study and scheduled an interview with me until I met my desired sample size. Most participants were interviewed between April 2016 and January 2017, with the last being in October 2018. While both my sampling and recruitment strategies made it easier for me to recruit participants, drawing from the same community, friend groups, or classrooms does have the potential to produce too similar cases and could affect the diversity of experiences in the sample. In particular, sample bias resulting from the use of university students as study participants has been noted by many social scientists (Sears, 1986; Henry, 2008; Druckman & Cam, 2009). Student samples can be biased in age, ethnicity, social status,

level of education, cognitive abilities, and social behaviours. This mostly raises questions of validity for studies that seek to generalise findings to a larger population. This project does not seek to generalise to a larger population. However, because all of my participants were university students, my sample is drawn from a certain subset of the population, which may exclude different perspectives from non-university affiliated readers. In terms of variance between participants, I did not detect any major biases during data analysis. Some commonalities between students who were coming from Arts and Humanities were observed. A number of the participants stated that they had taken Women's Studies courses and a feminist reading of texts was observed throughout these interviews. However, each participant differed enough in background, sexual knowledge or experience, and reading practices that each case was unique. Despite the lack in diversity in terms of student/nonstudent, the final sample is diverse in a multitude of other ways including sexual orientation and ethnicity (see Table 1 for sample demographics).

| Name | Age | Sexual Orientation | Person of Colour (Y/N) |
|------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|
| Andie | 22 | Bisexual | Yes |
| Juliet | 19 | Pansexual | No |
| Jane | 21 | Heterosexual | Yes |
| Sarah | 23 | Heterosexual | Yes |
| Bonnie | 20 | Heterosexual | Yes |
| Scarlet | 24 | Lesbian | No |
| Stacey | 21 | Heterosexual | No |
| Arya | 23 | Heterosexual | Yes |
| Christina | 23 | Heterosexual | Yes |
| Madeline | 22 | Heterosexual | No |
| Kelly | 18 | Heterosexual | Yes |
| Statistics | Mean: 21.5 Median: 22 Mode: 23 | Heterosexual: 8/11 LGBTQ: 3/11 | Yes: 7/11 No: 4/11 |

Table 1. Demographic information on participants.

3.2.8 Ethical Issues

Talking about sex. Talking about sex and sexuality can be an uncomfortable experience for some people. When interviewing participants on sensitive topics, special attention should be paid to the participant's level of comfort and resistance to some questions.

Gary Melton (1992) points out that researchers are often desensitised to talking about personal matters, but that considerable effort should be made to avoid embarrassing or offending participants. He writes:

Procedures should be no more intrusive than necessary to obtain information about the phenomenon under study...gratuitous or thoughtless invasions of privacy are at best cavalier and at worst voyeuristic exploitation of participants anxious to contribute to social welfare. (p. 77)

I am comfortable discussing topics of sex and sexuality, but I always kept in mind that I was asking participants – strangers – questions about some of the most personal details of their lives and that everyone has different comfort levels in sharing that information. Many of the participants were practiced in talking about sexuality openly. Others were generally private people and never talked about sex with anyone outside of their partners. During the interviews, it was important to be careful that I did not ask questions that unnecessarily invaded participants' privacy or violated their personal dignity. In advance, I prepared for this by using open-ended interview questions that allowed participants to contribute what they were comfortable with. The questions in this study focused primarily on reading practices. However, many participants did speak in detail about their sexual histories throughout the interview. This information often came up organically when telling the stories of their experiences. Some participants were sexually experienced, some had never had a sexual encounter before and this was often an important factor in their reading practices and experiences. Any follow-up questions to this information that I did ask were carefully considered before being voiced and were framed within the context of reading as much as possible. If participants seemed hesitant to answer my questions or were embarrassed by the information that they shared I did not continue to question them on that topic. In reciprocity, I occasionally shared personal anecdotes or made comments about my experiences reading sexually-themed literature in hopes that participants felt less under examination by me and therefore less embarrassed or vulnerable.

Two of the participants did speak directly about a history of sexual abuse or being in an abusive relationship. The possibility of this topic coming up was raised during ethics review and a clause was added to the Letter of Information that reminded potential

participants that talking about sexuality may cause re-traumatisation for those with a history of sexual abuse. Links to local resources were provided to help participants cope with any potential emotional duress if necessary. As a researcher, this topic was difficult to react to and navigate during the interviews. Again, I tried to discuss these topics within the context of reading and did not dwell on them for very long in case it was a difficult topic for the participant.

Informed consent. Informed consent is a standard practice in social research and includes fully explaining to the participant “what the research is about, who is undertaking and financing it, why it is being undertaken and how it is to be disseminated” (BSA qtd. in Heath, *et al.*, 2009, p. 55). As part of the Letter of Information, a description of the research purpose and procedures was given to each participant to review prior to each interview. This project is considered “minimal risk” as it does not expose participants to risks any greater than experienced in ordinary life. A written consent form was provided for participants to sign. Participants were also made sure to understand that participation was voluntary and that they could refuse to answer any questions and could withdraw from the project at any time without consequence.

Anonymity and confidentiality. In accordance with ethics, multiple steps were taken throughout the research process to maintain anonymity and confidentiality in regard to participants’ identities. Melton (1992) writes: “As a general rule, the more deeply private an experience or behaviour is, the more careful researchers should be to protect it” (p. 75). To ensure the confidentiality of the research participants’ identities all identifying information was stored securely and was not shared with any others. To ensure anonymity, participants’ real names only appear on the consent form and only their participant numbers or pseudonyms appear elsewhere. Ensuring anonymity for participants was very important for this project, as anonymity may facilitate greater freedom of response on taboo subjects (Heath, *et al.*, 2009).

Compensation. No monetary compensation was offered to participants. I did not offer compensation to avoid attracting participants who were only interested in the compensation pay, which can potentially result in what Emond (2003) describes as

“performance for pay”. My hope was to attract participants who were genuinely and deeply interested in reading and the topic of this project. Additionally, all of the participants were interviewed on campus or over Skype and should not have needed compensation to cover costs such as transit fare or parking.

In March 2016 I received ethics approval through Western University’s Non-Medical Research Ethics Board, and all protocols conform to the Tri-Council Agencies guidelines on ethical conduct for research involving humans (see Appendix E).

3.2.9 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview data for this project. Thematic analysis is a method used to identify, analyse and report themes found within data. According to Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2006), it “minimally organises and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic” (p. 79). The cyclical and recursive process of thematic analysis, including the interpretation of the data at multiple stages, is appropriate for hermeneutic research. The following outline, developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, pp. 87-93), is used to describe in detail the process that I used when analysing the interview data.

Phase 1: Familiarising yourself with data. This phase consisted of transcribing the verbal data from the interviews. I transcribed close to verbatim but I did not include false starts, speech errors, repetition of words and long pauses or breaks in speech when these did not seem significant. I deleted false starts only if they did not contain pertinent information, for example, if a participant was stumbling over their verbal grammar and then reiterated correctly afterwards. I also removed repetitive words such as “like” and “you know” when they were used excessively. Braun and Clarke recommend transcription verbatim, but since I am not analysing the interviews on the level of discourse, providing less detail in the transcripts was appropriate. During this stage I also re-read the transcripts and took down initial ideas for coding.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes. This phase consisted of coding interesting features in the data. I used a “data-driven” coding frame. Consistent with a phenomenological and feminist approach, this is a “bottom-up” approach to identifying themes and patterns that allows themes to emerge from the data without relying on a pre-existing coding frame or theoretical construct. With the help of Qualitative Data Analysis software, *Atlas.ti*, I began coding features of the data by systematically tagging and naming selections of the texts and collating them into code categories. When tagging data, I kept parts of the surrounding text to provide context. In this stage of coding, I aimed to code for as many potential themes/patterns as possible.

Phase 3: Searching for themes. This phase consisted of collating codes into potential themes. I began by organising codes and considering how they combine to form an overarching theme. By the end of this phase there was a collection of potential themes and sub-themes to be reviewed in more detail.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes. This phase consisted of ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme by determining if potential themes needed to be merged together, broken down into separate themes, or dissolved if there was not enough supporting data. In order to assess the validity of each theme, data within each theme needed to work together meaningfully and there needed to be definite distinctions between each theme. Although identifying themes across the data set was important during this stage, the themes unique to individual participant’s experiences were also kept and used throughout this project.

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes. This phase consisted of naming the themes and sub-themes. This helped to clarify how themes fit into the data as a whole, their relation to other themes, and how they relate to the research questions.

Phase 6: Producing the report. This phase consisted of the final analysis of the data and matching themes to the themes found in the textual analysis of YA Literature. Compelling examples from the extracted data were used to demonstrate themes and other interesting aspects of the data.

3.2.10 Final Themes

Six main themes were identified during analysis. Each of these themes correspond to different aspects of participants' shared reading experiences – motivations for reading, reading preferences, information gained from reading, connections to characters and stories, emotional responses, critical interpretations, how information is applied in their own lives, and more. They reflect not only the most numerically prevalent responses but also interesting themes in the data.

1. Reading the Efferent Romance – participants reported that YA Literature provided them with a standard for a relationship.
2. Reading Difficult Stories – participants had complex relationships with content that is confusing or disturbing.
3. Reading the Erotic – participants read erotic stories for both knowledge and pleasure.
4. Reading for Alternatives – participants often turned to online sources when they could not find the narratives of sexuality they were looking for in conventional YA Literature.

The last two major themes that were identified contain the details of the types of information on sexuality found within sexually-themed fiction and the unique characteristics of fiction as an information source on sexuality. They provide a list of the range of topics on sexuality that participants identified as existing within sexually-themed fiction and what participants identified as “special” about YA Literature as an information source on sexuality. Unlike the chapters preceding discussion of these themes, they are not discussed alongside a YA text. These two themes differ from the former four in that they correspond more closely to interview questions, required less interpretation, and are presented in list format. These two themes are discussed in Chapter 8: Conclusion.

5. Types of Information Found in Sexuality-Themed YA Literature
6. Characteristics of Fiction as an Information Source on Sexuality

3.2.11 Additional Instruments

Participant generated booklist. Participants were asked to bring a list of 10-20 YA books/online materials about sex, sexuality, love or relationships that they had read and thought were relevant to the project. This was a good exercise in getting participants to think about the texts that they had read so that they were able to talk more precisely about them during the interview. It also provided me with a convenient list of titles that were being read by the participants themselves. It allowed me to compare titles read between participants to identify influential texts. I was only partially successful in retrieving these lists from participants on a consistent basis. Some of them forgot to bring them or others only listed three or four books. In all cases, I compiled lists of texts that each participant talked about in the interviews and these often corresponded to their original lists (see Appendix A). I read any texts on these lists that I felt were particularly relevant to this study.

Demographic survey. A short written survey was administered at the end of each interview. This survey was used to collect demographic data about age, gender identity, sexual orientation, and ethnicity. Each answer field was a blank space, allowing for participants to define these characteristics however they would like. This was given to participants after the interview to avoid anxiety over disclosing personal information to me before starting the conversation. Collecting this demographic data was important for this project as it allowed me to more accurately describe the participants.

3.3 Part Two: Textual Analysis of Sexually-Themed Young Adult Literature

RQ2: What narratives of sexuality are present in sexually-themed Young Adult Literature and how might these narratives potentially inform young women readers about relationships and sex?

In this section, I describe the methodology used to select and analyse examples of sexually-themed YA Literature. The selection and analysis of the texts was a recursive process as I read novels, comics, and online stories before, during, and after the interviews. This allowed me to adapt the final list of texts to adequately correspond to the

themes that emerged from the interview data. From a longer list of compiled texts (75 total), four texts were chosen for analysis. These texts are used as prime examples of the sub-genres they belong to and that also embody the themes present within the experiences of the young women readers with whom I interviewed.

3.3.1 Sample of Texts

A purposive sampling method (Berg & Lune, 2012; Babbie, 2011; Schwandt, 2007) was used to select texts analysed for this research project. I used my knowledge and expertise on sexually-themed YA Literature to choose texts that were most relevant to the research question. A major limitation of using a purposive sample is that it results in a lack of generalisability (Berg & Lune, 2012). However, the goal of this project is not to generalise the findings across all YA Literature but to provide examples that are critical to understanding the phenomenon under examination. The selection of texts was based on factors such as literary quality, richness of content, and the following criteria:

1. *Are Young Adult Literature.* For the purposes of this study YA Literature is defined as “Written about Teens” and “Written in a Teen Voice” (see Chapter 1). Most often this meant that the main character was between the ages of 12-18 and the narration was in the immediate first person. There was some flexibility on age of characters if overall the narrative was similar to the YA genre as a whole. As a result, a few texts in the final sample have older characters, usually 19 years old.
2. *Have been identified as Third Base+.* For this project, only texts that contained at least one instance of explicitly described penetrative, oral, or digital sex between persons of any gender was included. This also includes masturbation. Explicitly described is defined here as “on-screen” sex that is described in enough detail that the reader can get a sense of the act being performed. This ensured that I was able to analyse the details of sexual acts and not just relationships. As Roberta S. Trites (2000) has written, “Whether a novelist writing for adolescents depicts sexuality as a matter of pleasure or displeasure, however, the depiction itself is usually a locus of power for the adolescent” (p. 102). Therefore, I felt it was necessary to read texts where sexual acts were described in detail. Degree of detail varied

between texts. Two texts in the sample were not sexually-explicit. One was a text about asexuality and one was a Japanese comic that I felt was thematically significant/significant to participant Sarah.

3. *Have been published since 2000.* This criterion ensured that the most contemporary themes of sexuality were analysed and limited the amount of texts that had been previously analysed elsewhere.
4. *Reflect diversity.* Choosing texts that reflect a wide variety of sexual identities and experiences ensured a level of diversity in the sample. This criterion is included as an attempt to disrupt mainstream ideals concerning sex, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity and class. Preference was given to texts that highlighted the sexual experiences of young women, but in some cases texts that focus on male sexuality were included. A number of texts read feature queer relationships, including most of the fanfiction, but also a number of published novels were about gay, lesbian, bisexual, and other queer relationships. Diverse ethnicities are also represented.
5. *Are relevant to teen and young adult readers.* This criterion ensures that the books chosen were being read by teens and young adults and not simply prescribed or valued by adults. This was difficult to establish but there were a number of indicators I used to determine this. A) I considered what the participants had read and looked for patterns in genre, theme and content. In many cases, I selected titles or authors they had talked about. B) I looked at the commercial and literary success or popularity of the texts. C) I consulted both professionally published YA booklists and reader generated lists. D) For texts that did not appear in any of the above categories, I evaluated the texts for relevance or unique appeal.

Selecting the texts purposively ensured a level of diversity in the sample in terms of authorship, genre, theme, form, style, characters, and intended audience. It also ensured that the content of the texts was rich enough that I was able to contribute to the discussion of sexuality in YA Literature, and how readers may respond to these narratives, in a meaningful way. For the most part, I focused on reading any and all YA books I could

find that contained descriptive sexual acts. I privileged YA texts that: were told from a female perspective; were sex positive/were not just about sexual violence; were by award-winning, popular, or highly-regarded authors; were standalone books or the first book in a series; and were not immediately stereotypical in their content in regard to gender roles.

I used a wide variety of sources to find sexually-themed YA Literature that met all my criteria. The criterion, Third Base+, largely dictated which books I selected to read and the remaining criteria were investigated during a first reading of each book. Finding an efficient and systematic way to identify which books contained descriptive sexual acts before I read them was challenging. I started with booklists from authoritative sources such as the American Library Association's *Best Fiction for Young Adults* and reader-generated lists such as *Young Adult Fiction with Sex on Goodreads*. I then cross-referenced these books with their records on *Goodreads* and other sites such as *Common Sense Media* where users or site administrators have often already identified the level of sexual content. I also conducted numerous searches to find blog posts or articles written by teachers, librarians, and journalists reviewing sexually-explicit materials for young adults. I looked to academic texts on sexuality in YA Literature such as Lydia Kokkola's (2013) *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality* and Brian Gillis and Joanna Simpson's (2015) *Sexual Content in Young Adult Literature: Reading Between the Sheets*. Lastly, I worked with the booklists the participants had generated and the texts they talked about during the interviews. In addition to books available in print, I also investigated the online spaces where the participants read sexually-themed fiction. There were also books that met all of my other criteria but due to lack of information on the level of sexuality in the content, I read them personally to identify them as Third Base+.

A total of 75 sexually-themed texts were identified as relevant to this study and read at least once (see Appendix A). This includes 55 YA published texts, 10 YA Drarry/*Harry Potter* fanfictions, 5 other fanfictions, and 5 YA Japanese comics. The formation of this list occurred over the duration of the study. Many other books were read but were excluded, mainly if they only alluded to sexual acts but no characters ever engaged in any "on-screen". This list is not an exhaustive list of YA texts that contain sexual acts. From

this longer list I chose four texts that met all my criteria and would provide the richest analysis in relation to the major themes that emerged from Part 1 of this study: the interviews. After the four most relevant texts were selected, they were subjected to a second (or third) round of close reading and analysed using textual analysis for major codes and themes. The texts are as follows:

1. *I Never* by Laura Hopper
2. *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner
3. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas
4. *Helix* by Sara's Girl

I also selected *And Every Day Was Overcast* by Paul Kwiatkowski as a text that challenges the conventional definition of YA Literature and used it in Chapter 1 to make a case for why it is necessary to alter this definition to include texts that may not be considered appropriate for teens, but come close to reflecting the lived experience of many teens.

3.3.2 Textual Analysis

Textual analysis was used to analyse each of these texts. When researchers perform textual analysis on a text, they “make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text” (McKee, 2003, p. 1). While this method of analysis might seem ambiguous or overly subjective, this method is standard within humanities research. It is also, essentially, a hermeneutic form of analysis. Consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, textual analysis acknowledges there is no “correct” way of interpreting texts because texts are interpreted in different ways by a variety of different researchers or research communities. The issues of validity in hermeneutic phenomenological studies also apply to textual analysis and relate specifically to rigour. Alan McKee (2003) argues that “the knowledge produced by textual analysis can be useful for understanding more likely interpretations of particular texts, as long as the researcher has a detailed knowledge of the sense-making culture they’re describing” (p. 137). What makes a researcher “knowledgeable” when reading and making

interpretations of the text is their knowledge of related “intertexts”: the genre of a text, other texts in a series, scholarly works on the text, and the context in which the text is circulated (McKee, 2003). My engagement with scholarly texts on YA Literature, the scope of novels that I analysed together, and my review of the historical and present constructs of teen sexuality provide me with enough knowledge to interpret these texts in a meaningful way.

The process of textual analysis was ongoing and recursive and required several close readings of each text, the flagging of important passages, and the compiling of similarly themed passages across texts to draw connections. My research question guided the analysis and was informed by the literature that comprises the conceptual framework for this project. I largely looked for dominant discourses surrounding the sexual agency of young women, the enjoyment of sexual pleasure with/without undue consequences, and degrees of normalisation/regulation of sexuality across sex, gender, ethnicity, and class.

I also included information on the authors of these texts including biographical and author’s perspectives on their works. This was methodologically important because the author, as the creator of a text, and the meaning that they ascribe to that text is another perspective which should be taken into account. Rosenblatt (1978) specifically acknowledges that the author’s intent should be considered, although it is not typically the focus of the reading event. Additionally, as Michel Foucault (1980) argues in “What is an Author”, it is not just the words on the page that can influence the meaning made of a text, but also who the author is. Therefore, I included biographical and other information about the authors within each chapter to add to the interpretations of texts. Although it was not possible to speak to these authors directly, as much as possible, I read interviews conducted with authors and included their viewpoints on the texts.

3.4 Limitations of the Project

As outlined above, there are limitations to this study.

Due to the size and makeup of the sample of young women readers, this project is not generalisable to the greater popular. Eleven participants was a sufficient number to obtain

a rich dataset from which to analyse this phenomenon, but it is not large enough to make these readers' experiences generalisable. My goal during analysis was not usually to draw definitive conclusions across the entire data set, but to highlight individual experiences and discuss similar experiences across the data. Participants often varied widely in their reading and life experiences and each brought their own unique perspectives to the study. The sample also consisted only of postsecondary students, a specific subset of the population and not representative of the general population. As noted, recruiting from student populations is mainly an issue when seeking generalisability because university students have been found to have different characteristics than the general public. However, only using university students in this study does also mean that different experiences and perspectives from readers outside this population may be excluded from the data. Gaining access to online reading communities could help to curb this limitation in future studies. There was, however, a good amount of ethnic and sexual diversity in this study with seven of the eleven participants that identified as a person of colour and three that identified as LGBTQ.

Most of the participants (18 to 24 years old) in this study are young adults, not teens (12 to 18 years old). This study explores the reading experiences of young women who are reflecting on their past and present reading experiences to shed light on how YA Literature has informed their sexual lives up to their present experience. There is a considerable amount of memory work being done in this study and participants' perspectives on their experience may differ from what teens may have to say about their more immediate reading experiences. Although this study has implications for research and practice involving teens especially, it is important to acknowledge that while the participants are close enough in age to teens that they may be able to recall their memories as a teen more clearly than older populations and are at times in the same stages of their sexual journey as some teens (*e.g.*, never had a sexual relationship before) they are different than teens in many ways. Most notably, these participants generally have more life experience and more education in terms of sexuality. This was especially apparent with participants who had taken courses on human sexuality or in Women's Studies. Some of them were also transitioning away from reading YA Literature and felt that they identified more with Adult characters and stories. Conversely, there were

definite advantages to interviewing this age group, foremost being participants' level of comfort and willingness to open up to me. Although participants were able to give rich accounts of their reading experiences as children and teens, and the younger participants were close to their teen years, interviewing teens within the age range of 12-18 may result in different findings.

In this study, the defining lines between YA Literature and other genres, formats, and traditions of literature are blurred. This has made it difficult to determine the entire scope of information on sexuality gained or to only speak of YA Literature when describing participants' reading experiences. This problem did not ensue from a lack of attention on my part, although certain steps could have been taken to help provide more clarity during research design. While designing the research project and the instruments used for interviews I was asked to define what YA Literature is so that I had a reference point for the literature I was examining and asking participants about. However, it became quite clear to me early on in the interview stage that across participants there was no consistent definition. In a very real way, this project views YA Literature as what young people choose to read or what they define it as and not what I would define it as. I could have asked them to only speak about the books that fit into my narrow definition of YA Literature. This would have made my study much more contained, analysis would have been easier, and I could have answered my research questions with more specificity. However, I do think there was good reason for not forcing a definition of YA Literature onto participants. The main reason is that it would have prevented participants from talking about the extremely important experiences that they had reading other kinds of sexually-themed literature from an early age. One of the most important findings from this study is that many young women readers are "reading-up" from a very early age and bypassing YA Literature altogether because they were interested in more sophisticated narratives of sexuality. Another reason is that it does not allow for a ground-up approach to defining YA Literature, which was something that also came out of this project. As such, this project is in some ways about young people reading fictional narratives of sexuality, and not necessarily strictly about YA Literature. However, their reading experiences in general reveal a lot about the state of YA Literature and I have incorporated that into my thesis where appropriate. Because of these inconsistencies,

when participants did not know the name of the books, it was difficult to know if they were talking about YA Literature or something entirely different. I did my best throughout this project to describe exactly which kind of literature they were talking about and when this was unclear, I did not apply statements made to any general claims about YA Literature. This made at least some of the statements made by participants unusable, but it was important for the sake of rigour.

This study does not address non-binary gender identities or asexuality in any depth. None of the participants in this study spoke about reading texts about transgender relationships. I also had a difficult time locating sexually-explicit texts about transgender characters and their relationships. They do appear in the larger sample of texts, such as in Francesca Lia Block's *Love in the Time of Global Warming* (2013) where the main love interest is a transgender male and the main character accepts him without question. *Beauty Queens* (2012) also has a transgender female main character but her sexual relationship is not described in explicit detail. In Sara McCarry's *About a Girl* (2015), the main character falls in love with her best friend who had transitioned into a male, but their relationship is brief. *The Handsome Girl & Her Beautiful Boy* by b.t. gottfred also comes close to this topic with a look at tomboyism and bisexuality. More reading and analysis needs to be done in this area. In addition, although I have made attempts throughout this thesis to not make the assumption that all young people want to have sex, I have devoted little time and attention to asexuality specifically. It did not come up in any of the interviews or in the vast majority of YA texts. Near the end of the project, I did read *Let's Talk About Love* by Claire Kann (2018), a novel about a bi-asexual young women, but asexuality was largely unexplored in this thesis. However, I do think this is an important topic that has only recently been receiving more attention and should be acknowledged further in future research (Mihajlich, 2016, June 3).

This project is a broad, exploratory look into the reading experiences of young women and YA Literature. More depth is needed when looking at experiences and texts within specific sub-genres within the YA corpus, such as Difficult Stories, and for online amateur fiction, such as fanfiction. Although I have made general statements about YA Literature as a whole, based on my experience reading a wide variety of YA texts and

scholarly literature, this study does not claim to have done any systematic content analysis across the longer list of texts that I read.

3.5 Conclusion

RQ3: How can the knowledge gained by this investigation directly inform and improve library collections and service practices?

The public library has a role to play in the publication, distribution, accessibility, and usage of sexually-themed YA Literature. Therefore, the results of this research project are discussed with special attention paid to library collections and services. This discussion is largely theoretical as none of the interview data or textual analysis done for this project directly answer this question. Although some participants talked about their experience with the public library, not all participants were library users. Library users talked about spending time at the library as children and teens, the books they discovered there, their feelings about checking out sexual materials from the library, and the library as a public institution. The information they shared did not result in any major themes across the data set, but some minor themes were recorded and are discussed in the introduction and conclusion. During the textual analysis component of this project, a number of questions were raised about the classification or definition of YA Literature. This is especially relevant to libraries and is discussed in the introduction. In the conclusion, I make specific suggestions for how librarians can help to improve collections and services for teens.

Chapter 4

4 Reading the Efferent Romance

He had no rules for this. Which was liberating some of the time because that meant there were none to obey, not even with Linus. But sometimes a guide or history or a long-established literature would have been useful.

-From *Release* by Patrick Ness (2017, p. 11)

A guide, a history, or a long-established literature on the rules of sexual relationships for young people. This is the purpose of what I am calling Efferent Romance. These are the quintessential Young Adult (YA) novels about relationships and sex, the novels that usually come to mind when this subset of the YA genre is discussed. They have, over the course of the mid-20th century, become the romances that are hailed as the literature that is written specifically for a teen audience. They take place in contemporary settings, follow the lives of ordinary teenagers, and aim to teach teen readers lessons about sexual life. In their most extreme form, they are almost manual-like in their construction, providing the teen reader with a script for how sexual life should ideally unfold. The most well-thumbed and cherished example of Efferent Romance is Judy Blume's *Forever* (1975), the iconic novel that has provided generations of young people with secret knowledge of sexuality. These texts are informative, pleasurable to read, and have a strong presence in the world of YA Literature.

In this chapter, I explain the purpose and function of Efferent Romance and how it may inform the sexual lives of young women readers. It is known from research on reading, such as the work done by Paulette Rothbauer (2006) and Vivian Howard (2011), that reading fiction offers young people an opportunity to learn more about their social worlds, their places within it, and the possibilities for them in the future. In essence, reading can inform readers' subjectivities. Efferent Romance is especially positioned to inform the sexual subjectivities of young people because it often provides a comprehensive script for living a sexual life. First, I explain the qualities of Efferent Romance and summarise readers' experiences with this type of literature. Next, I review the key messages about sexuality that Efferent Romance communicates to readers using *I Never* (2017) by Laura Hopper, a contemporary *Forever* read-a-like, as an example.

Finally, I discuss how the qualities and characteristics of Efferent Romance may inform the sexual subjectivities of its readers. In conclusion, I highlight the positive and negative qualities of Efferent Romance and make suggestions for how this body of literature can better serve as an information source on sexuality for young women.

4.1 Young Adult Efferent Romance

4.1.1 Qualities of Efferent Romance

In Louise Rosenblatt's book *The Reader, The Text, The Poem: The Transactional Theory of the Literary Work* (1978) she identifies two kinds of reading: efferent and aesthetic. These two stances of reading define the reader's approach to reading and what the reader does as they interact with the text. In efferent reading, the reader is focused on what information they will "carry away" from the reading to apply at a later time. An example of this would be reading a guide to oral sex to learn how to better perform oral sex in real life. The objective is to assimilate as much information as possible to be able to use it in a practical way. Responses to the art of the words have little importance in efferent reading. In contrast, in aesthetic reading, the reader's focus is on the feelings, ideas, and connections that are evoked by their interaction with the text. An example of this would be reading an erotica novel and experiencing the feelings of arousal that are evoked by the language and acts described in the text. The reader's attention is completely on the experience in moment, in which texts are essentially "lived through" by the reader (p. 27). An analysis of the meaning and structure of the text has little importance in aesthetic reading as it is more about the experience of the reading event itself.

Although efferent and aesthetic reading are quite distinct, they are not always mutually exclusive. As Rosenblatt (1978) notes, "I am not sure that all aesthetic reading excludes or is diametrically opposed to an awareness of possible later usefulness or application" (p. 24). The blending of efferent and aesthetic reading is the reading context that I primarily explore in this thesis. In Library and Information Science (LIS), this is often framed as Everyday Life Information Seeking (ELIS) within the context of pleasure reading. A link between fiction reading and ELIS has been well established in LIS (Moyer, 2007; Ooi & Liew, 2011; Ross, 1999, 2000; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002).

Catherine Ross' (1999) research on pleasure reading was the first to systematically describe this context when she found that readers are able to “carry away” a wide variety of information from fiction without necessarily taking a conscious information seeking approach. In effect, all aesthetic reading has the potential to also be an efferent reading experience and can inform readers in a variety of different ways within their everyday lives. In education, efferent reading is often privileged, but Rosenblatt's theory and instruction is also widely accepted, taught to prospective teachers, and built upon by educators and scholars (Asselin, 2000; Smith, 2012; Wilhelm, 2016).

I approach this research with the assumption that reading YA Literature about relationships and sex is both an efferent and aesthetic reading experience. Theoretically, there is a direct link between the ELIS behaviour of teens and the dominant themes of YA Literature. The ELIS behaviour of teens has been described by Denise Agosto and Sandra Hughes-Hassell (2006a) as “the gathering and processing of information to facilitate the multifaceted teen-to-adulthood maturation process” (p. 1394). In essence, teens are motivated to seek information to develop the following set of variables that directly relate to their maturation process: the social, emotional, reflective, physical, creative, cognitive, and sexual self (Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2006b). YA Literature then has the potential to be an especially relevant information source in teen ELIS because the themes of maturation and self-development are concepts that are innate to nearly all YA Literature. Empirically, the responses that I have received from participants in this study provide evidence that they both enjoyed reading narratives of sexuality on an aesthetic level but were also able to “carry away” valuable information related to their sexual knowledge, identities, and performance.

In this chapter, I examine what I am calling Efferent Romance. Efferent Romance is quite unique to YA Literature and contains more efferent qualities than other literary genres such as literature¹⁵, erotica, or conventional romance. This is mainly because Efferent Romance seems to overtly encourage an efferent reading experience through its

¹⁵ Fiction of high literary merit.

employment of obvious didacticism. In contrast, these other genres more firmly encourage an aesthetic reading experience, an experience in the moment that is not necessarily meant to be carried away from the reading event. Therefore, I am using the term Efferent Romance to distinguish this type of narrative of sexuality from the other types of fiction that appear later on in this thesis because it is thematically and experientially different.

Efferent Romances are the quintessential YA romance novels. Their two most defining characteristics are that they aim to be realistic and that they are didactic. Efferent Romance belongs under the larger umbrella of the YA Realistic Fiction genre. Early on in YA Literature's development, Catherine Ross (1985) described the defining characteristics of the YA Realistic Fiction genre as: "adolescent protagonist, narration from the adolescent's point of view, realistic contemporary settings, and subject matter formerly considered taboo" (p. 175). This is true of most YA Literature today that does not fall into other genres with their own conventions. For example, in marked contrast to conventional romance, Efferent Romances are not larger-than-life. Rather, they describe ordinary teenagers living typical teenage lives. Characters are often average or stereotypical teenagers such as the "girl-next-door" or the captain of the football team. They deal with everyday issues such as broken homes, illness, death, poverty, or absentee parents. They address the taboo of sexuality, but the outline of sexual relationships usually follows a typical narrative and does not stray far from what would be considered average or acceptable sexual conduct for teens.

Efferent Romance also tends to be obviously didactic. The author's goal is to describe relationships and sex in a realistic manner, reflecting scenarios that are plausible in real life. The language used to describe sexual encounters is very matter-of-fact, almost detached, and not necessarily sexy or meant to titillate the reader. It often includes descriptions of talking about sex, dating, contraceptive use, sexual acts, and dealing with emotions in ways that could be easily replicated by the reader. Robyn McCallum (1999) includes didactic texts within her description of texts that are polyphonic, meaning "many voiced". In didactic texts, although there is no explicit recognition that many voices are speaking, they are narratives wherein both the narrator's voice and that of the adult

author's can be heard. The narrator's voice generally appears as the teen living their teen life, whereas the author's voice appears occasionally throughout the narrative to provide clarity and guidance on important topics, most certainly about sexuality. Laura Hopper (2017), author of *I Never*, perfectly describes this interaction when describing one of her objectives when writing her novel, "I thought about what I would want to read if I were in high school and as a mom of teenagers, what I would want my kids to read" (para. 2). Much of YA Literature is as Hopper describes: what teens would want to read *and* what their parents would want them to read. This is the interaction that produces the didactic, polyphonic quality of Efferent Romance and most YA Literature itself.

Judy Blume's *Forever* is the most well-known examples of Efferent Romance. Blume's iconic novel is considered to be one of the first and best novels that realistically portrays adolescent love and sexuality. The story follows two fairly average teenagers, Katherine and Michael, as they go on their first date, grow closer together, have sexual intercourse, and eventually go their separate ways. This novel is obviously didactic and is often described as a "self-help manual to help teenagers learn more about sex" (Trites, 2000, p. 88) because it addresses topics of sex and sexuality such as contraceptive use, menstruation, pregnancy, adoption, and STIs. It is also hailed as one of the first novels to describe intercourse in enough detail for young readers to imitate in their own lives. As a literary work, *Forever* not only provided teens with a unofficial guide to sex, but it also made it easier for other YA authors to publish materials about sex and sexuality (Cart, 2010; Jones, 2006). At the time of its publication in 1975, *Forever* was a daring and controversial narrative that sought to disrupt dominant literary codes of adolescent sexuality, which at the time was typically characterised as dangerous and potentially disastrous (Kokkola, 2013; Brown & St. Clair, 2002; Trites, 2000; Christian-Smith, 1990). In particular, these codes strictly limited physical contact to chaste hugging and kissing, portrayed female sexuality as dangerous, and showed young women who engaged in sexual intercourse to be faced with abandonment or pregnancy (Christian-Smith, 1990). While these codes are still present in YA Literature today, *Forever* was deployed as an antidote to these literary conceptualisations of adolescent sexuality by portraying sexual intercourse as a positive and pleasurable experience that came from a female-centred perspective (Younger, 2003). *Forever* became such a hallmark in YA

Literature that decades after its publication it still remains a touchstone for readers and writers of sexually-themed YA Literature.

Efferent Romances appear to me as essentially a long line of *Forever* read-a-likes. My favourite reference to *Forever* comes from Patrick Ness' *Release* (2017) in a scene where the hero of the story, Adam, tells his best friend, Angela, that his staunchly religious brother got a young woman pregnant. Angela replies, "WHAT?!?!...Did he even READ Judy Blume?" (p. 57). Presumably, if Adam's brother had read *Forever*, had read about the multiple forms of contraceptives that the characters use, he would not be in his current predicament. Many other books that I read for this project are also *Forever* read-a-likes. Foremost they include *I Never* by Laura Hopper, *Forever for a Year* (2015) by b.t. gottfred, Daria Snadowsky's *Anatomy* duology (2007, 2013), *The Infinite Moment of Us* (2013) by Lauren Myracle, *Between Us and the Moon* (2015) by Rebecca Maizel, *The F-It List* (2013) by Julie Halpern, and *Lost It* (2007) by Kristen Tracy. It also extends to some LGBTQ YA Literature such as *Release* by Patrick Ness, *The Handsome Girl and Her Beautiful Boy* (2018) by b.t. gottfred and *Our Own Private Universe* by Robyn Talley (2017). All of these novels contain explicit sex and aim to be informative about sexuality, but I will also note that explicit sex is not a defining quality of Efferent Romance. Efferent Romance can extend to any story with a romantic relationship that is set within the context of ordinary life and aims to teach a lesson. With that in mind, this encapsulates most YA Literature about relationships and sex. These are the types of romance that have come to be expected from YA Literature and are unique to the genre. I have chosen to analyse *I Never* by Laura Hopper for this chapter, the most contemporary of all *Forever* read-a-likes that I read for this study.

4.1.2 Readers of Efferent Romance

Participants Jane, Andie, Madeline, Bonnie, Arya, and Kelly were the more avid readers of YA Literature in this study. Among these participants, there is a clear indication that their understanding of relationships and sex were influenced by YA Literature. For example, Jane told me, "Yeah, it's pretty much where I got all my information from. Or like a standard idea of what a relationship consists of, for sure". Readers did not use the term Efferent Romance to describe certain novels, but they spoke about these texts as the

quintessential YA Literature about relationships and/or sex and had much to say about the characteristics that define Efferent Romance and what it taught them.

Participants had a sense that YA Literature follows its own conventions that are related to teaching young people about life. They were well aware of the didactic quality of YA Literature and they generally viewed this as a positive when contemplating YA Literature as an information source on sexuality. As Bonnie told me:

I feel like most Young Adult stories, they have a lesson at the end or they're supposed to teach you something. They're didactic in that way. So, I feel like there's definitely something you can take. Even in the conversations that we've had, I can pick out three or four things that I've told you that I've learned specifically from reading these books.

In addition, readers identified YA Literature as being specially positioned to address the sexual events that are often unique to teens. Although many scholars have spoken out against the manufacturing of adolescence as a unique stage of human development between childhood and adulthood (Adams, 1997; Lesko, 2001; McCallum, 2006), participants generally felt this was a positive inclusion in YA Literature. As Scarlet told me:

I think it's important to have Young Adult Literature because it's a good transition into adulthood. Adolescence is such a unique experience in general because you're developing at a really fast rate, fast in comparison to the rest of your life. The transition from childhood to adulthood is confusing, so I definitely think it's important to have stories that teenagers can relate to and be validated by.

Readers often described YA Literature as transitional texts about sexuality, a structure that acknowledges teens as children that are progressively developing into adults. For participants, this was seen as a quality that made them especially relevant to a teen audience. Bonnie told me:

I feel like with children's books and Young-er Adult novels, maybe 9-12, they don't talk about it at all. And then when it comes to Adult Literature, you're just completely confronted, sometimes overwhelmed by the sexual context or connotation that comes in the book. So, when you read Young Adult Literature it's not necessarily a gateway, but it's a way for you to be introduced to sex without being overwhelmed. And being a young person myself, I empathise with the people who are involved in the books and the characters. That's why I feel

like it's so valuable. Because I'm not afraid to delve into the stories and because I can see myself in them.

However, readers did not always take this at face-value and were critical of stereotypical depictions of adolescence. Just as readers were able to identify the didactic quality of YA Literature, they were also able to recognise that YA Literature is not necessarily true to the lived experience of teens. As Scarlet told me again, "It's interesting because most Young Adult Literature is written by adults. It's like a teen perspective written by an adult so it's not actually a teen perspective". They were also not completely satisfied with the content in YA Literature because it did not always address their sexual reading interests.¹⁶ However, as I asserted in Chapter 1, even though YA Literature, largely written by adults, overwhelmingly contains messages of socialisation, I still think it is incredibly important to have a literature that is dedicated to teens. Readers felt this too.

As transitional texts on sexuality, a certain amount of didacticism is to be expected in Efferent Romance. It makes sense that an introduction to sex is accompanied by an explanation or a reflection on the meaning. However, overt, obvious didacticism was seen as negative by some of the readers in this study and they emphasised that reading should be, overall, entertaining. In another words, the efferent experience of the reading event should not overwhelm the aesthetic experience. For example, participant Arya felt that books should not sound "preachy" because, in her experience, it would automatically make her shut out that voice. Madeline commented specifically on the importance of educational content, but also the entertainment factor. She told me that:

Sex isn't just falling into bed and rolling around a couple times and walking out. There's an emotional aspect to it. There's consent, condoms, contraceptives, that kind of side of it that I think would be really important to portray. And the relationship side of it, any type of abusive relationship, knowing how to handle it...I guess this is taking away the whole part of the book portion of it. You know, this is a great story this is how it's going to happen but...I think having some of that would be important because it teaches a lesson while reading something that's enjoyable to youth or teens.

¹⁶ See Chapters Six and Seven for an in-depth discussion.

What is interesting about readers' awareness of the efferent qualities of sexually-themed YA Literature is that they also reported that they were not necessarily looking for an efferent experience when seeking out literature about relationships and sex. For example, Jane told me that her interest in reading about relationships and sex was almost a subconscious thing. She told me how it started:

Probably just going to *Chapters* and seeing the books, the covers, stuff like that. You get drawn to them or you want a certain thing. At that point I'd never been in a relationship, right, so I was like maybe passively or subconsciously looking for that kind of thing to see what it was like.

This is consistent with Catherine Ross' (1999, 2000) finding that ELIS in the context of pleasure reading is a process of *finding without seeking*. In addition, while readers recognised that they could find valuable information about relationships and sex within YA Literature, they did not necessarily see reading it as similar to reading an educational textbook. For example, Arya described YA books about relationships and sex as "junk food". She said:

No one ever told me what sex was like or what it kind of entailed. So, I think it was just pure curiosity and I think I just, I used to hang out at the library a lot when I was in Middle School. So, I would just spend a lot of time perusing through books and reading what my friends told me to read and reading what I kind of... would flip through the books and find interesting.

YA Literature informed participants in this study about many aspects of sexuality. However, one of the most common answers that I received from participants, either directly or indirectly, was that reading stories about relationships and sex as a young person provided them with a standard for what a relationship looks like or how it should be. For example, Madeline told me that one of the earliest lessons that she learned from books was the progressive nature of a relationship. She described to me reading a Sarah Dessen romance novel where the process of a relationship was reaffirmed for her. She told me:

I guess looking back on it, the whole entire book was set up like you know, girl moves to a town, meets boy, they go on multiple dates before eventually they start dating, and then going further into the relationship... So, it was like, "Oh, this is

how the character in the books did it, and this is how my mom said I should do it, and this is how I should do it”.

What readers in this study described was a script for a sexual relationship. More than any kind of literature, Efferent Romance focuses on the events of a relationship from beginning to end. It uniquely provides a script for an entire relationship and does so in such a comprehensive and didactic way that it could be mimicked by the reader. The details of these scripts are complex and each reader in this study related different aspects of what they learned from this kind of literature. In the next section of this chapter, using *I Never* as an example, I go into detail about what Efferent Romance communicates to readers about what a “standard” relationship looks like and how this may shape readers’ sexual subjectivities in both positive and negative ways.

4.2 Sexual Relationships in Efferent Romance

4.2.1 *I Never* by Laura Hopper

I Never is the debut novel of Los Angeles based writer Laura Hopper. For most of her life, Hopper has worked in the film and publishing industry and is currently an Executive Editor for Disney Worldwide publishing. Her first novel was well-reviewed and comes highly recommended in *School Library Journal* (Riley, 2017, October 14) as “...destined to be a classic [that] will undoubtedly be passed around from teen to teen as a word-of-mouth favourite ” (para. 1). Hopper (n.d.) herself describes her novel as “...a thought-provoking, highly relatable novel...about the teenage [sic] adapting to the pangs of becoming a young woman while dealing with the all-too-real problems of life” (para. 2). Since Laura Hopper is a relatively new author, not much is known about her beyond the few details that I describe here. However, Hopper’s work belongs to a long line of Judy Blume read-a-likes that aim to provide a reading experience for teens that addresses sex with detail and honesty while also guiding them towards healthy sexual relationships. In fact, Hopper (2017, November 9) has explicitly stated that Judy Blume is one of her greatest influences and that her book was directly inspired by *Forever*. Like many authors who write frank portrayals of teen sexual relationships, Hopper aims to portray sex positively and include female pleasure as a component of sexuality. Hopper (2017,

November 9) describes this as the “juicy details” when she describes her motivations for writing *I Never*:

I overheard a group of moms wax on about the crazy joy they were getting from reading the *Fifty Shades of Grey* books. It was the moment I realised that we needed a book that satisfies the thirst for the juicy details but also paints the picture of a healthy relationship. I went home and started outlining I NEVER. (para. 10)

Hopper’s work is one of the more progressive texts in this category as it contains more instances of positive views on relationships and sex than many previous novels, such as Daria Snadowsky’s *Anatomy of a Boyfriend*. For example, there is more focus on female pleasure, consent, and independence in Hopper’s book that speaks more strongly of third-wave feminist values. Among the newest novels that I read for this project, *I Never* encapsulates as much as possible the historic and contemporary trends of realistic and didactic novels about sexuality for young people that began with Judy Blume’s *Forever*. In essence, *I Never* is a fine example of the quintessential coming-of-age story that has come to be expected in YA Literature.

I Never is an exclusive look into the intimate relationship of two ordinary teens. It is, in full, the story of heroine Janey King’s first love. Taking place over the second half of Janey’s junior year, it begins with the news of her parents’ separation. While on vacation in Mexico for winter break, Janey’s parents reveal to her that they are no longer in love. Although they still care about each other, they feel they would be happier if they parted ways. Janey is confused and upset about this news, but she soon finds distraction in Luke Hallstrom, a senior year track-star who she bumps into on the plane ride home. To her surprise, she has caught Luke’s attention, and he begins to talk to her at school, text her, and ask her to meet-up with him. She is in complete disbelief that Luke would be interested in her. Janey is boyish, studious, and inexperienced, and Luke is popular, extremely good looking, and could be with any young woman he wanted. Janey is incredibly insecure about herself and believes that it makes more sense for Luke to be with someone more attractive and interesting than her. Yet, Luke follows through on his intentions, taking Janey on her first date, giving her a first kiss, and becoming her first love. There’s only one problem: Luke is moving across the country after he graduates

from high school. While dealing with the painful reality of this situation, Janey also cannot deny her intense emotional and sexual feelings for Luke. Once a young woman who never really thought about sex, Janey decides that she is ready to experience sex with Luke. She loves him, he loves her, and although their relationship causes her a lot of pain and is definitely not forever, it feels right. Janey and Luke embark on a sexual journey together that is full of pleasure, passion, tenderness, and consideration towards each other. In her first relationship, Janey learns what it takes to have a relationship with another person and also a relationship with herself.

4.2.2 Key Messages about Sexual Relationships in Efferent Romance

As a script for a sexual relationship, Efferent Romance passes on many key messages to readers about what to expect from a sexual relationship. As participant Jane told me, reading YA Literature gave her an idea of “what would happen in a relationship or it kind of created a standard or expectation maybe. Just an idea, I guess. Because I didn’t have an idea beforehand, it’s kind of like this is what might happen or you would experience in a relationship”. The events of the story, the feelings felt by characters, and the conclusions offered by the voice of the author all culminate in a set of key messages that are both positive and negative in nature. Below I describe the key messages that I have found in Efferent Romance, using *I Never* as an example:

1. Sexual Relationships are One of Life’s Greatest Joys

Efferent Romance, as all romance does, demonstrates why a person would want to be in a relationship. Linda Christian-Smith (1990) writes that “[t]he common vision of romance – girl meets boy and it’s all hearts, flowers, and sweetness – confronts us with the innocence and specialness of love. Romance may be many things, but it is neither simple nor innocent” (p. 28). While I certainly agree with this statement (as you will see below), I also believe that the specialness of love operates as more than just a mechanism for the pacification and domination of women. In this section, I approach the topic of romance from a celebratory perspective, that romance invites the readers to share in the positive aspects of romance and love. Efferent Romance shows that despite all the negative

aspects of relationships, they also bring characters deep feelings of joy, excitement, and validation. First, being the object of another's affections bring joy to characters. Sexual relationships make characters feel wanted, desired, and loved like no other relationship can. Second, there are also the physical responses that create joy and excitement. Characters feel immense desire for their partners and also experience intense pleasure during sexual encounters. Third, sexual relationships create deep bonds between partners. Acts of affection and sex bring characters closer together and there is a sense that they know each other in ways that no one else does. In *I Never*, Janey summarises how she feels about being in a relationship with Luke by saying, "I feel lucky and beautiful" (p. 260).

Participants in this study drew attention to the joys of sexual relationships by describing small scenes of love with smiles and adoration. Sarah, for example, told me about a scene in a Japanese comic called *Maka-Maka* by Kishi Torajiro (2008) that she read. She described:

So, these two women they had a very romantic and sexy life but then you could see that they also loved each other a lot. Just these small subtle moments that the author put in. Like after they had sex and were out drinking coffee and she was talking about her nails...what was it, what did she say? She said, "I'll always keep my middle finger nail cut so I can have sex with you, it's all for you. I actually love nails, but the nail on my middle finger, it's for you". I was like, it's romantic and I still remember that.

This scene is not from a YA novel, but these kinds of romantic moments can be found in any romance story. Participants such as Andie, Madeline and Kelly described these loving interactions between characters as "cute", and this cuteness evoked good feelings within readers such as love, specialness, and wanting to have these experiences for themselves. These moments accurately demonstrate the specialness that one feels when in a sexual relationship with another person and why these kinds of relationships are of special consequence in our lives. While romance and love are certainly more complicated than special moments suggest, these moments of joy show the reader that feeling of what loving and caring relationships inspire.

2. There Are Many Consequences to Sexual Relationships

Efferent Romances comprehensively describe the potential consequences and risks of sexual relationships. When I asked participant Stacey what she learned from reading YA Literature she told me:

[I learned about]...the intimacy of sexual intercourse. Because your parents can tell you, or forbid you...and the textbooks can tell you the technicalities. But, it's different when you see a character go through it and what they learn and what they regret...That it's not just technical terms. It's not just feelings or what your parents tell you. There can be pros and cons to every romantic or intimate sexual relationship.

Efferent Romances, realistic in nature, do not just show the positive aspects of romance and love. Above all else, they show that relationships are often fraught with uncertainty that is caused by a fear of being hurt, disappointed, or rejected. They also heavily suggest that sex is risky and men, especially, are not to be trusted. Messages about risks are conveyed from multiple sources throughout Efferent Romance, but most especially through adult characters or the adult voice that seeps into the narrative. Parents in Efferent Romance are often angry, suspicious, and autocratic when there is evidence that their teen is in a relationship that may be sexual. Not surprisingly, participants in this study almost always reported that they did not talk to their parents about relationships and sex. Some participants, like Scarlet, had a "sex talk" with her mom before she became sexually active, but parents were not a preferred source when seeking information about relationships or sex. In many cases, participants came from conservative families and received repressive information about sex from their parents. For example, Christina describes what her mom taught her as more of a threat. She told me:

With my mom, she more so gave my brother the message, "Hey, this is sex. Just make sure you don't get a girl pregnant". For me it was, "If you're not a virgin then you're unworthy of living". Yeah, really conservative views. So, I didn't learn much. The only thing I learned about sex was you have to remain a virgin until you're married because if you're not a virgin your husband can cheat on you, beat you, financially abuse you and that would be ok because you're not a virgin. So, I actually grew up having a negative image about sex.

While this is a rather extreme example, it goes without saying that parents, in fiction and in real life, often respond to their children's sexual lives by attempting to manage the risks of sexuality. In *I Never*, Janey's mom is disapproving of her relationship with Luke

and she tells Janey, “Sex brings an unexpected set of complications and risks to your life. You have to be able to acknowledge those factors and discuss them like an adult” (p. 163). Judith Levine (2002) makes a poignant observation in her text *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex* that the modern family is vexed by “...the self-cancelling task of inducting the child into the social world of sexuality and at the same time protecting her from it” (p. xxx). As a result, our narratives of sexuality for young people, often an introduction to sexual life, are also largely an introduction to the consequences or risks of sexuality. In this section, I describe these consequences.

Sex is physically risky. Efferent Romance provides information on the physical risks of sex, such as STIs and pregnancy, and how to prevent them. In Judy Blume’s *Forever* Katherine makes a special trip to Planned Parenthood to get a prescription for the birth control pill. She also gets tested for “venereal disease” at the insistence of the doctor even though she and Michael were both virgins. In more contemporary Efferent Romance, physical risks are acknowledged but they are not necessarily emphasised as they once were in earlier periods of YA Literature. In *I Never*, Hopper describes the process of buying and using condoms in practice, but there is no real discussion about STIs and pregnancy as a risk. Rather, condom use is just a normalised part of the process, even a ritual that both young women and young men go through before they have sex. Actual pregnancy or the contracting of STIs was rare in the texts that I read in this study and usually took the form of a pregnancy scare or STIs in reference to a past event or a minor character. Some characters did engage in unprotected sex, such as in b.t. gottfred’s *Forever for a Year* and Lauren Myracle’s *The Infinite Moment of Us*, but the characters were not “struck down by lightning” (participant Andie’s words) afterwards. Efferent Romance narratives tend to be less extreme than darker, more complex narratives of sexuality where disease is linked more closely with death and death becomes the ultimate punishment for carnal desire (Kokkola, 2013). This threat is of course alive and well, but with newer novels it does not tend to feature prominently beyond acts of prevention.

Participants in this study had different experiences with reading about physical risks and how to prevent them in narratives of sexuality. Bonnie told me that an emphasis on the physical consequences of sex made her afraid. She said:

...I feel like for so long reading stories like that and just getting sex education I was afraid to have sex. Literally. Because I'm like, "Oh no! I'm going to get pregnant no matter what I do. Even if I wear a condom, even if I don't. Even if my partner is healthy or not, I'm going to get an STI".

Sarah described that her reading of normalised condom use, similar to that in *I Never*, helped her to better remember that condoms are an important part of sexual health. In contrast, Madeline told me that she could not remember reading a story where a condom was used. This may be because she tended to read in the fantasy genre where condoms do not fit within the context. However, she felt that this information needed to be included when showing sex in YA Literature. In these regards, participants seemed to agree that portraying physical risks was important, but that they needed to be reasonable and not emphasised to the point where it becomes an intimidating warning. Efferent Romances treat these risks differently from novel to novel, some better than others, but as part of a comprehensive description on sexuality, risks to one's physical well-being are one of the most common messages that they convey.

Relationships cause emotional suffering. Efferent Romance shows how relationships cause characters emotional suffering. While sexual relationships do bring a considerable amount of joy to characters, they also bring with them a considerable amount of self-doubt, insecurity, and heartache. As Janey says after she and Luke make their relationship official, "Luke Hallstrom is my boyfriend. I am his girlfriend. Something I never thought I wanted or needed is making me so happy. The crazy part is that it doesn't relieve my insecurity like I thought it would" (p. 141). In Efferent Romance, heroines are often navigating their sexual subjectivities for the first time. This requires the heroine to make herself vulnerable to another person at great risk to her emotional, social, and physical well-being. Efferent Romance communicates that there is real cause for concern when making oneself vulnerable because people, men in particular, do not often live up to the expectations of a happy relationship. In *I Never*, Janey is constantly questioning Luke's motivations and commitment to her. This causes her a lot of feelings of self-doubt, jealousy, and pain. Even though Luke is very cool-headed, direct, and consistent in his affections towards her, Janey is never able to fully enjoy their relationship. She does not

believe him when he compliments her, accuses him of cheating, and even wonders if she is “solely a virgin to conquer” (p. 100).

Later in the novel, after they have slept together, Luke admits that he does not take sex as seriously as she does and does not see a problem with casual sex. Janey takes this as a sign that he also does not take their relationship seriously, and she is incredibly hurt. She says:

Here I am, annoyingly confident that sex in a real relationship is the only way to go, that I've given Luke a piece of myself and that I'm so fortunate that my first experience is something real. And the truth is that my boyfriend (is he even my boyfriend anymore?) has much different views about sex that I do. And much different views than I thought he did. (p. 252)

Although Janey eventually comes to terms with the idea of casual sex, and it is clear that Luke genuinely cares for her, this revelation shows that Janey's expectations for a relationship have been betrayed. From Janey's perspective, she is giving Luke a “piece of [her]self” whereas Luke's view on sex is less about deep, almost spiritual, commitment and more about acting on sexual desire. Luke's views on sex are actually a lot more reasonable than Janey's, but *Efferent Romance* still privileges committed relationships as a means of “protection” for young women (*i.e.*, promiscuity increases the risk of consequences).

This discrepancy between the meaning of sex for female and male characters can be observed in various ways across *Efferent Romance*, and they all serve as a somewhat cautionary tale for young women that men cannot be trusted. For example, participant Jane told me that she thought the love interest in *Anatomy of a Boyfriend* was a jerk because he did not seem to genuinely care about the heroine's feelings. She told me:

I remember that the guy just kept wanting sex and the girl was kind of just going with it. She couldn't even orgasm from it, it was one of those situations. I don't even remember if the girl left the guy or if the guy left the girl, honestly. I guess it showed how guys can be manipulative or how they might put their needs before the girl's.

None of the female main characters in *I Never* end their story without being burned in some way by the young men in their lives. In *Efferent Romance*, because readers are

usually made to sympathise most with the heroine, the damage is usually done by the young men they date. However, there are also instances where heroines are not exactly trustworthy either. For example, in Lauren Barnholdt's *Sometimes It Happens* (2011) the main character treacherously sleeps with her best friend's boyfriend. Across the spectrum of Efferent Romance, through numerous instances of betrayal and heartbreak, these narratives show that for all the joy that relationships bring no one can truly be trusted with keeping one's heart safe from harm.

Relationships are hard work. Efferent Romance shows how relationships with other human beings are difficult and require hard work to keep them functioning. The problems encountered in these relationships are usually mundane troubles, such as petty fights, misunderstandings, and inconsistencies about romantic intentions. They rarely tread into the realm of abuse and the problems covered provide examples of common relationship issues that young readers can expect to encounter in their own relationships. Relationship problems often get in the way of happiness and cause partners to go their separate ways. However, instead of demonising young men, Efferent Romances are often sympathetic to imperfect characters and school readers on how to accept others' flaws. For example, Janey learns to deal with the fact that Luke is a terrible flirt, even though it makes her feel insecure. She says:

I have to deal with the fact that there's something about Luke that I don't like. I've got to gain the strength to accept him as he is. The realization that I don't think he's absolutely perfect is actually somewhat liberating. He's human. (p. 196)

I see instances like these as recognising that all humans are flawed. They show that any relationship can be fraught with anger, pain, and arguments and through this, prepares readers for these negative realities in their own relationships. For example, participant Andie told me that encountering these kinds of problems in fiction actually helped her to sort through her own. She told me:

...I would read a story and I would be like, "Oh my god, why would he even get mad about that?" And then I'd think about it and like, wait, that's happened to me and I completely overreacted. Seeing it from the other side in a situation that wasn't mine...I was like, "Oh, I could see it now, I guess". I have a bank of

information that I can draw on and say, ok, I can either respond to this this way, like what I want to do right now, or I have five other stories that I had just read.

Efferent Romance shows that there is difficulty, frustration, and pain in relationships, but that accepting others' flaws, dealing with problems, and overcoming differences is a necessarily part of the process.

Relationships are part of greater social life. Efferent Romance establishes that personal sexual relationships are part of a larger social fabric that includes other people. Efferent Romance novels are not just about the relationship between two people, but also how other people respond to the relationship. As participant Andie said about the characteristics of YA Literature, "...it talks a lot more frankly about the repercussions of sex...and not just 'you'll get pregnant and die'. Yeah, like, everything from your social life to what happens within the relationship". In this case, Efferent Romances often show how people outside of the relationship can react both negatively and positively to it. In *I Never* most of the people in Janey's life react negatively to her new relationship with Luke. Her friend Sloan becomes jealous, they quarrel, and their friendship is almost destroyed. Her friend Brett is also jealous, and very judgemental, and they become distant from each other. In one chapter, Janey describes how wonderful she feels when Luke gives her attention and affection at school, but then she also says, "But as much as I like the constant reminders that he's into me, there is a worrisome paranoia that Brett might be nearby, witnessing and judging" (p. 117). Parents are especially resistant to the relationships of their offspring. Janey's mom is very suspicious and disapproving of Luke and makes Janey's life more difficult than it was before. Her dad is a fairly neutral, but he is also cautious and makes sure to have a conversation with Janey about Luke.

Only Janey's friend Danielle is truly happy for her and consistently supports her throughout the novel. Acquaintances at Janey's school also seem to be approving because Luke is beloved by most of the population. In Janey's case, her choice of partner improves her social standing at school. Indeed, Christian-Smith (1990) notes that in YA romance, the attention of a popular young man often bestows prestige and special privileges on the heroine. However, this is not always the case, and in the event that a relationship violates acceptable forms of romance, daily life can become hell for

heroines. Janey's friend Sloan specifically tells her that she will not have sex until she leaves high school. She says, "That way it's just about us: no gossip, no school politics, no bullshit" (p. 279). Here, Sloan makes it explicit that other people's reactions are a clear consequence of entering into a sexual relationship. Efferent Romance shows that who a person chooses as a partner and what happens within that relationship can have profound effects on their relationships with friends, family, and acquaintances. This element of Efferent Romance shows the reader that relationships, do not exist in isolation, but are part of greater social life.

3. Sex is a Serious Matter

Efferent Romance upholds the idea that sex needs to be taken seriously. This is mainly due to the fact that there can be so many consequences to sexual relationships that heroines must take sex seriously in order to avoid any pitfalls. Sex, in many ways, is still presented as dangerous for young women – but not young men – in YA Literature. In consequence, heroines place great emphasis on securing a committed, loving relationship and refraining from sex until they feel "ready". As a result, sex rarely happens outside of the context of love and casual sexual relationships are little more than tolerated. From the very first pages of *I Never* the necessity of love in sexual relationships is asserted and maintained throughout the novel. The novel is opened with this statement from Janey:

I just think sex should mean something. After all, it's my body, the one body I have, which has to last forever. Why would I let someone have that kind of access without being pretty important in the scheme of things? I don't want to let someone get that close to me only to have that person ultimately mean nothing in my life. I think too much. (p. 2)

The status of a relationship, committed or casual, becomes one of the main problems in Efferent Romance. In *I Never*, young women who do not secure commitment are described as "stupid" and at risk of compromising their integrity. In general, female characters greatly agonise over the presence/absence of commitment in relationships and sex especially is seen as an act that, if not done with extreme consideration, could lead the relationship away from commitment. For example, Janey's willingness/reluctance to have sex is clearly seen as a defining factor in whether or not Luke may respect her as his

partner. This can be seen when Janey's friend, Danielle, tells her what she needs to do to make sure the relationship is serious and not just a "hookup":

You need to know it's coming. Don't let him surprise you or talk you into doing it before you're ready. In fact, the first two or three times he tries, you should say no. He'll respect you for that. When you're ready you should come with protection so he knows you're cool with it. That will turn him on. (p. 82)

Danielle describes preparation for and resistance to sex as techniques to avoid being tossed aside by young men who are just looking for sex. Young women as resisters and young men as initiators have long been characteristics of heterosexuality as well as a thread that runs throughout YA romance (Christian-Smith, 1990). This is obviously problematic as it does not promote the idea that young women are able and entitled to have their own sexual subjectivities and their own sense of sexual autonomy. Michelle Fine (1988), Deborah Tolman (2002), and Louisa Allen (2004) have all identified this as one of the major gender-based messages about what is appropriate sexual behaviour for young women that interferes with their ability to improve their emotional, social, and physical well-being related to sexuality. Coupled with heroines' inexperience, the need to take sex seriously usually means that heroines are passive or reluctant recipients of young men's sexuality, at least until they secure commitment.

Among the different texts that I examined in this study, I have found the girl-as-passive and boy-as-dominant tropes especially prevalent in Efferent Romance. Young men themselves are not necessarily portrayed as predators, but they are written as "ready" for sex when young women are not. There are no real questions about their experience, anxieties, hesitations, or fears; they want to have sex and they are ready. Luke, for example, seems to have no worries or insecurities about sex. What is problematic about this common dynamic is that it sets up a scenario where young men ask for sex and young women either say yes or they say no. This scenario, as opposed to a scenario where young women take a more active role in initiating sex, sets up the narrative for a multitude of troublesome situations. For example, participant Scarlet told me that she often identified with characters in YA Literature that were pressured for sex or performed sexual acts even if they were not "ready". She told me:

As a teenager, being in a relationship with a guy, and feeling guilty for not wanting to give a blowjob anytime I was asked but still doing it because you feel like you don't want to hurt anyone's feelings... When I read that in books I identified with those characters... a lot of the time it's really normalised in those books. It's just what you do or it's a common theme for teen girls to be "not ready". I was ready but I wanted it to be on my terms.

Scarlet described the teen girls in these types of stories as not "standing up for themselves". This draws attention to a main argument within the *discourse of desire* literature (Allen, 2004; Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Fine, 1988; Tolman & Higgins, 1996), that when young women do not feel a sense of sexual entitlement, when they are afraid of getting hurt, and when they do not take active roles in their sex lives, they are less able to dictate the terms of what happens during their sexual encounters. In these narratives, it is often the norm that young men are the ones who propose, initiate, and act and young women respond.

However, young men in Efferent Romance are typically understanding of young women who are not "ready" and consent is coded into the conversations they have with their partners. In opposition to conventional romance, where spontaneous, violent, and erotically charged coercive sex can quite often be observed, Efferent Romance is careful to present sex to readers as a consciously planned event that is agreed upon by both parties. Young men may try to persuade young women to have sex with them when they are not ready, but there is usually a verbal check-in between characters to make sure that everything is going according to plan. In *I Never* Luke endlessly asks Janey questions like: "Is this okay?" (p. 87), "Can I kiss you?" (p. 101), "This ok?" (p. 102), "Should we stop?" (p. 138), "Is that okay?" (p. 172), "You okay?" (p. 174) and "Are you sure?" (p. 229). Participant Arya told me that these check-ins within a YA text passively introduced her to the concept of consent. She told me:

I remember this guy and girl, they were about to have sex... And then for a second, in the book, he asked "Are you sure? Are you ok?". It was kind of like, "Are you sure you want to do this?". I remember reading that and I was like, "Why is he asking her? I don't get it. Just do it. I don't get it". And my friend coincidentally was reading the same novel. She was a year older than me and I remember talking to her about it the next day during lunch. I was like, "Why is this character... why does he ask her?" and she was like, "Well, you know, he's asking her because you're supposed to ask". And I was like, "What do you mean

you're supposed to ask? I don't...I don't get it. I really don't get it". And then I think she taught me the idea of consent because I didn't know it was a thing.

Through reading different YA texts, Arya learned that being "ready" means that one has chosen to have sex because they personally choose to, not because someone else has persuaded them to, and that giving consent is an important part of this process.

I have also seen some variety in how young men initiate and respond to sexual situations. Some young men do say "no", or "I need more time", or "let's just kiss instead". For example, Art tells Zee in b.t. gottfred's *The Handsome Girl & Her Beautiful Boy* that he is not ready to have sex. Zee has already had intercourse with more than one person, but Art has not, and he is more hesitant. Zee respects his decision, although somewhat reluctantly. Another varying trend that I have also observed is young men who are more interested in commitment than their female partner. This is evident in books such as *The F-It List* (2013) by Julie Halpern, *Dreams of Significant Girls* by Christina Garcia (2011), and *Kiss It* (2010) by Erin Downing. Young women in these books tend to approach commitment with disinterest, while the young man is left to feel slighted, forgotten, or used. This is a reversal for both male and female characters, although I cannot say it fits within a positive framework of sexuality. Overall, the dominant narrative is still that young men are the initiators and young women are the resisters, at least until commitment is secured in the relationship. As Christian-Smith (1990) notes, "...heroines have good reason for their concern over being perceived as too forward, for in their world proper femininity requires certain passiveness with their ability to take the initiative restricted to carefully defined situations" (p. 33). In Efferent Romance, being in love and being "ready" is portrayed as the ideal precursor for sex. It is conveyed that sex should be taken seriously and the decision to have sex should not be made lightly, especially for young women, because it is just too risky otherwise. After commitment is established, heroines are more sexually assertive. In *I Never* it is actually Janey who asks Luke to have sex with her, even though he was the one who proposed and encouraged it in the first place. With this agreement from Janey, she has reached a point where her desire outweighs her fear.

4. Sex Can Be Fun

Efferent Romance shows that although sex is a serious matter, in the appropriate context, sex can also be fun. Attraction, curiosity, love, desire, and the need for connection are the positive forces that drive characters together despite the trials of relationships. Examining YA romance in the 1980s and 1990s, Christian-Smith (1990) wrote that the physiological components of heroine's sexuality were not considered legitimate and focused more on emotional responses. The notion that young women are not entitled to feel desire and pleasure are increasingly disappearing in contemporary YA Romance as a whole. Following the positive attitude toward sex in most Efferent Romance, forces of desire are seen as "natural" for both female and male characters. In spite of who initiates sexual acts, these narratives show that young women and young men both want, need, and enjoy sex. In *I Never* Janey describes her feelings of desire and sex as a biological need:

I am physiologically connected to this guy, and it's clear my body wants him desperately. I want to have sex with him. Every organ I possess is telling me that I want to have sex with him. On second thought, it might be more of a need. I need to have sex with him. The same way I need food, water, and shelter. (p. 158)

In the most contemporary Efferent Romances, female desire is described more often and more explicitly. Where YA romance once stuck to psychological descriptions of female pleasure (Christian-Smith, 1990; Kokkola, 2013; Trites, 2000), one of the things that strikes me the most about *I Never* are the descriptions of Janey's physiological responses to her sexual interactions with Luke. For example, Hopper skips the metaphorical descriptions of what it feels like to be physically aroused by having Janey describe how it physically feels to be sexually attracted to Luke and repeatedly point out the "wetness" she feels between her legs. Through these descriptions, female desire is directly acknowledged, described in detail, and normalised.

Sex in Efferent Romance is both realistic and open to the possibility of immense pleasure. As Laura Hopper (2017, November 9) said of her book, "I'm most proud of the scene where Janey and Luke have sex for the first time. The goal was to make it really romantic, yet still real. I think it's the attainable fantasy about what the first time could be and should be like" (para. 8). An "attainable fantasy" is an excellent way to describe the positive aspects of sexual relationships that appear in Efferent Romance. Nothing is ever perfect between the characters, either emotionally or physically, and sometimes there are

failed attempts at having good, satisfying sex. Usually, this takes the form of one partner, usually the young woman, not being able to achieve climax. Sometimes this is a direct result of a lack of attention from their partner, and this has rightly come under critique. However, there are some cases where failed attempts at sex are not necessarily based in inequality, but are reflective of real-life complications of sex. For example, for the heroine, Aki, in Robin Talley's *Our Own Private Universe* the feeling of having a finger inside of her was just too intense and they had to stop. Or in Judy Blume's *Forever* where Michael prematurely ejaculates not once but twice on the night he and Katherine have sex for the first time. Readers in this study reported that they appreciated that sex was portrayed realistically and not necessarily romantically. As Andie told me:

Anywhere else where you look up "Sex, how does it work" it's literally biologically this is how it is. And you expect it to be like the movies, like oh my god fairy-tale, you know, butterflies flying around. Then Young Adult books explain how it is. So, sometimes they're like "Oh, it was awkward and we took off our clothes and kind of just looked at each other and are like...god, what do we do now?"

Despite some of the complications that can arise during the act of sex, Efferent Romance shows how sex can be fun and pleasurable. In the most contemporary of Efferent Romances, pleasure is a mutual experience. In *I Never*, both Luke and Janey take care that they give each other pleasure. For example, Janey tells Luke, "It makes me happy to see you experience pleasure," (p. 242). Characters experience immense pleasure and even experiment with sex in ways to bring about new pleasure. In *I Never*, for example, Janey and Luke experiment with digital and penetrative sex. They take their time with foreplay, and they also experiment with different positions. During one encounter Janey even pulls out a bottle of whipped cream. They also have sex outside of their bedrooms, such as Luke's car and in Luke's friend's guest bedroom. This type of variety in sexual acts is a topic that is not often elaborated on in biology textbooks or in traditional sex education. As traditional sex education typically focuses on the biological aspects of sex, sexual acts that are strictly for pleasure, such as oral sex, are not usually explained. Participant Arya told me about an experience where she encountered oral sex for the first time in a novel. She said, "I remember that the characters were trying to have oral sex and it was just bizarre to me. Straight up bizarre...it kind of broadened my horizons in that sense where I

was like, ok...I guess sex doesn't have to be penis in vagina". Portraying good sex, even though it may be more realistic to show sex that is lacklustre, is important because it shows a possibility that pleasurable sex is attainable for young women.

One important characteristic of sex in Efferent Romance is that it is often described matter-of-factly and is not meant to be titillating to the reader. This has to do with retaining a didactic quality to the narrative. As Roberta S. Trites (2000) explains, "as long as the adolescent learns something from the experience, then the literary representation of sexuality seems more acceptable with a genre dedicated to teaching adolescents how to become Other – an adult" (p. 102). In Chapter 6 I discuss the positive aspects of erotic literature, but in this context, even though the sex is described matter-of-factly it still conveys that sex can be pleasurable. In sum, in Efferent Romance, even though sexual relationships are complicated, these texts also communicate to the reader that sex can also be fun, pleasurable, and satisfying.

5. Sexual Relationships are Transformative

Efferent Romance depicts the experience of a sexual relationship as transformative. The maturation process from childhood to adulthood is never more pronounced as it is in Efferent Romance, because heroines often journey into a more concrete selfhood as they experience their first sexual relationship. As Linda Christian-Smith (1990) writes "...romance occupies a key position in heroines' development; romance is not only credited with their maturation, but it is the single experience that gives their lives meaning" (p. 25). Heroines come out the other side of romance and sex knowing more about who they are, their desires, and their goals for the future. Specifically, sexual relationships solidify femininity, propel characters into adulthood, and give them the opportunity to create a sexual subjectivity.

In *I Never*, Janey King goes through a radical sexual transformation throughout the text. In Efferent Romance, heroines are usually experiencing a relationship for the first time and as such, they are inexperienced and lacking a developed sense of sexual subjectivity. Janey, for example, had rarely contemplated herself as a sexual person before she met Luke. In the opening chapter of the novel Janey explains:

Yes, I know plenty of seventeen-year-olds are dating, are having sex, are maybe even in love. It really hasn't occurred to me that I might be missing out on something. I don't think of myself as a late bloomer; I just haven't felt ready for all that. (p. 2)

Janey's only experience with young men was a fleeting crush that was never acknowledged by the other party. She had also never explored her sexuality independently (*i.e.*, has never masturbated). At the beginning of this story, Janey is essentially a blank slate completely unsure of how to navigate her newfound relationship. Christian-Smith (1990) notes that in romance, "...girls' sexuality is dormant up to the moment of romantic specialness" (p. 40), and this provides opportunity for them to develop their own sexual subjectivities. Some participants in this study spoke of characters feeling "confused" or "uncertain" about the actions that they were taking in their sexual relationships. They associated this with being in the process of forming a sexual identity or maturing into adulthood. As participant Stacey told me:

Young Adult Literature, because it's more PG, it's more just like they're discovering things about themselves. They're discovering their sexuality or their sexual identity, whatever it might be. So, there's this...they're already unsure of themselves.

A large part of this uncertainty comes from the heroine's self-doubt over whether or not she is truly loveable. This self-doubt is mainly caused by worries over their attractiveness. As Linda-Christian Smith writes, "[w]hen white heroines look into their mirrors, the reflection they see does not please them. They see freckles, drab hair, chubby cheeks, or a general unattractiveness. Their reaction is not self-acceptance, but a decision to alter their appearance" (p. 46). In *I Never* Janey describes herself as frumpy, athletic, boyish, and lacking feminine features such as curves, large breasts, and a fashion sense. She compares herself to other young women, who are described as voluptuous and sexy, suggesting that these are preferable feminine qualities. Luke constantly compliments Janey for her physical attractiveness and awesome personality, but Janey does not understand why Luke feels this way, as she has never received this kind of attention and does not see herself as beautiful. Janey begins to take part in rituals of beautification. She grooms herself more closely, wears makeup and swaps her baggy clothes for sexy items

of clothing. Janey also begins to change her opinion of herself because Luke validates her appearance. She says:

I always saw myself as so far beneath the category of pretty, feminine, or sexy, let alone *perfect*...How is it that I never saw myself the way he sees me? Why is it that I needed him to open the door for me? I don't want to be the kind of girl who needs validation from boys. I don't want to believe I'm beautiful just because he tells me it's true. However, I am grateful to him for giving me the tools to shed my self-doubt. (p. 173)

In reality, the validation she receives from Luke helps her to accept herself but it also motivates her to become more feminine. The clear message *I Never* sends is that femininity is the key to both attracting and securing a boyfriend. In *Efferent Romance*, the feminine self is solidified through sexual relationships with young men. The participants in this study were very resistant to anti-feminist messages such as this. They often spoke of women's issues and female empowerment. In regard to femininity, participant Jane specifically described a scene in Rainbow Rowell's *Eleanor & Park* (2013) where the main character is resistant to beautification, and it made Jane realise her own resistance to it. She told me:

There was this one scene in the book where she puts on make-up and she doesn't really feel like herself when she's wearing it. I guess I related to that...I didn't really think about it like that until I read about it in the book a couple years ago. I was like, "I feel like this but I didn't really know I felt like this until I read it". So, I still am kind of iffy about it, I guess because what I read about and my previous experiences.

In many romance narratives, heroines transform in appearance to better meet the dominant cultural idea of beauty. As Janey herself notes, she would prefer it if her self-worth was defined by herself and not a love interest. However, these narratives do not usually support the idea of self-love and self-confidence because the "specialness" of love would not be as potent without the validation of another. In *Efferent Romance*, part of the transformative experience is becoming more firmly bound within femininity, an essential component of heterosexual romance.

The biggest transformation to occur in *Efferent Romance* is that over the entire course of their relationships, heroines develop their own sexual subjectivities. Janey begins as a

person who does not really have any sense of her own sexuality. She is incredibly insecure about her sexual abilities, her appearance, and looks to Luke to lead their interactions. Throughout the story, as Janey gains more experience and begins to fall in love with Luke, she becomes more assertive and playful with her sexuality. But this is not something Janey has done independent of her relationship. She even goes so far as to credit Luke as the catalyst for this change, saying “Luke changed my self-awareness and my feelings about my own sexuality” (p. 237). The act of intercourse itself is a major component of developing a defined sexual subjectivity. The loss of virginity has long marked the end of innocence and the beginning of experience. In *I Never*, after Janey and Luke have sex for the first time she says:

I feel different. I feel like a full-fledged woman. I now know what the fuss is all about. I am in on the joke...I feel like a new person. I could swear when I catch my reflection in the mirror that I look a little different. Like it is written all over my face. It's as though I've gained an awareness that exudes from my every pore. (p. 234)

Janey describes her feeling as being in on the adult “secret” of sex. She has gone from someone who was confused, uncertain, and insecure and has developed into a “full-fledged woman” who feels confident with her place in the world. The experience of sex has been a significant facet in her development so far in life, propelling her into the realm of adulthood. Although there is no sense of what Janey’s love life will be like after she and Luke part ways, it is clear that through their relationship Janey has now developed a sexual sense of self, a very serious and very adult-like one, that was not there before. In sum, *Efferent Romance* shows that through sexual relationships young people solidify into people who have stronger positions in the world: sexual partners, beautiful women, and adults. They develop sexual subjectivities, they become more solidified in their gender, and they gain the experience necessary to make the transition into adulthood.

6. There is No Such Thing as Forever

Judy Blume’s *Forever* is named so ironically. Above all, *Efferent Romance* conveys a message that most relationships are ephemeral. In this regard, *Efferent Romance* operates in many ways as the antithesis of conventional romance. It presents a harsh reality that,

for the most part, the only person you can depend upon for happiness is yourself because there is no such thing as forever when it comes to love. That love is not a guarantee is something that participants in this study understood and recognised as a realistic aspect of sexual relationships. They did not have any romantic ideals that love lasts forever and were, for the most part, resistant to this idea. For example, Jane told me:

I feel like a lot of books I have read, you kind of expect the happy ending. So, that aspect of it...I don't really know, maybe. It's hard to tell. But I think the happy ending thing or the relationship going smoothly until one big thing happens might not always be the case.

In contemporary Efferent Romance, I have observed not only the idea that love is not a guarantee but also a move away from needing others to emphasising individualism. For example, Janey has a conversation about this very thing with herself:

Luke makes me feel sexy and strong and desired. And he's going away. Does that mean these feelings are going to go away? I don't want to feel complete only when there's a boy around who loves me. I won't always have a boyfriend. I don't *want* to always have a boyfriend. I want to be single and independent at various times throughout my life, and I need to be okay with that. I need to figure out how to keep feeling confident even when no one is holding me close and whispering *I love you* in my ear. (p. 261)

This is a message to the reader that independence from young men is the key to happiness. And while I do think more messages of self-love, self-care, and independence are needed in Efferent Romance, I think that these messages are better represented within a heroine's identity overall and not in how well she can deny attachment or accept loss. I do not think that it serves anyone to promote the idea that human beings can do without deep, meaningful relationships in our lives. I believe that it does everyone a disservice to promote and accept feelings of indifference towards others, the things that they share, and what their absence means. At the risk of sounding conservative, I think a bit more of "forever" in these books is needed. However, when relationships do not work out, it is important to also show characters who accept loss and live full and productive lives beyond that loss. Loss, as Efferent Romance conveys, is a common part of relationships. Here I will commend Efferent Romance novels such as *Forever*, *I Never*, and countless other coming-of-age novels for showing that life always goes on after disappointment or

heartbreak. At the end of *I Never* Luke is moving across the country and they both accept this with a sense of “satisfaction and sadness” (p. 289). Janey feels overwhelmingly sad but is also grateful for the time that they spent together. The reader can be confident that life will go on for Janey. Efferent Romance usually ends with a break up, and although it privileges monogamy, it definitely does not privilege matrimony. It shows that even in the presence of love, there is no such thing as forever...but that is ok.

Summary

These key messages in *I Never* extend far beyond traditional sex education and focus primarily on the social aspects of a sexual relationship. Each of these positive and negative messages has a role to play when informing young readers about what to expect from a relationship. For better or for worse, they summarise the joys and tribulations of relationships in an attempt to prepare young readers as they develop as sexual subjects.

4.3 Developing Sexual Subjectivities Through Efferent Romance

In summary to this chapter, I discuss how the script of Efferent Romance has the potential to shape the sexual subjectivities of readers. Robyn McCallum (1999) defines subjectivity as “ – that sense of a personal identity an individual has of her/his self as distinct from other selves, as occupying a position within society and in relation to other selves, and as being capable of deliberate thought and action” (p. 3). All sexually-themed literature has the potential to shape the sexual subjectivities of young people. However, YA Literature is uniquely positioned to do so because the narratives themselves are largely about shaping subjectivities. It was evident in this study that participants turned to literature to learn more about sexuality and how they should identify as sexual subjects. In participant Bonnie’s experience, she turned to fiction to learn about sexual relationships and what the expectations were of herself as a sexual subject. Bonnie told me:

I want to say Grade 7-8, middle school years, I saw my friends start getting into relationships with people. Not necessarily anything serious but “Oh, you like this person” and sort of the networks of relationships that come with that...I figured

with these changing relationships I should sort of figure out where I stood and what was expected of me.

How do the key messages about sexuality in *Efferent Romance* have the potential to inform readers' sexual subjectivities? I believe this discussion lies primarily with how the identity of the heroine is constructed and how this construction creates an ideology of "ideal" sexual subjectivity for young women. As I will argue, although there are a lot of positive qualities of *Efferent Romance*, in the end it teaches young women readers how to be "normal" sexual subjects.

Efferent Romance heroines and their lives often reflect hegemonic norms of North American society. They are the "good girls" that Tolman and Higgins (1996) describe as reinforcing ideals of femininity that, ultimately, make young women vulnerable. They are usually white and come from middle/upper-middle class families. They live in comfortable suburban homes. They are usually kind people, high-achievers, great students, and have excellent performance in their extra-curricular activities. There is usually a side-story of hardship that the characters are dealing with, such as their parents' divorce, death, injury, or illness, which adds complexity to the narrative. But *Efferent Romance* heroines are, for the most part, unimaginative characters that do not break free from the mould of heteronormativity. They are the "girl-next-door", the familiar character that is often portrayed as the hallmark of "ideal" North American life. They reinforce the fabricated idea of the "ideal" North American citizen that has come to be associated with national stability and progress (Adams, 1997; Foucault, 1978; Lesko, 2001). For example, Janey King in *I Never* lives in a nice home in a suburban town in California. Her dad is a commercial airline pilot, and her mom is a kindergarten teacher. She is studious and excels at both track and field and debate club. Her side-story is that her parents are going through an amicable divorce, which causes her a lot of upset. This type of character is dominant in *Efferent Romance*, something that I find as a scholar, problematic, and as a reader, frustratingly uninteresting.

In some ways, I see the creation of a heteronormative character as somewhat intentional, a narrative strategy that aims to reflect common experiences. As participant Jane told me about reading similar texts, "It gives you an idea of what a relationship might be like

once you're in one...that kind of thing. Just like any normal person, right? No matter who you are or where you came from you can still find a relationship, I guess". Unlike conventional romance, where characters are larger-than-life, the girl-next-door trope in these books can serve to ground the story in a perceived realism, making their content more believable in the context of everyday life. However, this is where I see a major drawback. In presenting this perceived "normalcy", Efferent Romance does not present a diversity of sexual subjectivities. They work within the "self-affirmation of one class" (Foucault, 1978, p. 123) that idealises or normalises a certain type of person. In Efferent Romance, there is usually only one way to be a "good" sexual subject, and it does not usually offer convincing depictions of a diversity of sexualities that are equally as valid.

The lack of diversity in *I Never* can be observed specifically through the other sexually active characters in the novel and what happens to them. Although it appears as though multiple subjectivities are represented positively in the novel, the outcomes of their decisions all result in the same conclusion: that passiveness, chastity, and monogamy are the best values to have as a sexual person. Janey has two best girlfriends, Danielle and Sloan, who have very different sexual experiences from Janey. Danielle is closest to Janey in her values, but there are some differences. She has a steady boyfriend, Charlie, and is the first of the trio to have intercourse. Danielle and Charlie are very public with the fact that they have sex frequently. They appear to be a happy couple, and Danielle encourages Janey to follow in her footsteps. Near the end of the novel, it is revealed that Charlie has been cheating on Danielle, and she breaks up with him. Janey remarks that Danielle seems "strangely unaffected", and Danielle tells her "Maybe I was ready... Things were getting kind of boring" (p. 264). It is apparent in the novel that Danielle and Charlie entered into this relationship under superficial motivations, that the primary link between them was sex, and that this is what caused their relationship to fail. On the other hand, Sloan is the sexual foil to Janey. She is boy-crazy, promiscuous, sexually experienced, and crude. Her nickname is "E.B.", which stands for "everything but" because Sloan has done "everything but sex" with numerous guys. Sloan is even lusty for Luke and the young women have a falling-out over it. She is written as jealous, irrational, and somewhat pathetic. Janey seems to pity Sloan because although she does not lack for sexual partners, none of them love her. At the end of the novel, it is revealed

that Sloan has changed her ways and has entered into a serious, committed relationship with Janey's best male friend, Brett. Her decision to stop going to parties, stop messing around with young men, and committing to Brett is met with relief and approval from her friends. Brett tells them that they are going to wait to have sex because, "Everyone we know who has done it has had some kind of regret or another...Either they rushed into it or they ended up breaking up and can't even look at the other person" (p. 279). To Janey, "...their choice to wait to have sex makes their relationship seem even more real, more mature, more serious" (p. 280).

On the one hand, these variations in sexual subjectivities validate other forms of sexual experiences outside those of the stereotypically chaste, inexperienced heroine by simply having them present in the narrative. However, although Hopper also writes in overt statements that support relationships that exist outside this stage of heterosexual romance, it is not very convincing. In her novel, bad things happen to the young women who chose to have sex outside of the bonds of caring, committed relationships. As Deborah Tolman and Tracy Higgins (1996) write, "When women act as sexual agents, expressing their own sexual desire rather than serving as the objects of men's desire, they are often portrayed as threatening, deviant, and bad" (p. 205). Janey, Danielle, and Sloan all experience heartbreak, rejection, and embarrassment as consequences to their relationships with young men. Janey is forced to accept the fact that she and Luke will have to break up when he moves to college and is ultimately left to deal with the feeling of being left behind by someone she loves. Danielle is greatly disrespected by her boyfriend when he gets bored and cheats on her. And Sloan faces continual emotional dissatisfaction by choosing casual encounters. Perhaps these are examples of "considerable ordinary suffering" (Gilbert, 2012, p. 249). However, Hopper goes on to situate happiness within the realm of compulsory heterosexuality: a person can avoid the damaging consequences of sex if they refrain from having sex until they know for sure that someone loves them. If authors, like Hopper, were serious about validating other sexual subjectivities, there would be more books with central characters like Sloan or Danielle who do not face embarrassing or overly depressing consequences. But there are very few. Without these, there are very few options for unique sexual subjectivities to be

shown as valid options for young people who are in the process of developing their own sexual identities.

As I outlined in detail above, there are numerous negative messages in YA Literature that could be seen as encouraging sexual repression in young people. In all honesty, I am not bothered by “repressive messages” in YA Literature as other scholars are. This is mainly because I see how Efferent Romance, in its quest for realism, hits the mark when it provides a snapshot of what being in a relationship can be like. Addressing pleasure and danger together can better prepare young people for the joys and difficulties of sexual life (Allen, 2004; Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Fine, 1988). I do not believe that the negative messages present in texts are necessarily there as a device to curb sexual expression. I very much doubt Laura Hopper would have had this in mind when she wrote *I Never* because it is clearly aiming to portray sex in a positive way. Young women are undoubtedly inundated with repressive messages throughout the course of daily life, particularly in traditional sex education. Contemporary Efferent Romance texts do not necessarily act to reinforce these messages. Rather, I think that they simply reflect them. I do not see this as a failing *per se*. What I see as the biggest failing of Efferent Romance is a failure to produce radical, diverse heroines. While representing the status-quo may make narratives more relatable to readers, its biggest shortcoming is that in representing the status-quo they provide flat, uninspiring characters who do very little to resist the changeable negative aspects of relationships that can be seen in texts and in the world around us. It hardly matters that Janey King is young and sexually inexperienced, she can still be a complex character...but she is not. Heroines in Efferent Romance do not seem to be able to stand alone as interesting, dynamic, and worthwhile people outside of their relationships. Furthermore, characters that are more dynamic or interesting, like Danielle and Sloan, are punished for being so.

Participants had different responses to what they viewed as “weak” heroines and “different” heroines. Scarlet was very critical of this common “weak” heroine in YA Literature as a whole. She used the example of Bella Swan from the *Twilight* series saying, “...it’s like the female character isn’t even a person. It’s bizarre”. In addition, participant Jane told me that one of the most impactful YA novels she read was *Eleanor*

& *Park* by Rainbow Rowell, a very quirky and heartwarming book about two outsiders who find solace in one another. She said that the atypical characters, Eleanor with a “lousy” home life, and Park without many friends, made her feel more connected to the characters. She said:

I really liked the idea about how they were both kind of outsiders and they got together. It’s kind of like any situation where you might be a bit different but you put another different person and then you can still find love even though you both aren’t conventional or just your stereotypical person... Just because it proves that anyone can find love, I guess. So it’s encouraging.

These are the feelings that I would like to see aroused by YA Literature...the hope and encouragement that is inspired by ordinary, yet underrepresented, characters in love. I cannot help but feel that if there were more inspiring characters in YA Literature, that the repressive aspects of our sexual world, especially for women, would not seem as daunting. As a general rule, Efferent Romance only promotes one kind of sexual subject and that is the woman who is still firmly rooted in the ideals of heteronormativity. As I stated, in the end Efferent Romance teaches young people how to be “normal” sexual subjects. Perhaps this is can function as a standard for young readers, a base-line type of sexuality that they can grow from, but it does little to inspire or validate the numerous other sexual subjectivities that can be witnessed in greater society.

4.4 Conclusion

Efferent Romance has a lot to offer when considered as an information source on both the pleasures and dangers of sexuality. It is undoubtedly information rich as it addresses many of the same topics of sex education, such as contraceptive use, menstruation, pregnancy, and STIs. It also shows a sexual relationship as something that is highly emotional and social in nature. It aims to present sex realistically, show sex as something positive that teens do, and provide readers with a guide to healthy relationships. However, because it is so obviously didactic, it does fall short of being radical enough to encapsulate sexuality in a way that sheds itself of the fears that adults have about teen sexuality. Lydia Kokkola writes in relation to didacticism:

A truly radical novel could not wag the finger, foreground the punishment of the teen, warn her of her ignorance, take pleasure in flouting what she does not know. A radical text would address the young reader as someone who perhaps knows less, but is not less intelligent or less emotionally developed. (p. 213)

I do not believe that Efferent Romance does this, because it is so didactic, but also because it does not do a very good job of “knowing” teens. Most often, Efferent Romance sticks to the status-quo, rarely pushing the boundaries in a way that acknowledges teens as capable of understanding complex situations beyond heterosexuality, monogamy, and other forms of “ideal” sexuality. Efferent Romance does not completely do what is needed in sex education. In presenting an “attainable fantasy” it does little to inspire hope, change, and embolden readers to look beyond the status-quo. They are, in a very real sense, scripts for living a sexual life but not necessarily a place where an interrogation of possibilities happens.

There are alternatives to this formula. They are the quirky *Forever* read-a-likes. They include novels such as *The Nerdy and the Dirty* by b.t. gottfred, a story about an energetic and vain hypernerd and a perpetually aroused goth girl who unexpectedly fall in love. There are also some excellent LGBTQ novels, such as *Release* by Patrick Ness and *Our Own Private Universe* by Robin Talley. These books are well-written and feature diverse, complex characters and plots. However, across the YA corpus, I find these texts an anomaly. More often than not, YA novels stay true to the status-quo narrative. Occasionally these narratives feature a character of mixed-race. There may be a side character who is gay or lesbian. Someone may be into art instead of track. However, it usually feels very contrived and cannot fully support the development of diverse sexual subjectivities in the young women who read these texts.

Efferent Romance is the quintessential YA Literature about relationships and sex. It comprises the long-established literature on the rules of sexual relationships for young people. As such, it forms a collective and dominant narrative of sexuality that is replicated again and again in slightly different forms. For the remainder of this thesis, I step outside the world of Efferent Romance to discuss the literature that falls outside of the bounds of carefully curated instructive literature for young people. First, I examine a more complex, dark, and ambiguous narrative of sexuality and how these kinds of texts

inform and affect young readers. I then turn to more conventional romance to examine what value erotica, with its even more pronounced support of patriarchal norms, has in the lives of young readers. And finally, I suggest slash fiction as a kind of literature that can be looked to to draw upon all the strengths and weaknesses that different narratives of sexuality present to young readers.

Chapter 5

5 Reading Difficult Stories

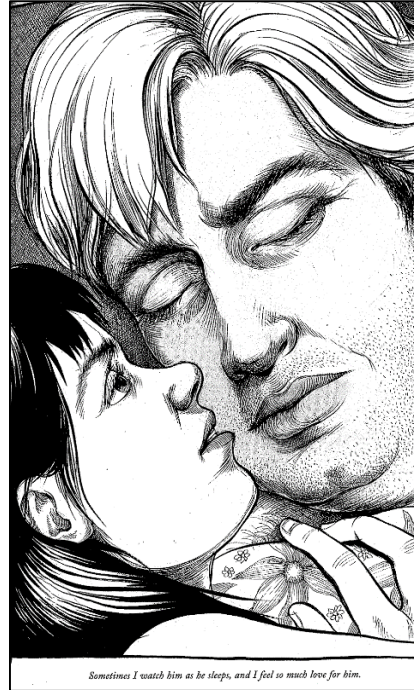


Figure 1. A sample of images from *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 212, p. 236, p. 143, p. 79)

I think it's important in stories to have great characters. I don't think it usually helps having characters that are innately black or white. Because human beings, we're all grey. And so I think that in itself makes people realise that. I feel like if a character's grey you instantly relate to them a lot easier and I feel like the number one way in which you can kind of pull the attention of your reader and make sure that they're getting something out of it is through relatability. Is that a word?

Participant Arya

What happens when didacticism is removed from Young Adult (YA) Literature? In this chapter, I turn my analysis towards more complex narratives of sexuality than was observed in Efferent Romance. I focus specifically on what I call *difficult stories*, a site where young readers engage with some of the ambiguous, and often darker, sides of human sexuality. These stories present a level of ambiguity to the extreme, as they are stories about characters who engage in ethically-ambiguous, potentially-abusive, and taboo sexual relationships. In these stories, the presence of didacticism is notably absent and the dichotomy between “right” and “wrong” is obscured. There is no script for how a relationship should be in these texts. Rather, they show the complex, ambivalent, and contradictory nature of love and desire and how this can often lead to disappointment or harm. Indeed, scholars such as Anne Carson (1986) and Henry Staten (1995) remind us that mourning, melancholy, even hate, are inherent to erotic love: “As soon as desire is something felt by a mortal being for a mortal being, eros (as desire-in-general) will always be to some degree agitated by the anticipation of loss” (Staten, 1995, p. xi). In light of this, sexual ambiguity, and the agony it brings, has the potential to be a reflection of an ordinary, universal reality.

In this chapter, I explain the value of difficult, ambiguous content in YA Literature and how negative or confusing messages about sexuality may inform the lives of young women readers. Influential YA Literature scholars such as Roberta S. Trites (2000) and Lydia Kokkola (2013) have often condemned the presence of ambiguity, mixed-messages, and negative consequences to sexual expression in YA Literature, arguing that it serves as a strategy to repress young people's sexualities. However, some of the most influential feminist sex education scholars (Allen, 2004; Cameron-Lewis & Allen, 2013; Fine, 1988; Gilbert, 2012; Tolman, 1994, 2014) have acknowledged a need to discuss

positive aspects of sexuality alongside the dangers of sexuality. In this chapter, I argue that with the absence of didacticism, difficult stories may be perplexing and disturbing to some readers, but they can also act as sites for considerable positive change. First, I explain the characteristics of difficult stories and summarise readers' experiences reading stories with difficult content. Then, I review how difficult stories present the complex, ambiguous, and often darker side of sexuality, using *The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Word and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner (2002) as an example. This part-diary, part-graphic novel is a melancholic story about fifteen-year-old Minnie Goetz, a creative and intelligent teenager who has an affair with her mother's boyfriend. Finally, I end with a description of how reading difficult stories has impacted readers' sexual lives in both negative and positive ways. I then conclude with a discussion that supports difficult stories as a valuable source of information on sexuality for young people, but also make suggestions for approaches to reading this content.

5.1 Difficult Stories and Readers

5.1.1 What is a Difficult Story?

A difficult story goes beyond a typical romance narrative of hearts and flowers and "boy-next-door" niceness. It deals with relationship issues that go deeper than tears shed over an unanswered text message or a comfortingly logical end-of-summer breakup. It is a complex narrative of sexuality that interrogates what it means to be sexual in a world where people break the moral and ethical codes of society much more than one would like to think. But a difficult story is also not a cautionary tale. Although a difficult story does often contain illegal sexual acts (such as incest, adult-minor relationships, or non-consensual sex) it does not necessarily act as a warning against these or present a narrative of trauma. Unlike Efferent Romance, a difficult story is also not overtly didactic and does not clearly spell out every single judgement. It is, in essence, messy, ambivalent, even turbulent. Characters often present as neither good nor evil – our heroes or heroines commit questionable moral acts, and it is often easy to sympathise with the characters who are undeniable sources of pain. Even when confronted with unscrupulous behaviour, these stories make the reader question the validity of the "rights" and "wrongs" of the world. And not because bad behaviour has been normalised by the

author, but because the author has written something that is meant to be thought about and questioned. If judgement is enacted in the story, the entirety of the story, with all of its ambiguities, still positions the reader to be left in a state of questioning and, perhaps, to make decisions about their own “truths” about human sexuality.

5.1.2 Readers of Difficult Stories

As outlined throughout this thesis project, the young women that I interviewed had varying and often opposing reading interests. For some readers, the idea of reading a story that presents the darker side of sexuality did not appeal to them. For example, Juliet felt strongly that, for her, reading sexually-themed or erotic literature should be a positive or pleasurable experience. She told me:

I like to read stories that are optimistically-realistic. So, the stories can have difficulties in them but [only] if it's a really functional relationship...But if it's like one person got raped or something I don't want to read about it. I don't need to hear about it. I've had enough of those bad experiences so I don't need to remember them.

For Juliet, painful experiences depicted in literature would interfere with her enjoyment of the text. Juliet associated this feeling with her history of sexual assault and the bad experiences of some of her friends. She did not want to be triggered by upsetting content in literature. She also identified herself as a positively-minded person, an optimist, and had very little interest in reading literature that was not either conventionally romantic or erotic. Juliet read strictly for pleasure, emotional and sexual, and not necessarily to satisfy a curiosity about sexual relationships that are complicated, confusing, and potentially harmful.

Other participants were very interested in reading difficult content even if they did not know why or they felt conflicted about it. Many of the stories these readers referred to were Adult Literature, but the majority of them are coming-of-age stories or feature a teen as one of the main characters. They were also predominantly read by these readers when they were children or teens. Participant Scarlet was the most prominent of these readers. Her earliest, and most significant, memory of reading a sexually-themed text was when she was eight or nine years old and found a copy of Wally Lamb's *She's Come*

Undone (1992) on her aunt's bedside table. *She's Come Undone* is a beautiful yet unsettling coming-of-age story about a young woman, Dolores, whose non-consensual encounter with her older, charming neighbour has unpredictable and devastating consequences on her psychological and physical well-being for the majority of her young adulthood. This experience, as well as the one Dolores has with an older woman when she is in college, are shrouded in complicated and confusing messages about sexual responsibility and the nature of sexual desire. Throughout Scarlet's teen and young adult years, this book remained a touchstone in her life, and led her to read other stories with similar sexual themes such as *White Oleander* by Janet Fitch (1999) and *Lolita* by Vladimir Nabokov (1955).

Two participants, Andie and Jane, talked about Tabitha Suzuma's *Forbidden* (2012), an incestuous love story about a brother and sister who fall in love while raising their younger siblings. While Andie had read the description of the novel and had no interest in reading it, Jane identified it as a story that was surprisingly interesting to her. She told me:

So, it's basically this brother and sister who fall in love with each other. It's circumstantial, like their mother is pretty much gone. It's just them raising their siblings. And I didn't really know, there's actually some kind of, I don't know what to call it...It's not a disorder but it's like maybe a syndrome and it's an actual thing, you can fall in love with your siblings just because of the circumstances that surround you...[It's] one of those books you pick up from the library that you don't really expect much from. But I found it really interesting. You can kind of understand how it happened. It's...I don't know, I liked it. And I don't really know why I liked it.

Forbidden was one of the most sexually-explicit novels that I read for this project. It reads like erotica, complete with steamy sex scenes, and not like a depiction of a syndrome brought on by the characters' very dire family situation. Aside from the conflict that arises from the incestuous nature of their relationship, the relationship between the main characters, Lochan, and his sister, Maya, is written as caring and loving. But the story ends in tragedy. Lochan is imprisoned by the police and he ends up committing suicide. Despite this horrible (and frankly scary) ending, there is a strong underlying sentiment that Lochan and Maya have been misunderstood and cruelly

subjected to intolerant outside forces that end up destroying their lives. As Kokkola and Valovirta (2017) note, the relationship between Lochan and Maya is mutually-desired and the text reads like a “star-crossed lovers” story. As Jane explained, the book makes you sympathise with the characters’ relationship despite the incest taboo. Sarah, who also read stories about incest, had a similar experience. She said:

[Before], if I heard about incest I would have just been like, “What’s wrong with them?”. But now, [when] I think about it, it’s still wrong, but I’m sure it’s hurting them too. No need to blame them more, right?

Arya, another participant who was interested in reading literature that covered the difficult and darker sides of sexuality, explained that she did so because it gave her a window into how people cope with difficult sexual situations. In addition to this, she liked reading stories about real-life experiences because it gave the story an added element of being “real” and made her feel a sense of solidarity with the author. Arya told me:

I hope this doesn’t make me sound like a weird person, but I kind of like reading about real stories. So, I know this one is kind of bitter in the sense that it’s not something that’s...it’s not about a good experience. But, I think reading about real experiences especially in terms of sex, it...I don’t know how to explain it. But it makes it seem like either you’re not the only one or, you know, there are real people who go through these things. And you can at least tap into their brain a little bit and see what happened and what they did and how they felt.

As you can see in this comment from Arya, she was worried that I would think she was a “weird person” for reading real stories about sexual trauma. The readers in this study who read about topics such as incest, sexual abuse, or unhealthy relationship dynamics often felt a sense of trepidation over getting enjoyment from reading stories about typically taboo or condemned relationships, especially ones that are associated with harm. With that, some of the participants who read difficult content also expressed that they had limits when it came to abusive content. Sarah in particular, who read Japanese comics and had an interest in a wide array of taboo subjects, had thought about and was able to describe the difference between stories that were interesting and enjoyable and stories that were potentially harmful. She said:

Well, these days, genres have really spread out and while I have become more open-minded and tolerant there are some stuff I find, such as *Shota* and *Lolita*.¹⁷ *Shota* is basically the male version of *Lolita*. I still find that still a little bit complicated sometimes...If they play the taboo and make the characters feel the conflict inside then I'm like "Oh, that's interesting. That was a cool ride". When you can experience the taboo too it's like...oh, that was cool. But if it's just porn and it feels a little...err...I can just read normal stuff. Don't need to feel burdened by feeling complicated. So, that's usually the threshold I set for myself.

What is interesting about Sarah's explanation about perceived harmful messages in literature is that the intent of the author or the quality of the writing makes a difference in how taboo or ethically-ambiguous content is received by readers. She identifies the importance of the story, how skillfully and thoroughly the author interrogates the complicated subject, as a defining aspect of a threshold. I think this is an incredibly important assessment. Based on the author's words, what is the most likely intent of the author? This is something that is often brought to attention by librarians in the instance of book challenges. They ask the challenger, "Have you examined the entire resource?" (ALA, 1995), as the entirety, and the spirit, of the story does matter considerably.

While Sarah approached her threshold from a very logical assessment of the story, affective responses, when a story is just "too much", were also identified as a threshold. For example, Scarlet, who has always been drawn to reading about difficult relationships, identified her limitations in terms of an emotional response.

I kind of have a love/hate relationship I guess with these stories that involve the young women who end up with older men. I used to be very interested in those stories, but I started *Lolita* [by Vladimir Nabokov] and I couldn't finish it. The author's intent is to show how horrible the man is in that relationship and to show the deterioration of this child and it was just too much. I couldn't finish it. I wanted to read that book because it's a story that is realistic and I think I couldn't...it was too realistic for me...he did a really good job of showing how a child behaves when they have been traumatised.

Even though Scarlet understood the author's intent, for her, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* was just too disturbing for her to finish. This was partly because it reminded her of the

¹⁷ *Shota/Lolita* are genres in Japanese comics that eroticise the sexual relationships between young boys/girls(respectively) with adults.

children she worked with part-time, but she also identified the cultural fetishising of the Lolita figure as a source of her discomfort. In Lydia Kokkola's (2013) chapter on "The Borderlands of Abuse" she also defines a threshold, or a level of "acceptability", that defines abuse. She writes that "...sexual activity becomes abusive at the point at which it renders the victim's body abject" (p. 188), inspiring both disgust and fascination from characters in the novel. From this perspective, the author is in control of presenting whether or not sexual activity is abuse by choosing to write shame, horror, and disgust into the narrative. However, this border may not be easily recognised or even adhered to by the reader. What sexual activity inspires disgust is historically, culturally, and personally situated and what each reader brings to the interaction with the text may produce variations in how it makes them feel. Thus, the reader's historicity becomes a major factor in defining boundaries. In addition, competing, often violent, discourses of how sexuality should or should not be performed are ripe within our current historical moment. Even the most authoritative voices are circumspect, and these texts play on that ambivalence. As Kokkola and Valovirta (2017) have eloquently stated in relation to incestuous sibling romance:

These bleak vistas for incestuous siblings' romance are portrayed in different tones: while clinical research condemns it, fiction is more flexible in allowing bad romance to drive the plot and titillate readers. Trapped between these competing, incompatible discourses, 'truth' and 'reality' are silenced. (p. 138)

In this context of reading, personal worldviews become a major factor in how these narratives are interpreted and enjoyed. As seen with the readers in this study, their tolerance for and enjoyment of difficult, and potentially disturbing, content differed vastly. As seen above, for Sarah, the presence of shame or conflict in a story of sexual abuse actually validated her enjoyment of the text. This is likely because the characters in the story took the time to consider and decide if what they were doing was harmful – there was not a total exploitation of the characters involved or a complete victimisation of a character. In addition, as I will discuss below in more detail, erotic love is often mixed with both positive and negative feelings, including hate and disgust, which can obscure and change the appropriateness of a relationship.

Why did these participants read difficult stories? Kokkola (2013) writes that “[t]he sexually abused body invites strong – but incompatibly mixed – reactions. Horror and disgust are combined with fascination” (p. 171).¹⁸ Fascination and curiosity were definitely motivations for these readers, but so were excitement, solidarity, and the need to know about the horrible yet universal sexual experiences that happen to real people. As can be seen here with Arya, she did not express voyeuristic motivations, but rather, a motivation to connect and identify with the story on a personal level. This is consistent with findings from Catherine Ross’ (1999) study of pleasure readers, which indicated feeling a connection to others or feeling a sense that you are not alone in the world as a major outcome of reading for pleasure. This in itself suggests a powerful and positive outcome for these stories. Having these narratives in fiction for young people is part of examining the phenomenon of desire. And in order to do this there needs to be stories about the darker, more complicated side of sexuality – where brothers fall in love with their sisters, where teens fall in love with adults, and above all, where people are driven by their own selfish motivations to satisfy their need for pleasure and affection without sympathy or empathy for others.

The question here is: what are the potential effects of difficult stories, with all of their ambiguities and lack of didacticism, on the sexual lives of young readers? For the rest of this chapter I explore some of the defining aspects of a difficult story, using *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* as an example, in relation to the reading experiences of the young women readers I interviewed, to demonstrate the potential outcomes of reading difficult stories.

5.2 Young Adult Literature, the Realities of Risk, and the Difficulty of Desire

5.2.1 An Example: *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner

One cannot expect to have such a perfect relationship with any human being. It would be asking too much. Human beings are naturally selfish and cannot

¹⁸ Here, Kokkola is referring to Julia Kristeva’s theory of *abjection*.

completely sacrifice their pride and ego and give their entire heart and soul to another human being[sic]. (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 157)

The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures (originally published in 2002) by Phoebe Gloeckner, is a semiautobiographical novel about Minnie Goetz, a fifteen-year-old young woman who has an affair with her mother's boyfriend. Based in the 1970's, Minnie lives with her somewhat careless and distracted mother and her younger sister in an apartment in an affluent neighbourhood of San Francisco. This is how she meets Monroe, her mother's 35-year-old boyfriend, the big, blond, tall, masculine man whom she trusts as a friend and guardian. Curious about sex, while out with Monroe one night at a club, they become sexually involved. But Monroe, to Minnie's disappointment, does not take their relationship seriously. He is jaded, regards her as a silly child, and, beyond sex, seems entirely incapable of providing Minnie with the love and dedication that she seeks from him. Heartbroken and distraught, Minnie seeks love elsewhere, which leads her to dark and often terrifying places. She slowly withdraws from school, dabbles in hard drugs, runs away from home, and befriends all manner of depraved individuals that involve her in questionable and harmful situations. The novel combines the first-person narration of Minnie, written in diary form, with illustrations and comic strips that paint a vivid picture of Minnie's struggles and misadventures as she journeys through her turbulent relationships with Monroe and other characters. Minnie is also an aspiring cartoonist, an intellectual and witty young woman whose creative endeavours drive her forward throughout the novel. But for the most part, *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is a disquieting book about human failings and selfishness. There are very few breaths of fresh air. Even moments of beauty are marred with pain, loneliness, or inner conflict. An early analysis of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* in *The Comics Journal* describes it as "...a warm comprehension of the combined recklessness, cluelessness, and gallantry attending a young girl/woman's encounter with horrendous moral squalor" (Phelps, 2004, p. 74). This "horrendous moral squalor", as Phelps coins it, is an overwhelming presence in the novel that seems to pervade every one of Minnie's relationships. Yet, above all, Minnie's story is about the realities of erotic love, the ambiguity and turmoil, which Minnie navigates in order to reach a state of self-love and self-acceptance. What really drives Minnie is not her sexual relationships, but the other

passions that make life worthwhile, like art, poetry, and good friends. And in general, the story provides a clear example of how a young woman's path towards a greater understanding of love, sex, and life can include both pleasure and agony.

Author Phoebe Gloeckner is a well-known underground cartoonist and medical illustrator who is currently an Associate Professor at the University of Michigan's Stamps School of Art & Design. She has published numerous works including her graphic novel *A Child's Life* (1998), which tells the story of a younger Minnie Goetz, and an illustrated children's book *Weird Things You Can Grow* (1994). Growing up in San Francisco, Gloeckner was introduced to underground cartoonists Robert Crumb and Aline Kominsky, who had considerable influence on her work. Her works are often sexually-explicit, bizarre, emotionally raw, and deal with topics such as sexual trauma. *A Diary of a Teenage Girl* is one of her most successful publications, and in 2015, it was made into a feature-length film directed and adapted by Marielle Heller and released by Sony Pictures Classics. One of the most compelling aspects of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, especially as a narrative that could inform the sexual lives of readers, is its relation to the lived experience. It is important to note that Phoebe Gloeckner resists, or flat out rejects, the use of the term "autobiographical" in relation to her work. Nonetheless, the main question readers want answered is: "Is it true?" (Gloeckner, 2015, p. xv). Gloeckner strongly maintains that *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is a work of fiction, but also acknowledges the undeniable connection to her own experience. She states, "I always resisted this thing about an autobiography...I'm finally admitting, yes, that's my experience. I've given up trying to explain to people" (Gloeckner, 2015, August 8). This is a key component in the story of Minnie Goetz: she is a character based on a real life that was lived. What is most interesting about the way Gloeckner (2015) has written her story is that she abandons the pursuit of the "factual truths" that connects her experience to the story and uses fiction as a tool to express what she sees as greatly more insightful: the "emotional truths" behind Minnie's experience (p. XV). This emphasis on emotional truths strikes me as a narrative strategy that underscores a move away from didactic narratives of adolescent sexuality. The book is not particularly concerned with how adolescents should act or feel but with staying true to the emotions felt by a real teenage girl in a real moment of turmoil. This is in part made possible by the experiences of the author and the use of her real diary entries

written by Gloeckner when she was a teenager living this story (see pages 302-305 of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* for examples).

Despite all of the negative aspects of sexuality presented in this book, the point of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is not to warn readers about the dangers of love. In the preface to the novel, author Phoebe Gloeckner responds to descriptions of her novel as a story of “trauma” or “female adolescent sexuality”. She writes, “...I must tell you that it is ‘about’ nothing. At the same time, it is ‘about’ everything...It’s about pain and love. It’s about life. That’s all” (Gloeckner, 2015, p. xvi). It seems impossible not to use the words “trauma” or “female adolescent sexuality” to describe the story of the tremendously sad and hypersexualised life of Minnie. However, what Gloeckner attempts to accomplish with her statement is not to deny the discussion of these things, but to circumvent a strict decoding of the sexual relationships in her novel that only simplifies a narrative that is intended to be ambivalent. This seems apt, as the phenomenon of erotic love still remains to us largely ambiguous, especially in regard to adolescents. This kind of decoding also assumes an underlying didactic intent or moral statement made about these relationships on behalf of the author. In fact, Gloeckner (2011, February 6) continually asserts a purposeful lack of moral judgment on her part. Instead, she presents readers with a series of “moral questions”. *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* is a true difficult story. In the next part of this chapter, I go into detail about how *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* presents a very real and nuanced portrayal of sexuality that shows how young people may encounter difficult or confusing aspects of sexuality, but that encounters with these aspects can also lead to positive outcomes.

5.2.2 Encountering Sexual Realities for the First Time



Figure 2. Minnie tells Monroe how she feels. (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 199)

The Diary of a Teenage Girl shows how young people, experiencing relationships for the first time, will inevitably be confronted with the risks of sexuality. As can be seen with Efferent Romance, in most sexually-themed YA Literature, main characters often have an imperfect knowledge of sex and relationships. Because of this, they can suffer through intense bouts of confusion and upset as they gradually come closer to identifying and understanding “truths” about sexuality. Near the beginning of the story, it is clear that Minnie is just starting to broach upon her sexual autonomy, questioning her abilities to make decisions for herself, as she becomes involved in sexual relationships for the first time. She writes:

Sometimes I feel incapable of love. I have a little feeling that I'm doing something wrong. I can't look at myself objectively. I want someone to say, "Minnie, you shouldn't do that," even though I know it's my business and no one else is interested. I want someone to care enough to say more than just "it's up to you what you do with your life." I don't have any opinions and I don't trust myself. (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 15)

Her lack of experience, but also guidance, leaves her feeling confused about what she considers to be in the realm of "adult" thoughts and behaviours and she often appears to stumble through her relationships, which each present their own set of difficulties and disappointments. She writes of her main lover, Monroe, "How am I to interpret his adult codes and bullshit? Of course I'm confused, but I suppose understanding will come in time..." (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 26). This does not mean that Minnie is not a capable, intelligent, mature young woman or that she lacks any sense of sexual identity. In fact, her personality, interests, and sense of identity is much stronger than heroines in *Efferent Romance*. But like most teen heroines, she is on a path of discovery, one which will continue on through adulthood. This inexperience is often the cause of the problem she encounters. However, these problems are not unique to young people alone. As Sharon Lamb (2010) writes in her critique of discourses of healthy sexuality:

When we feminist theorists are done saying what good sex should not be, we can only create an unachievable ideal of what it should be, offering up fantasies of what we hope girls can achieve without regard to whether adult women have achieved such ideals in any uncomplicated and long lasting way. (p. 302)

When even adult women and men have difficulties navigating sexual relationships, can teenage characters, who have never been in a relationship with another human being, really be expected to star in a perfect fiction of a happy and carefree relationship? One can only hope and dream. This is why I am often untroubled by "risks" in YA Literature. Heroines such as Minnie are bound to make mistakes, some of which are detrimental to their happiness. But this is a natural process – getting to a place where you know how to have sexually healthy and rewarding relationships seems to be a matter of learning, through trial and error, how not to get completely crushed. This does not necessarily act as a warning, but shows a plausible reality.

This is how young readers need to be considered as well: as young, and perhaps sexually inexperienced, but also capable of working through the ideas that threaten what adults perceive as their vulnerabilities. During my interview with Bonnie, although she disapproved of the relationship between Minnie and Monroe, she also felt that their relationship offered a realistic, albeit not an entirely attractive, view of how a person may act or feel after the engage in sex for the first time. She told me:

...for most young people, they're just being introduced to sexuality and being sexually active. So, just figuring out what happens after sex in a relationship or maybe what happens after a one night stand and the implications that come with that. And I feel like even in the book *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* she has sex with him for the first time and then all of a sudden she clings on to him. She just wants to experience sex and he is her medium for doing that. That's why he's such a large part of the book. But it sort of educates you on first-times and first experiences. And I feel like for a lot of young people who read Young Adult Literature that's sort of the whole point in reading it.

The Diary of a Teenage Girl, as Bonnie describes, does not necessarily depict a positive first-time experience but shows a possible after-the-fact emotional reality that might not be desirable, but is a possible outcome of first-time experiences. The resistance to these kinds of narratives, that leave the protagonist to flounder in their inexperience, is that they threaten to validate unhealthy relationships and leave the reader without the expectation of anything better. As Sarah McClelland and L. E. Hunter (2013) explain, "Part of the panic around children's sexuality is that this development could go wrong; if children gain access to the 'wrong' kind of sexual knowledge or experience, they may not become the 'good' kind of sexual citizen" (p. 61). What is the "right" and "wrong" kind of sexual knowledge? And does this only refer to knowledge about the "right" kind of positive sexual experiences or to the negative, and unfortunate, experiences as well? I believe that sexual knowledge needs to include the entire spectrum of human sexual interactions, both positive and negative.

As a surety, reading about dark topics in literature can be very upsetting for young readers, especially if they have no prior knowledge or exposure to the darker sides of sexuality. Arya told me about her interactions with Laurie Halse Anderson's *Speak*

(1999) when she was in Grade Eight and described the experience, at least at the outset, as very disruptive to her mind. She told me:

...I remember feeling very dejected. I remember feeling like it was almost like an existential crisis where you're like, "Why? Why is this happening? Why does this happen to people? Sex is supposed to be nice. Sex is supposed to be what relationships aspire to have". You know, it just felt wrong because it was obviously wrong. But it was kind of like, why didn't anybody tell me about this? And it was just like this big explosion of emotions.

While Anderson's *Speak* is unquestionably a story about trauma, not what I have defined here as a difficult story, it works to demonstrate how when sex does not fit the description offered by narratives of hearts and flowers or biology textbooks, it can be deeply disturbing to the reader. Research on reading tells that reading can be a highly affective process (Mar, *et al.*, 2011; McKechnie, Ross, & Rothbauer, 2007; Ross, 1999; Usherwood & Toyne, 2002) and as Mar *et al.* (2011) have noted, "emotions experienced during reading may have consequences after closing the covers of a book" (p. 818). With a difficult story, where trauma or abuse is not so clearly announced, the disturbance is much more subtle. During my discussion with Scarlet, she often talked about being confused and misled by some of the information she learned from sexually-themed fiction as a young reader. She told me: "...as a child I internalised some things that I don't think were...they weren't true, but I learned them. Do you know what I am saying?" When I asked Scarlet what exactly were these "untruths", she described to me a scene in *She's Come Undone* where the main character questions her sexual orientation after she experiences sexual gratification during a non-consensual encounter with another woman. Her therapist tells her: "A finger, a tongue. Friction isn't specifically male or female. It's – well, it's just friction" (Lamb, 1992, p. 261). Scarlet, who was interested in women, took this to heart. She recalled:

I think it kind of said to me...sure, maybe you're attracted to girls but that doesn't mean anything. You don't have to be gay. I think that's kind of where that stuck with me. I think that is what I learned but I don't think that was a truth that I learned.

At the age of eight or nine, what Scarlet did not understand at the time is that a statement like that is there to be challenged and is perhaps unaware of the other words, signals,

codes, and themes that contradict this statement elsewhere in the novel. But to her, the statement probably seemed logical, and she took the statement as a universal truth, causing conflict with her own early sexual feelings for women. At the time, Scarlet told me that reading this book satisfied some of the curiosities and questions she had about sex. Looking back, she felt that as an eight or nine-year-old the book gave her a distorted view of sexuality for a number of years. However, she also identifies this early experience as her start in beginning to ask questions about human sexuality and the nature of desire. In storytelling, when you do not pander to a young reader's lack of experience and/or knowledge (Kokkola, 2013), this is an example of what that looks like: a controversial statement left unexplained. In the case of Scarlet especially, her inexperience and rudimentary understanding of sexuality did not allow her to immediately see through what is problematic. But like Minnie, her understanding came with time. Identifying "truths" or interpreting codes about sexuality comes with experience. And it is often through questioning these untruths, or misinformation, that allow those in relationships with others to get closer to healthier perceptions of sexuality.

5.2.3 The Difficulty of Desire

He was afraid and weak and he needed me but I felt distant and confused, a kind of detached excitement, a perverse pleasure, because I'd finally found what I'd been looking for but now I had no desire for it. (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 207)

-Minnie, after Monroe finally tells her that he loves her.

In *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, the sexual relationship between Minnie and Monroe is fraught with moral, ethical, and emotional ambiguity. Criminally, this is a classic example of statutory rape. However, Phoebe Gloeckner herself avoids the use of rape to describe this relationship. She states, "It is a relationship, it's a sexual relationship. To say it's abuse or rape is, again, qualifying it in a way that's in a sense simplifying it, and that wasn't my intent" (Gloeckner, 2011, February 6). What makes their relationship so ambiguous is Minnie's expression of agency and desire. In fact, Gloeckner is frank and detailed in describing Minnie's desire, which, unlike most teen heroines, seems to be unabashedly enormous and voracious. Minnie writes:

Maybe I should ignore everything. But I like sex. What am I supposed to do, ignore sex? I need sex. I really want to get laid right now – in fact, any time – the desire is insatiable. I don't know if I've made that clear – I really like getting fucked. (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 26).

According to Kokkola's (2013) description, this relationship would be placed within the "borderlands of abuse" (p. 181) because Minnie appears to be a willing participant in what is typically considered a harmful relationship. Even though Monroe's age and near parental relation to Minnie cannot be ignored, it is also necessary to consider Minnie's position in the relationship. Kokkola writes that "by focusing on victims of others' carnal desire, the desiring teenage subject can remain invisible" (p. 4). Minnie is a teen that "revels in carnal pleasure" (Kokkola, 2013, p. 19). She is sexually desiring, pursues multiple sexual partners, experiments with her sexual orientation, and does not shy away from expressing both her sexual and emotional feelings. In terms of her relationship with Monroe, this places the reader in an uncomfortable position. If a perceived victim does not consider themselves a victim of abuse, where is trust to be placed? How can issues of power and control be acknowledged in a relationship while also recognising sexual agency?

These questions become even more complicated when considering the emotional pain involved in both abuse and erotic love. Minnie's desire for Monroe is an intense mix of hatred, love, and carnality. This fits within a definition of erotic desire:

Whether apprehended as a dilemma of sensation, action or value, eros prints the same contradictory fact: love and hate converge within erotic desire. (Carson, 1986, p. 9)

The convergence of love and hate can be observed most overtly in the last time Minnie sees Monroe, during a chance encounter at the beach. Minnie writes, "For that first moment I saw him, before I even thought about it, my heart leapt to my throat and I struggled between yearning and nausea" (p. 289). Indeed, their relationship is at once sickening and worthy of sympathy. This complexity is just one of the ways in which Gloeckner's novel attempts to examine the phenomenon of desire. What does it tell us? It tells us that desire is conflated with danger and that dangers can be indiscernible – wrapped up in feelings of pleasure – to those who are unaware or unprepared to recognise

them. It also tells us that acting on desire can be an empowering and pleasurable experience. However, in certain circumstances – from the extreme to the ordinary – it can also produce negative consequences. Consequences of varying degrees are a reality of erotic love. Acknowledging these in narratives of sexuality do not always result in repressive strategies that aim to tell adolescents how erotic love should or should not be, but how it often is.

How are young readers supposed to make sense of this relationship between love and hate in erotic desire? Or to distinguish between an acceptable amount of suffering and outright abuse? Sometimes this contradiction is romanticised or taken very lightly in literature. As participant Andie said in reference to Jane Austin’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), “I still find it funny how two people can hate each other and end up together”. Other times, it is presented as something darker. As mentioned above in this chapter, participants had different levels of acceptability when it came to what they considered abuse. For example, many of the participants in this study read E. L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Juliet described it as “rapey”, and Andie interpreted the dominant/submissive relationship as abusive and something to be avoided. Andie told me:

I read *Fifty Shades of Grey* and after I read that I was like, “Oh my god”. Ok, that guy, it’s the controlling aspect. And he’s actually abusive. So, I could still read them but in the end I’m going to be like...like people go “Oh my god it’s such a good book and I want a relationship like theirs”. I’m like, why? He literally tells her what birth control to use, which doctor she can go to. What the heck?

In opposition, other participants, such as Christina, were a lot more receptive to the dominant/submissive aspects of the relationship. While they may not have desired some aspects of the main characters’ relationship for themselves, they did not consider the relationship abusive, because BDSM was something they were very interested in and could identify with sexually. One of participant Scarlet’s encounters with the conflicting nature of erotic desire came from her experience becoming sexually aroused by a non-consensual sex scene. When I was speaking to Scarlet she told me that the lesbian sex scene that she read about in *She’s Come Undone* was very erotic but also very negative. She said, “So, it was a very confusing experience to be turned on by a part of the book that is a non-consensual thing”. Scarlet was confronted with the complexities that revolve

around feelings of desire and pleasure and very human ugliness. Sex and violence were something that participant Sarah often read about as well, telling me, “I thought it was interesting how these stories, they always mix love with sex. And sometimes sex equals violence”. The feeling that Scarlet had while reading about this abusive relationship, at such an early age, although dark, is something that I think is important to speak about and acknowledge as a facet of desire and pleasure. In Deborah Tolman’s (1994) paper, “Doing Desire: Adolescent Girls’ Struggles for/with Sexuality” she emphasises a need for understanding and speaking about sexual desire:

One approach to educating girls is for women to speak to them about the vicissitudes of sexual desire – which means that women must let themselves speak and know their own sexual feelings, as well as the pleasures and dangers associated with women’s sexuality and the solutions that we have wrought to the dilemma of desire: how to balance the realities of pleasure and danger in women’s sexuality. (p. 340)

Scarlet’s example is one such vicissitude of sexual desire that is likely to prompt a discussion about the ethics of sexual desire. In addition to this, as Sharon Lamb (2010) points out, the concept of “pleasure” needs to be unpacked because pleasure does not just originate from “good sex” as many would like to believe. She asserts that placing an emphasis on pleasure as a measure for “good sex” can be misleading as pleasure can also be felt during negative sexual experiences, such as non-consensual sex. This shows that hate, or even violence, can exist alongside love and pleasure, and there is often no clear line between common negative feelings that are aroused by relationships and abuse.

Participant Sarah, who had a lot of experience reading about the complications of love, had a clear notion of what she considered abuse or not. In relation to adult-minor relationships she told me:

So, where I draw the threshold is where I can see the younger character is actively seeking the older character out or thinking it through. And usually I would want the older character to feel some conflict over what they’re doing. Or maybe they’re not doing anything, they’re even withdrawing.

The evidence Sarah is seeking here is agency on behalf of the perceived victim, but also a mutual expression of care and compassion within the relationship. While *eros* is complicated and unreliable, the presence of *agape* love helps to free one from selfish

conflicts that often motivate bad, destructive behaviour. Care and compassion, mutuality and equality, in the context of love and sex are what Lamb (2010) suggests as a measure of a “healthier” sexuality. She writes that mutuality and equality in sexual relationships is about, “...choosing to give as well as to receive, to seek pleasure within and from without, to love, have sex or play, with an eye towards fairness and an underlying ethos of caring and compassion” (p. 303). Lamb also rightly acknowledges that mutuality and equality are an ideal to strive for and assumes that this ideal is hard to achieve – for one is never completely free of selfish desires – but it is genuine care and compassion that are a good “underlying ethos” for sexuality. And what better way to emphasise a need for care and compassion in relationships than through a story such as Minnie’s, where the subtle nuances of human selfishness that exist within romantic and sexual relationships, even if erotic love is present, are exposed? Acknowledging the potential for pleasure and danger to co-exist may be confusing, but in order to consider how this kind of narrative informs readers about sexuality, it can go a long way in helping young people to recognise situations which are not always clear-cut, definitely positive or definitely negative, because the two are often conflated.

5.2.4 Interpreting Difficult Content



Figure 3. The last time Minnie meets Monroe. (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 290)

In the last few pages of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, Minnie and her friend Chuck take a long walk on the beach, snort her last bump of meth, sell weird poems to strangers, and have a final run-in with Monroe. Phoebe Gloeckner (2015, August 14) describes the end of *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* as a happy ending, but I would say that it is more of a hopeful ending. It offers hope that Minnie will prevail, but it does not offer a clear-cut end to Minnie's troubles. As for Monroe, he is left unpunished. For most of the novel, Monroe is the main source of turmoil and upset for Minnie. As for his responsibility for

the negative effects of their relationship, he is continuously excused because he is childlike, immature and seemingly unaware that his relationship with Minnie is causing her harm. In the beginning, Minnie has faith in Monroe that he has her best interests at heart. She considers him a good friend, a good person and an adult who knows how sexual relationships operate. She trusts in his decency as a friend and guardian. But over time, Minnie grows to realise that Monroe is really only out for himself, never quite caring enough that their relationship is crushing her. Despite this, it is clear that Minnie is in a better place at the end of the novel than she is throughout most of the story. She has journeyed through the turmoil of external love to a place of self-love and self-acceptance. This is culminated in her last thoughts about Monroe (that she does not even feel the need to utter out loud): “I’m better than you, you son-of-a-bitch” (p. 291). Although Minnie’s sexual agency does need to be considered in their relationship, as an adult, Monroe is the most responsible for the trajectory of their relationship. Yet, Minnie’s suffering far outweighs anything experienced by Monroe. His only real consequence is that he is written as ignorant and self-absorbed, someone to be mocked and disliked. But Phoebe Gloeckner does not write it that way because she is buying into a harmful trope. She is writing a realistic outcome, and through her skilled storytelling, the feelings of disappointment and disgust that are aroused by Monroe’s character should make it clear who is in the wrong. And not to mention that Minnie is truly an admirable heroine, one that is easy to like and admire. Out of all the texts that I read for this project, Minnie Goetz was the most complex, interesting, inspiring, and “real” heroine. Although she is not a “good girl” and has her fair share of troubles, in many ways these are the result of her struggle against normalcy. In terms of her characterisation, I would consider her to be an excellent role model for female agency, autonomy, and perseverance.

Young readers need to be given the opportunity to try to understand these often subtle tones in literature to identify for themselves what is “right” and “wrong” even if it is not explicitly laid out in the plot or in the dialogue. At the onset, readers in this study who encountered disturbing and/or ambiguous content in literature during their childhood and teen years did reveal that they were confused or misled by what they read. However, these negative experiences often inspired positive growth or transformation. In the case of Scarlet, despite her initial negative exposure to *She’s Come Undone*, as she read more

and more stories about adult-minor relationships, she began to recognise a pattern of injustice in the stories she read about young teen girls who have relationships with older men. She told me during our interview:

I think that theme is in quite a few novels that I read where it's like this young, troubled teen girl that has a relationship with an older man and there's no responsibility put on the man because he's just a man he can't help himself.

At first, Scarlet did accept this trope as normal, but as she read more widely she became attuned to this injustice, one which she directly correlated with gender inequality and patriarchal norms. And when she realised this pattern as an injustice, her attachment to these difficult stories, which she returned to again and again, strengthened her personal beliefs and fuelled a transformation within herself. She told me:

...when I was coming to terms with my own sexuality and recognising that I actually really don't like men... Having been exposed to all of the negative in that book, *She's Come Undone*, and just how this whole woman's life is basically centred around who she is sexually and who she is in relation to men and what her worth is in relation to men... To answer your question, yes, that book contributed to me wanting to change that narrative in my own life.

Readers can fixate on details that disturb them, but in the end this difficult text had a positive outcome on Scarlet's perceptions of pleasure, danger, and sexual responsibility.

Negative content, the content that confuses and causes young people to agonise about human sexuality, can have a positive effect even it presents sex as dangerous. Again, Arya, who was deeply upset by a story about non-consensual sex also explained that it was one of the most positive reading experiences of her life. She explained:

I don't think it made me fear. I think it just opened my eyes to the fact that sex is something that...it's not something that you partake in at a certain time or at a certain age, it's when you feel ready... You have to give your consent. And, I think it was for the better for me because I don't think I would have ever experienced that or I wouldn't have known about these things...definitely not from my parents. Definitely not from my friends. So, it was...I guess that information is something that I carry with me, even today.

What I can observe throughout this chapter is that interpreting difficult content takes time. Through participants like Scarlet, who was an intensely curious and sexually aware

young woman, and her experience reading a similarly dark and confusing story such as *Diary of a Teenage Girl*, I can observe a deep confusion that over time blossomed into a foundation for a want for Scarlet to live her life as a strong counter-narrative to that of the main character. As can be seen with Scarlet, it was not until she gained a greater understanding of injustices against women and had come to terms with her own sexuality that she fully understood the intent of *She's Come Undone*.

5.3 The “Fury of Affect”: Should Young People Read Difficult Stories?

If sex includes some of the most exhilarating, passionate and devastating experiences in a person’s life, shouldn’t sex education address exhilaration, passion and devastation? It may be too much to claim this passion and exhilaration for the experience of sex education, but perhaps sex education could be touched by this fury of affect, could, at least, regard this tumultuousness as part of sexual experience. (Gilbert, 2004, p. 233)

How much sexual knowledge is too much? Will a knowledge of the tumultuousness and devastation that is part of sexual experience, this “fury of affect”, as Gilbert (2004) calls it, help or hinder young people? McClelland and Hunter (2013) ask, “What kinds of citizens will sexually knowledgeable children grow up to be? Though this question is rarely explicitly asked, the fear of the deviant sexual (adult) citizen underlies much of the panic around children’s sexuality” (p. 62). While future research is needed to answer this question in full, readers in this study had opinions on whether or not difficult content was beneficial for young readers when they are learning about sexuality. Many of these readers expressed a need for young people to have guidance when reading difficult content. On the one hand, they felt that there was a need to cover topics that were realistic in relation to sex, but they also had concerns that young readers may misunderstand content that is not concise or clear enough about the dangers of sexuality. For example, during my discussion with Madeline, who felt that rape was normalised in a lot of YA Literature, I asked her, “So, do you think overall that books, especially for teens, should kind of present more ethical relationships?” She responded:

I don’t know. Yes and no. What we were talking about earlier how some books are so cut and dry that they’re showing a false hope of how you think your relationships are going to be. So, I guess on that side of the argument but on the

other side you can be like you don't want to show these types of things in a book. Like someone cheating on someone, like rape scenarios that are normalised that kind of thing either because it's not setting a good example. But if these youth are only reading, like this is their way of finding out what life is like, I guess you might as well have it in there. I'm torn on that subject.

Madeline is stuck in the same locus of tension that many get trapped in: these sexual scenarios are ones that some may wish would disappear, they provide "bad examples" of relationships in the context of learning, but they are also necessary to know about. The conversation that I had with Scarlet in particular summed up a lot of the contradicting feelings that participants, as well as myself, have about presenting difficult and negative sexual experiences in literature for young people:

Scarlet: So, all of these really intense sexual experiences that are very adult sexual experiences...as an eight or nine or ten-year-old, it was very exciting to read that book because it was like, ok, I finally get to learn about not just the basics of sex but the intricacies and the emotional side. So, that really satisfied a curiosity in me of finding out what human sexuality is. But I also feel like it was not a healthy exposure...

Davin: Yes, so would you say that it was a negative experience?

Scarlet: I think ultimately, yes. But it also led me to question things. It was both.

Difficult stories, full of ambiguity, can be both traumatic and transformative, destructive and supportive, disheartening and enlightening. I cannot help but be disconcerted by Scarlet's words, but I also think they make an interesting argument for including complex narratives of sexuality, the ones that are disturbing and ambiguous, as a valuable information source on sexuality for teens. Is haphazardly reading these stories, alone without tutelage, the best way for young people to learn about sexuality? Probably not. But should they not exist at all? I do not think so. I do not believe literature would be half as informative, or interesting, if every narrative is morally and ethically required to conform to a 21st Century narrative equivalent of hearts and flowers. As Arya told me:

I find that I enjoy books that don't have a happy ending...I think that I relate more to stories that are a little more, like you said, heartbreaking because I feel like I can relate to the characters a lot easier, I can sympathise with them if they have an arc and they kind of try and get over the heartbreaking situations that's happened to them. Even though that is a bit of a happy ending it makes me feel better

because it makes me feel like I've been there with them through that entire journey.

Indeed, if in stories of sexuality everything goes “right” where is the help within real lives for when things going horribly, inevitably, wrong?

This is an instance where young people can use the guidance of adults to help interpret this content. However, novels such as *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* bring age-appropriateness into question and adults may be exponentially more afraid to discuss relationships such as adult-minor relationships without fear that they may be doing something wrong. As McClelland and Hunter (2013) argue:

Perhaps what we learn when we look more carefully at this term [age-appropriate] is that its use is more for the speaker to position her or himself as “not” bad—not a pedophile, not asking children to have sex, not meaning that kindergartners should be learning about sex, not inappropriate. It's less about the person who is being protected in these moments, but often more about the adult who is assuring everyone that there was no illicit meaning implied. (p. 74)

What is “age-appropriate” really depends on the reader. Readers, when confronted with something that is too much for them to read, may simply close the book and stop reading. For example, Andie and Stacey did this when they encountered sexual information in texts that was “too much” for them:

Andie: I came across it and I was like “Ooookkkk, I'm not going to look at it”.

Stacey: So, there were a lot of passages I was like, “Ok. Skip, skip, skip.”

However, in talking about complex narratives of sexuality with young people, sexual pleasure does not have to be the focus of that discussion. As Lamb (2010) suggests, it is the ethos of care, compassion, fairness, equality, and mutuality that not only makes for healthier sexual subjects, but healthier people. This is a much easier conversation to have and one that is arguably, in this context, the most valuable.

5.4 Conclusion

In which I prevail
for a moment
over the feelings
which have bound me

and come to realize
that no matter how precariously
close to the end it may feel,
my life has really only just begun (Gloeckner, 2015, p. 283)

As seen with readers' experiences with Efferent Romance, stories that are meant to provide examples of what healthy/healthier relationships look like can be beneficial for young readers. But these stories tend to dominate YA Literature and they cannot be the only stories available to young readers. In turn, it is not ideal for scholars who critique sexuality in YA Literature to direct authors to write narratives of sexuality that conform to one specific ideal of what is considered to be a healthy sexuality. Authors that attempt to portray an ideal form of what sexual relationships look like, even from a liberal standpoint, run the risk of subscribing to larger repressive cultural ideologies of how adolescents should or should not perform their sexuality. As Jen Gilbert (2004) has said:

The ambiguity that novels might introduce into discussions of sexuality makes a mess of our desire that there would be one right answer (whether we imagine that answer as not having sex, delaying sexual intercourse, or being responsible and protected). This, however, is the good news. (p. 235)

Multiplicities in stories about teen sexuality that are, in turn, read by young people are very much needed. Yes, the ambiguity this introduces, when there is no one, clear, concise answer as to how one should perform sexuality may be confusing. But it also allows the reader to interact with the phenomenon of desire when it is presented in a way that is closer to how it exists in the lived world. This is the heart of why a difficult story, such as *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, matters for young readers. It is not a contrived, carefully manicured, watered-down story about adolescent sexuality. It does not have a didactic agenda. It does not attempt to direct anyone's life or to reinforce an ideal. It tells a story of how life is blurry beyond belief. It shows an admirable character who is struggling through her first-times, making emotionally devastating mistakes, yet perseveres as a unique and inspiring person. Nestled within a larger set of narratives of sexuality, including the stories of hearts and flowers, difficult stories work to introduce young people to the more complex aspects of sexuality without suggesting that relationships such as Minnie's are something to be strived for, or settled for.

Improving narratives of sexuality for young readers is not about cleansing stories of the ambiguous, it's about championing stories written by skilled authors that present us with all of the dilemmas of desire: the good and the bad. One narrative about sexuality should be considered just one example in many, one that needs to be absorbed into the dominant cultural stories of love, sex, and desire. No one narrative is the best example. Nothing is perfect. And there are no absolutes that exist in the transaction of reading. Phoebe Gloeckner (2003) herself is quoted as saying, "The truth always changes, and in the end there is almost no truth". The best that can be done when telling stories about sexuality is to be honest about the emotions and shared-experiences lived by sexual human beings (including teens), to ask hard questions about the things that confound or disturb us, and to make change where it is needed most. In the words of Minnie:

Some things are too complicated to type down on paper. You just would not understand them even if they were described in the most meticulous detail possible. It is quite difficult to bring these things into focus – even the most powerful astronomical telescopes or the most modern electron microscopes used by man are worthless. (Gloeckner, 2015, pp. 15-16)

Chapter 6

6 Reading the Erotic

“I like the sex scenes in it”. This statement came from participant Christina who was explaining to me why she had recently chosen to read the last instalment of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy, *Fifty Shades Freed* (2012), by E. L. James. Christina did not seem to care about the story very much. She said that the second book in the trilogy was “kinda boring” and she just wanted to see how the story ended. But she definitely liked the sex scenes in it. I like this statement that she made because it demonstrates a dimension of reading sexually-themed literature that is not often talked about in studies of young people and the literature they read: reading for the sex scenes.

This chapter focuses on the experiences of the young women in this study who read erotica. It describes how erotica differs from other texts in the romance genre because it is written to titillate the reader, as opposed to inform or challenge the reader. It also shows that, often from an early age, feelings of arousal or pleasure were an important factor in some of the participants’ reading experiences as they often motivated or intensified their interest in sexually-themed literature. Although participants read a wide variety of erotica in this study, I have chosen to examine a Young Adult (YA) erotic romance novel, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2015) by Sarah J. Maas, to exemplify what erotica that is written for or read by teens entails and how well it can perform as an information source on sexuality. Here I rely heavily on Janice Radway’s (1987) *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* to analyse some of the major concerns associated with conventional romance. This includes the presence of stereotypical gender roles, sexual violence, and the unrealistic happy ending. Ultimately, I argue that although YA erotic romance tends to remain quite conventional in its portrayals of femininity, masculinity, and the social relationships between men and women, that an emphasis on female sexual autonomy, desire, and pleasure make *A Court of Thorns and Roses* in particular quite radical. Although explicit, sexy sex scenes are generally deemed inappropriate in YA Literature, I will argue here that it is the sex scenes specifically, not the relationship dynamics, that are erotica’s greatest asset when informing young readers about sexuality. I assert this because erotica has the potential to

evoke feelings of pleasure in the reader, and can therefore provide young women readers with an opportunity to experience the physical embodiment of pleasure in a safe, risk-free environment. As a result, reading erotica may lead to greater feelings of sexual entitlement, the development of new sexual fantasies, and inspiration to improve real-life sexual experiences.

6.1 Erotica and Readers

6.1.1 What is Erotica?

Erotica differs from the other sexually-themed literature that I have examined thus far in this thesis. In light of this, I start this chapter by defining erotica because it will provide a foundation for understanding the different thematic and experiential functions of this type of literature. Due to its relationship to romance and pornography, providing a clear definition of erotica is nearly as difficult as defining YA Literature. As seen with Efferent Romance, there can be stories about sex that are not necessarily erotic. There can also be stories that would be considered more pornography than a literary work of art. Erotica author Susie Bright writes in her guide on *How to Write a Dirty Story* (2002), that when defining erotica, “[t]he first thing you have to swallow is this: Even if you embrace the binary categories of porn and erotica, you’re going to have to be flexible” (p. 42).

Rather than debating the binaries, I turn now to a discussion on erotica that culminates in a definition for this thesis based on what participants had to say about the materials that they read and my own observations about the literature under examination. Treading the line between romance and pornography, erotica often gets its definition through juxtapositions. Participant Juliet, who read the most pornographic erotica among participants, seemed to subscribe to the most general definition: erotica is written and pornography is visual. I do, however, think that the difference is more nuanced than that. Stacey, who read both romance and erotica told me, “...I find erotica’s a little bit different [than romance]. It’s not...it’s more unveiled, I guess you can say”. By “unveiled” I believe that Stacey is referring to the sex scenes, which are usually on display and “sexy” as opposed to implied or unerotic. Stacey also stated that romances are “love stories” and erotica is “sex literature”. However, erotica is not “just” about the

sex and can, as it quite often does, belong to the family of romance. Nonetheless, participant Sarah told me, “I find that a lot of what I read can be interpreted as porn to people”. It is true, erotica does share commonalities with pornography in that sexual acts in erotica are written to evoke *pleasure* in the reader. I want to use the word “pleasure” here instead of arousal because I think that erotica can evoke more than just a sexual response. It can also evoke the feelings of pleasure that accompany emotional intimacy or love. In Eva Illouz’s book *Hard-Core Romance: Fifty Shades of Grey, Best-Sellers and Society* (2014), she looks to Steve Garlick (2012) for a definition of pornography, who writes that, “contemporary pornography is, in a significant sense, about masturbation” (p. 307). Illouz elaborates that:

...a pornographic book is defined by the fact that its explicit intent is to make the reader engage in masturbatory practices...they expose genitalia and use words, postures, and narrative devices whose entire purpose is to create sexual desire in the absence of a real partner. (p. 73)

In contrast to pornography, erotica is not “just” about masturbation, even though it may create enough feelings of pleasure in the reader to provoke it. Some of the participants, such as Christina and Juliet, were actually very adamant and clear about the difference between erotica and porn, which was seen as negative and misogynistic. Christina told me:

...there’s a huge contrast between how they describe sex in books versus porn. Porn is really degrading and animalistic where there is more of a sexual and passionate aspect to books. So, I learned that sex can be passionate and, you know, loving and it’s not just being treated like a toilet. Seriously, the shit you see in porn these days!

Indeed, the non-degrading nature of erotica has been noted by others, although it is not necessarily true across all erotica (Kammeyer, 2008). Participant Sarah also noted the presence of a detailed narrative as part of erotica, describing the erotic Japanese comics she read as “porn but also story”. The way that Sarah determined what was erotica and what was pornography was the presence of a well-developed story that was about more than just the sexual component of the relationship.

As a general rule, I believe the line that separates erotica and pornography to be the complexity of the narrative that envelopes the “unveiled” aspects of a sexual relationship. This can also be seen as a literary or artistic intention behind the work. However, I would also like to broaden this assessment to encapsulate the stories read by participants that were less literary and more pornography but still considered by them as erotica. As participant Juliet told me, “So, I read different novels for their literary value and I read erotica for the sexual value of it”. In sum, for the purposes of this study, erotica is defined as a complex written story that contains acts of sex/sexuality that aim to evoke *pleasure* in the reader. This chapter focuses specifically on erotic romance – conventional romance novels that contain explicit, erotically charged sex.

6.1.2 Readers Experiencing Pleasure

All of the participants in this study read erotica of some kind. The erotica read was a mix of YA, New Adult, and Adult Literature. What I would classify as YA Literature would be the fanfiction based on popular YA Literature or other YA cultural products that was read by Andie, Madeline and Kelly. This included works from the *Harry Potter*, *One Direction*, *The Hunger Games*, and *Percy Jackson* fandoms. Madeline also read erotic YA Fantasy such as *A Court of Thorns and Roses*. Participant Sarah read a wide variety of erotic Japanese comics that were either YA (teen characters set in high school) or Adult (adult characters living adult lives). In the New Adult category, *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E. L. James was by far the most popular erotic text read by participants. Jane also read novels by Abbi Glines, which she defined as YA but can also be considered New Adult. Participants also read a wide-variety of Adult erotic novels or read erotica online on websites such as *Literotica* and *Tumblr*, most of which were BDSM-themed stories.

Some of the participants that I interviewed for this study specifically identified pleasure or arousal as a component of their experience reading sexually-themed literature. For some, this occurred early in their adolescence and remained a significant aspect of their reading motivations and responses throughout their teen and young adult years. For participants such as Sarah and Juliet, their initial interest in reading erotic literature sprung from a “pornographic interest” or feeling aroused. Sarah told me that when she

was young, sometime after Grade Five, she was really interested in the male body. She said:

...there was a time where I was Googling what penises looked like. I did that once. I think that's really it. And then I think my curiosities are what led me into reading about same-sex stories. So, I guess it was weird...it was almost like a pornographic interest but then it also led to an interest in relationships in general.

Similarly, when I asked Juliet what got her interested in reading literature about relationships and sex she told me, "Being younger than I should have been and having the internet in front of me and being aroused at that time. So, you know, hormones". In these cases, their sexual curiosities, based in arousal, led them to seek out erotic literature.

Other participants, such as Christina, Scarlet, and Stacey, seemed to have serendipitously stumbled upon sexually-themed literature and their sexual response to it piqued their interest further. Christina told me that her first experience reading a book about sex/sexuality was when she was twelve years old. Although she could not remember the name of the book, she remembers her response to it. She told me:

...I was reading it and then things got progressively more heated. And so it just really drew me in and I re-read it like seven times, because you know...you're a horny little kid, you know? So, you're like "Oh my gosh". You know? So, I remember getting turned on by it. That's really what I remember mostly. And I think that's what got me into reading erotic literature.

Scarlet, who told me that she has always been a sexually curious person, related that her first remembered experience of reading a book with sexuality in it was Wally Lamb's *She's Come Undone*. Although this was not necessarily a "healthy" book to read as an either or nine-year-old, she remembers being turned on by an erotic scene in the book. Stacey's interest happened much later in life when she read *Fifty Shades of Grey* in Grade Twelve. She identified this as the book that got her into erotic literature specifically, although she had read less-explicit books such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series beforehand. She told me that she was "really drawn" to how arousing it was even though she struggled to get through how intense the content was for her. In these cases, the feelings of pleasure felt by the reader led to a greater interest in sexually-themed literature.

Most participants did not talk at length about being aroused by literature. It is, admittedly, an awkward topic and most of the participants preferred to talk about their thoughts on the books rather than their personal sexual feelings. It was also outside of the purview of this study to ask about the intimate details of participants' sexual practices, including masturbation. However, from what participants offered in response to my questions, there is evidence to suggest that not only do young people read sexually-themed fiction out of curiosity to learn about relationships and sex, but to experience the physical pleasure that can be derived from sex scenes. This finding supports an acknowledgement of young women, some only on the brink of adolescence, as sexually curious beings with a need to both learn about and interact with their sexuality. For some of these participants, sexually-themed literature was a safe, private, and satisfying erotic source that allowed them to gain experience in these regards. Specifically, these excerpts show that experiencing pleasure was both a reading motivation and a response for some of these readers as children, teens, and young adults. These readers consciously exercised their feelings of desire and pleasure through their reading practices. This reveals a significant dimension of reading sexually-themed literature, that some young people are interested in graphic depictions of sexuality not just for informational purposes but also for entertainment, enjoyment, and pleasure. In the next section of this chapter, I will examine an example of YA erotic romance to evaluate in more detail the informative potential of this type of sexually-themed literature.

6.2 Young Adult Erotic Romance

I would describe very few of the YA novels that I read for this study as "erotic". While many YA novels do contain sexual acts, very rarely are these acts described in detail or written to be titillating. In books that are sexually-explicit, sex is often presented in a very realistic manner. A prominent example of this is Judy Blume's *Forever*, which showcases what it is like to perform sexual acts but does not necessarily invite the reader to join in the sexual pleasure. Books like these have sex in them, but they are not "sexy". Of course, what is or is not titillating is subjective and even implied sex can be arousing to some. However, what makes the difference is that these narratives, the language and events that they describe, are not written with titillation in mind as they are in erotica.

Erotic descriptions aim to evoke a physical or emotional, rather than a cerebral, response from the reader.

The Fantasy and Paranormal Romance genres are where I have found most of the erotic or erotica-esque narratives. There is a wide range of sexual content in these stories. Some, like the *Twilight* series, contain very few sexual acts beyond kissing and hugging. However, the sexual tension has been described by readers and scholars alike as titillating, taking the form of what Christine Seifert (2008, 2015) has coined as “abstinence porn”. Books like those written by Jennifer Echols or Simone Elkeles are very similar to erotic romance except that the sex scenes, prefaced by an enormous amount of sexual tension, do not feature genital sex or they fade to black and never describe the event. Unlike the dispassionate Efferent Romances, these books attempt to create a sexy narrative, but they do not quite reach the status of erotica. In this chapter, I will examine Sarah J. Maas’ *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, one of the few YA novels I read for this study that fits snugly into the erotic romance genre: it is romantic, sexually-explicit, and erotic.

6.2.1 *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas

A Court of Thorns and Roses is the first instalment of the hugely popular New York Times Bestselling series by Sarah J. Maas. In the series, there are currently two sequels and one novella that bridges this series with a spin-off. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* is a *Beauty and the Beast* story about a young woman, Feyre Archeron, who is sentenced to live in the faerie land of Prythian after she murders a faerie in the form of a wolf. Feyre belongs to a family that has fallen from grace. Once a wealthy family, Feyre, her father, and her two older sisters were forced to move into a tiny, decrepit cottage in the forest outside of a small farming town. They live, poorly, off the land and have very few sources of income. Rather than starve, Feyre takes to the woods to hunt wild game. Beyond the forest where she hunts is Prythian, a vast land where faeries that wield great and terrible powers dwell and threaten the existence of humanity. But Feyre is the main provider for the family, so she must risk the venture into the forest. Her father is useless, crippled and too depressed to help. Her sisters are proud and selfish, considering the chores of survival to be beneath them. Feyre is strong, but alone. One day, while hunting

a deer, a gigantic wolf appears before her. She knows him for what he truly is, not a wolf but a faerie. In an act of necessity, but also hatred, she kills the wolf, skins him, and sells his pelt at market. Shortly after, a fearsome beast appears at her home, demanding that Feyre suffer the consequence of the murder she has committed. Feyre must leave her home and live out the rest of her life in Prythian, territory of the fae, or die. She chooses Prythian.

At first, living in Prythian is unsettling for Feyre. She plots escape, eager to get back to her family, and tries to trick her captors. The beast reveals himself as not (just) a beast, but as the shape shifting High Lord of the Summer Court, Tamlin. Although Tamlin is upset at the death of his friend by Feyre's hand, he welcomes her into his opulent manor, makes her comfortable, and protects her from the dark forces that gather outside. Over time, Feyre begins to accept her fate at the manor and forms a bond with Tamlin. Feyre then learns that there is a blight that is plaguing Prythian, diminishing the power of the High Fae and enslaving them. As Tamlin struggles against this blight, he begins to fall in love with Feyre. But after a particularly frightening encounter with the male rival, Rhysand, Tamlin realises that his closeness to Feyre has put her in danger and she must leave. Before they part, they make love for the first time. He sends her back to the human realm, telling her that he loves her. She does not say it back.

When Feyre arrives home she discovers that Tamlin has bestowed upon her family a considerable amount of wealth. She tries to pick up her life again but she is filled with longing and regret. While she is away, Tamlin is taken by the source of the blight: a dark queen who wishes Tamlin for her mate. Although unaware of what is happening in Prythian, Feyre finds the distance from Tamlin unbearable. She needs to tell him the depth of her emotions. She returns to Prythian only to find the manor empty with signs of a violent and bloody struggle. She goes after Tamlin, underneath a mountain in the centre of Prythian, to rescue him. In fae fashion, the dark queen agrees to give up Tamlin and break the curse on the land if Feyre can pass three horrific and life-threatening tasks. With the help of an unlikely ally, the beautiful but hateful and domineering Rhysand, Feyre slaughters a giant worm, escapes a violent death by crushing, and kills two innocent fae to complete her quest. She is the saviour of the story, not only saving Tamlin but the

whole of Prythian that was under such a spell. At the end of the novel Feyre stands with Rhysand, reeling from what she has been through, finished with the dark queen but not with the blood on her hands. Tamlin and Feyre return to the manor to live in peace. It is a happy ending, for the time being.

6.2.2 Sarah J. Maas

Sarah J. Maas is a New York Times Bestselling author, reader of romance, and an advocate in positive portrayals of sexuality in books for young women. Maas rose to prominence with her bestselling YA series *Throne of Glass*. She started writing *Throne of Glass* when she was sixteen years old and it was previously published and read online by fans (Maas, 2018, April 7, 2018, October 5). Narratively, both of these series do tread into the realm of New Adult Literature (Pattee, 2017). However, as I outlined in Chapter 1, I would consider New Adult as a sub-genre of YA Literature because New Adult has yet to break away as its own genre, still appeals to teen readers, and embodies the spirit of YA Literature. In other words, it is still marketed to and identified as YA by readers like participant Madeline, and this needs to be taken into account. A fervent reader of romance and fantasy herself, Maas (2016, May 15, 2017, April 28) reveals that she gained a lot of her knowledge about relationships and sex from reading fiction. Maas (2016, May 15) said in an interview with *Popsugar*:

...when I was teenager and even younger I read up — and I never would have gone to my parents with sex questions or sex ed in school. Books were the one place — especially romantic fantasy — where I could see these adult relationships play out and I got a sense of what a loving adult relationship could be like. (para. 12)

This experience has undoubtedly had an effect on how Maas writes about sex in her novels. In particular, Maas stands out as an author who embraces sex in books for young people and pays close attention to how she presents female sexuality in her novels. Most noticeably, her work is positive about sex and is coded with feminist values. When asked about the erotic sex scenes that she writes in the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series, Maas (2016, May 15) responds with an evaluation of sex in YA Literature and what her goal was in writing these scenes:

...we needed positive representations of sex and that it's OK not to just *have* sex, but to *enjoy* it, and for young women [to see that]. I firmly believe that young women can be with as many men as they want, we can have as many boyfriends as we want, we can change our minds, there are no limits to what we can do. I've been really grateful that I've been able to show a more real [sexual portrayal] of multiple relationships that [Feyre] has and not the whole fade-to-black thing. (para. 13)

Both *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and *Throne of Glass* emphasise female empowerment, female friendship, and include female desire and pleasure. It is apparent that Maas consciously writes the sex scenes with gender and power in mind by taking into consideration the power relations between men and women, not shying away from writing explicit sex scenes, and fighting against "slut shaming". This in particular, as I will argue, makes her writing radical in the context of YA literature even though in the context of romance, the books are still quite conventional.

6.2.3 The Ideal Romance

A Court of Thorns and Roses falls neatly into the category of conventional romance by following the narrative structure of the "ideal romance" outlined by Janice Radway (1987) in *Reading the Romance*.¹⁹ The story starts with a heroine whose social position or identity has been compromised: Feyre is desperately poor. An "aristocratic male", Tamlin, enters her life and, at first, she has a tense, even violent, relationship with him. Slowly, Tamlin begins to open up to Feyre and they start a tender, sexual relationship.

¹⁹ The narrative structure of the ideal romance:

1. The heroine's social identity is destroyed.
2. The heroine reacts antagonistically to an aristocratic male.
3. The aristocratic male responds ambiguously to the heroine.
4. The heroine interprets the hero's behaviour as evidence of a purely sexual interest in her.
5. The heroine responds to the hero's behaviour with anger or coldness.
6. The hero retaliates by punishing the heroine.
7. The heroine and hero are physically and/or emotionally separated.
8. The hero treats the heroine tenderly.
9. The heroine responds tenderly to the hero's act of tenderness.
10. The heroine reinterprets the hero's ambiguous behavior as the product of previous hurt.
11. The hero proposes/openly declares his love for/demonstrates his unwavering commitment to the heroine with a supreme act of tenderness.
12. The heroine responds sexually and emotionally.
13. The heroine's identity is restored. (p. 134)

Tamlin openly declares that he loves Feyre and puts her safety above all. Then they are hopelessly separated and when reunited, Feyre reciprocates his love by risking her life for him. Ultimately, through their connection, Feyre restores her social standing through financial stability and significantly increased social capital. As can be observed through the reading of this novel, it does little to break the conventional mould of romance. As such, Maas' bestselling novel belongs to a long tradition of conventional romance novels and sets the stage for a narrative that upholds gendered norms of femininity, masculinity, and the relationships between men and women. Romance novels, especially for young women, are of concern for many literary scholars (Christian-Smith, 1990; Kokkola, 2013; Radway, 1987; Trites, 2000) because they contain sentiments that do not support the emancipation of women from the pitfalls of patriarchy. In particular, the eroticisation of violence and the romanticisation of matrimony are of particular concern. While I maintain that conventional romance has, for the most part, not changed in these regards, I do see immense value in erotic romance as a positive source of information on sexuality for young people. As I will demonstrate below, even though Maas fails to break away from the negative aspects of conventional romance, she also breaks the mould by incorporating more contemporary and feminist ideals into the writing of her heroine, Feyre, and how she performs her sexuality.

6.2.4 Femininity in Romance

Janice Radway (1987) identifies the ideal romantic heroine as virginal, desiring of love (not sex), confident, beautiful, nurturing, independent, and fearing of men (p. 132). In many ways, Feyre Archeron does not stray from the characterisation of the "ideal" heroine. She at once represents an ideal feminist heroine, while also maintaining traditional gender norms. Feyre is strong, independent, and confident. More than that, she is the interim head of her family. She is also physically and emotionally strong. Forced to enter the woods alone to provide for her family, Feyre faces the dangers of harsh weather, wild animals, and unsavoury men. She is a huntress, good enough to kill and evade bloodthirsty magical creatures. She is also a talented artist with a passion for painting. This show of female empowerment is a common characterisation of heroines in romance, where they have fierce dispositions, uncommon intelligence, and, on occasion, adept

skills in an unusual profession (Radway, 1987, p. 123). As Miranda Green-Barteet (2014) notes in her article on dystopian fantasy, gender roles tend to be more fluid in fantasy because the often harsh circumstances of the worlds heroines belong to require them to be strong and agentic in order to serve justice. As is the case with Feyre, heroines in fantasy often embody typically masculine characteristics. In romance, while this may seem to promote female empowerment, Radway also reveals that heroines do not usually maintain their independence towards the end of the novel. She explains that the story usually begins by “expressing ambivalent feelings about female gender by associating the heroine’s personality or activities and behaviour usually identified with men” (pp. 123-24) but by the end of the story, the heroine typically embraces the traditionally feminine roles of matrimony and motherhood. While Feyre does remain fierce throughout the series, this progression in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* does exist, most noticeably in Feyre’s adjustment to her new luxurious and idle lifestyle. As she settles into her new life in Prythian she becomes more and more feminine. For example, in an attempt to please Tamlin, she trades in her tunic and pants for ornate dresses that she had previously refused to don. But perhaps most obviously, as I will discuss below, the *A Court of Thorns and Roses* series does culminate in matrimony and motherhood where Feyre assumes a quieter domestic role (at least temporarily). In these ways, Feyre fits the mould of romance; she is written as the ideal feminist heroine, strong and admirable, but does not completely fulfill a feminist destiny.

However, in terms of her sexuality, Feyre is one of the most powerful, autonomous, and freely-desiring characters that I encountered in the study. This part of Feyre’s character does provide a good model for female *sexual* empowerment specifically. Feyre is not virginal. She is quick to desire, but slow to love or commit. She also does not fear men. She actually fears very little. In terms of her sexual history, Feyre is unlike most YA heroines. Feyre is an initiator, has sex outside of the bonds of love, and never agonises about her desire. Early in the novel, Feyre reveals that she has a lover, Isaac Hale. The eldest son of a well-off farmer in her village, she began a casual sexual relationship with him two years prior to the setting of the novel. After walking home from town with Isaac one day, enjoying his company, she retells, “Simple, easy, perhaps a bit awkward, but he’d left me at my cottage feeling not quite so...alone. A week later, I pulled him into

that decrepit barn” (p. 31). This is all the readers receives in terms of a description of Feyre’s loss of virginity. It is very uncommon to find characters in YA novels that have already lost their virginity, as so many of these novels are about sex for the first time. Sarah J. Maas writes Feyre’s sexual history in such an understated and unlaboured way that it is effectively normalised, not something that needs a lengthy discussion. Maas (2017, November 9) reveals in an interview:

With the sex in my books, I try to make it a positive thing. It’s OK for women to be virgins, it’s OK for them to have had as many sexual partners as they want. With Feyre, it just felt like it was part of her character. I wanted her to have a sexual history that wasn’t something to be ashamed of, that was something that she was in charge of; I wanted her to be in charge of her body, her passions and desires. (para. 8)

Feyre’s relationship with Isaac Hale is also casual. She describes their “lovemaking” more as an act of solace or escape from the hardship in her life than one of love. Feyre says:

Sometimes we’d meet every night for a week, others we’d go a month without setting eyes on each other. But every time was the same: A rush of shedding clothes and shared breaths and tongues and teeth. Occasionally we’d talk...Often, we wouldn’t say a word the entire time. I couldn’t say our lovemaking was particularly skilled, but it was still a release, a reprieve, a bit of selfishness. (p. 31)

Despite the obvious lack of love between them, they care about each other enough to have a healthy relationship. Feyre accepts things how they are, not because she has to *per se*, but because *she* does not love him. This is an unusual occurrence in the quest for love in YA Literature as it is usually about gaining mutual love. Later in the novel, when Feyre sees Isaac with his new wife she does not feel ill towards them. She describes, “Nothing – there was nothing in my chest, my soul, for him beyond a vague sense of gratitude...I smiled broadly at him, at them both, and bowed my head, wishing them well with my entire heart” (p. 262). How Feyre and Isaac act and feel shows a functioning, but not oversimplified, casual sexual relationship. This is something missing from a lot of YA Literature in both the sense that sex within the context of love still reigns and any sex that falls outside of that context is often seen as vapid, uncaring, and fraught with

difficulties. Participant Kelly told me that she really valued stories about teens that presented sex as ordinary, mundane, or outside of the bonds of eternal love. She said:

A lot of [Young Adult novels] have kind of like...sex is either if you're passionately in love and you're like, "There's nothing else we can do. We love each other too much" or "We're gonna die this is our last night". And I think the few stories that I have [read] that aren't like that we're pretty neat...As long as it's safe and consensual, beyond that, it doesn't have to be serious.

Something that ties into this discussion is that Feyre does not obsess over the status of her relationships or how the other person may or may not feel towards her. This is partly because Feyre is an active participant, even the initiator, in the formation of her relationships. Feyre is forward with her feelings, bold in her actions, and is not overly concerned with finding love and commitment. Eva Illouz (2014) notes that in romance novels:

Unless sexual encounters are explicitly defined as fleeting and hedonistic, they become fraught with uncertainty, with women often reduced to the (inferior) status of trying to decipher men's intentions and of bringing them to the path of intimacy through sophisticated emotional strategies... (p. 43)

I find this type of behaviour especially prevalent in Efferent Romance because characters are navigating relationships, usually, for the first time and there is a strong sense of uncertainty. This usually happens to the point where it becomes an obsession and overwhelms the other aspects of the heroine's personality and interests. But it is no wonder that when sex can be seen as a commodity (Tolman, 2002), women are said to be "incomplete" without a man (Christian-Smith, 1990), recreational sex threatens the organisation of heterosexuality (Illouz, 2014), and women feel the need to have men (as prospective fathers) that commit to them (Radway, 1987), that romance heroines are obsessed with what men are thinking and feeling. I will suggest here that when these codes are erased from the narrative, heroines are more able to realise the outcomes of what Sara McClelland and Michelle Fine (2006, 2014) describe as *thick desire*: a desire to live a balanced, fulfilling, and healthy lifestyle in all areas of life, including sexuality. Feyre's lack of worry allows her to focus on other aspects of her life. But perhaps the outcomes of Feyre's relationships are too idealistic. She seems to get exactly what she wants from them, whether it is a lot or a little. Regardless, portraying female characters

that were empowered sexually was important to participants in this study, who often talked about women's issues. For example, Stacey told me:

Now it's more of a modern way of thinking where it's the woman who can be just as sexual and domineering as the male...And I like that stance better than the woman being helpless and naïve and being like needy and careless. I like that stance better, that instead she's independent and she has no emotional ties to these men necessarily.

Another interesting aspect of Feyre's sexual relationships is how they manage contraception. Feyre and her partners do use contraception, but it is the man who usually takes this responsibility. Feyre tells, "Since I couldn't afford it, Isaac himself took the contraceptive brew. He knew I wouldn't have touched him otherwise" (p. 32). I find this assertion of Feyre's especially bold and admirable. The use of condoms is common in YA novels, and the responsibility to have them is typically shared equally between young women and young men. However, due to obvious limitations on the types of contraceptives available, it is usually up to the young woman to manage her fertility. Feyre's expectation that Isaac take the contraceptive brew is perhaps a nod to the future, where men are expected to take more responsibility for their fertility. Or perhaps this signals a change in the feminine/masculine roles in romance. However, as I will now discuss, for the most part, the heroes in Maas' story still strictly adhere to their masculine roles.

6.2.5 Masculinity in Romance

Janice Radway (1987) writes that ideal heroes in romance novels are "spectacularly" masculine: promiscuous, desiring of sex (not love), confident, handsome, indifferent, honest, courageous, and emotionally reserved (p. 132). Men are at their most masculine in conventional romance narratives as compared to any of the other texts that I read for this project. The male leads in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* are truly larger-than-life in their maleness. They are incredibly powerful: physically, socially, and economically. But true to romance fashion, the heroes of the story are also princes. They are well-mannered, morally pure, and masters of the public realm. They are princes, but they are also brutish, aggressive, mischievous bullies. In Maas' books, they are quite literally animals: chimeras, wolves, foxes, and bat-like creatures that these men transform into. Their

physical hardness and power are also accentuated. Tamlin's body is described by Feyre as hard muscle, "...honed by centuries of fighting and brutality" (p. 163). They are also sexually voracious, being centuries old and open to casual sex. Although they are moral or honest in spirit, they also have very few restrictions on their behaviour, and are prone to violence or even killing.

Some participants in this study did not care for this type of characterisation in romance.

Jane told me:

...The guy is always so hypermasculine and I just don't appreciate that as much as I used to, I guess. I kind of want some variety in it. So, my favourite books are the ones that don't really follow that formula. Just because they stand out more. I find there is just more substance to them. They're just more interesting to read obviously...I mean they're still kind of what you'd expect but they're not following this stereotypical path, I guess.

I have nothing terribly new to say about the male characters in erotic romance such as *A Court of Thorns and Roses* except to confirm that the archetype continues to hold strong. I will add, however, that hypermasculinity does make sense in the context of the "ideal" romance. Steven Garlick (2016, 2017) explains that masculinity can be seen as born out of humanity's relationship with nature and the need to dominate it. He writes that: "masculinity is a technology of embodiment...that produces habitual ways of being oriented toward the dispelling of ontological insecurity through achieving and maintaining control or domination over nature and one's world" (p. 96). In conventional romance, the ideal hero is always coded as a hegemonic male (strong, violent, dominant) because he promises security and order in one's world. Radway (1987) writes that "...because of their strength, power and ability to operate in the public realm, the hero stands out as that world's most able representative and the essence of all that it values" (p. 130). The hypermasculine is privileged by hegemonic masculinity and therefore romance uses these characteristics to build the fantasy of the "ideal" male who promises the best future. Garlick (2017) explains that "...hegemonic masculinities regulate and pattern complex systems by offering the promise of a position from which the world can either be controlled or is under control" (pp. 96-97). If the ideal hero in romance is seen as a "man among men" (Radway, 1987, p. 130), it goes without saying that he will

embody hegemonic masculinity. Especially in high-fantasy, such as *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, a control over nature is hyper accentuated because magic, a natural force, is the ultimate source of power. The world of Prythian has, effectively, orientated itself around those who control nature the most.

This, I think, is the biggest problem with romance and the messages it conveys to women about what “ideal” relationships look like. Even though I do see that authors make earnest, informed efforts to create strong and autonomous heroines, I do not believe that you can have a truly feminist egalitarian text, one that supports women’s emancipation from the negatives of heteronormativity, unless the values of feminism are also encoded into the male characters’ personalities, thoughts, and behaviours. In not doing so, it is left up to the heroine to navigate and manage the problems of patriarchy alone. Perhaps this scenario is the most relatable and relevant to readers in this current historical moment, but I think this type of narrative can interfere with the imaginings of what it is like to have a balanced relationship, one that does not require the taming of beasts. These heroes may be kind, considerate, respectful, tender, and loving at the end of the story, but they start off as tyrants. It must not be forgotten that the archetype of the hypermasculine, disinterested, cruel yet coveted man does a disservice to men as well. It confines them to their own suffering under patriarchy, promises them much, but leaves them vulnerable. Garlick (2016) writes that “[t]he *work* of art, broadly conceived, lies in the re-enlivening of bodies and in the disclosure of possibilities for a different world” (p. 96). In this regard, I do not think that *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, or any conventional romance, completely does this work because of its adherence to strict gender roles for both women and men. I see this not only in my own assessment, but in reader’s responses to romance as well. The readers in this study were generally disenchanted by the messages of gender in conventional romance. What is really needed in romance is a new envisioning of romantic utopias that do not portray the domination of nature as also the domination of others.

6.2.6 The Sex Scene

A Court of Thorns and Roses does, however, envision new possibilities for young women readers in its sex scenes. Or, I should say, *sex scene*. Despite being one of the most erotic

and sexually-explicit YA books read for this study, there is only one sex scene in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* and it comprises only 2 pages out of 419. This scene, presented in near entirety just below, is sexy, female-centric, and complex in its relations between Feyre and the half-beast, Tamlin:

He breathed my name onto my chest, one of his hands exploring the plane of my torso, rising up to the slope of my breast. I trembled, anticipating the feeling of his hand there, and his mouth found mine again as his fingers stopped just below.

His kissing was slower this time – gentler. The fingertips of his other hand slipped beneath the waist of my undergarment, and I sucked in a breath.

He hesitated at the sound, pulling back slightly. But I bit his lip in a silent command that had him growling in my mouth. With one long claw, he shredded through silk and lace, and my undergarment fell away in pieces. The claw retracted and his kiss deepened as his fingers slid between my legs, coaxing and teasing. I ground against his hand, yielding completely to the writhing wildness that had roared alive inside me, and breathed his name onto his skin.

He paused again – his fingers retracting – but I grabbed him, pulling him farther on top of me. I wanted him *now* – I wanted the barriers of our clothing to vanish, I wanted to taste his sweat, wanted to become full of him. Don't stop," I gasped out.

"I –" he said thickly, resting his brow between my breasts as he shuddered. "If we keep going, I won't be able to stop at all."

I sat up and he watched me, hardly breathing. But I kept my eyes on his, my own breathing becoming steady as I raised my nightgown over my head and tossed it to the floor. Utterly naked before him, I watched his gaze travel to my bare breasts, peaked against the chill of the night, to my abdomen, to between my thighs. A ravenous, unyielding sort of hunger passed over his face. I bent a leg and slid it to the side, a silent invitation. He let out a low growl – and slowly, with predatory intent, raised his gaze to mine.

The full force of that wild, unrelenting High Lord's power focused solely on me – and I felt the story contained beneath his skin, so capable of sweeping away everything I was, even in its lessened state. But I could trust him, trust myself to weather that mighty power. I could throw all that I was at him and he wouldn't balk.

"Give me everything," I breathed.

He lunged, a beast freed of its tether.

We were a tangle of limbs and teeth, and I tore at his clothes until they were on the floor, then tore at his skin until I marked him down his back, his arms. His claws were out, but devastatingly gentle on my hips as he slid down between my thighs and feasted on me, stopping only after I shuddered and fractured. I was moaning his name when he sheathed himself inside me in a powerful, slow thrust that had me splintering around him.

We moved together, unending and wild and burning, and when I went over the edge the next time, he roared and went with me. (pp. 246-247)

There are a number of significant occurrences in this sex scene. First, Feyre is an active participant in the scene. The sex scene starts with Feyre and Tamlin talking, embracing and kissing until Feyre pushes him onto her bed. Tamlin leads the actions in the sense that most of what is happening is Tamlin giving pleasure to Feyre. However, she urges him on throughout the scene, becoming fierce in her own right, and creates the scene with him. For participants like Stacey, seeing a woman who takes control in a sexual relationship was an important part of her reading experience, saying, “So, when you read erotica novels like that where you see the men taking action in those relationships, it’s very empowering to read about a woman who can do just the same as or worse”.

Second, Tamlin, although he is described as animalistic and predatory, also responds to Feyre’s reactions to his actions. Tamlin can be seen hesitating when Feyre responds with a sharp intake of breath as he puts his hand into her undergarments. He waits until she confirms that everything is ok before he continues. When things get more heated, he stops and they have a very brief conversation about the direction the encounter is going. In both cases, Feyre responds with non-verbal, affirmative consent. She bites his lip, she spreads her legs, showing him that she desires him to proceed and then verbally states, “Give me everything”. The presence of non-verbal consent makes this a complex display of consent, showing how consent can be given in multiple ways that are not obviously contractual or regulated according to policy or law.

Third, Feyre is at the centre of the pleasure that is being given and experienced. When Feyre and Tamlin have agreed to have sex, Tamlin performs oral sex on Feyre. Oral sex is also something that is not often described in YA Literature. I notice in this scene that Feyre barely touches Tamlin and does not touch his genitals at all. The whole encounter

is very female-centric, focusing on Tamlin's willingness and desire to please Feyre and Feyre's physical pleasure. This is not very common in YA Literature. First, when sex is not described there is no chance to see the particulars of those dynamics and so readers do not see female pleasure either way. Second, there is usually an emphasis on male pleasure because, especially in Efferent Romance, the female orgasm is culturally considered elusive and it is not realistic to show an orgasm during the loss of virginity. Jane identified this specifically in *Anatomy of a Boyfriend* by Daria Snadowsky (2007), telling me:

...I remember that the guy just kept wanting sex and the girl was kind of just going with it. She couldn't even orgasm from it, it was one of those situations...I guess it showed how guys can be manipulative or how they might put their needs before the girl's.

Lastly, in the newest YA novels, the focus of pleasure is shared equally between partners. Feyre is not only able to have an orgasm in this scene, she has two orgasms. In a major way, this affirms both the desire and ability for women to have orgasms. Louisa Allen (2004) reminds us how important this affirmation is for the sexual well-being of women: "If there is no acknowledgement that young women's bodies can have strong pleasurable physiological responses during sexual activity and that these are 'normal' and positive outcomes, then the possibility of this being their experience may be reduced" (p. 156). Sarah J. Maas (2017, April 28) has said that one of the reasons that she did not write Feyre as a virgin was that she specifically wanted to write this sex scene as "fun". She tells:

On another level, it also allowed me to avoid the initial losing-her-virginity sex scene with Tamlin, which I didn't really want to write. I wanted to get right to the fun stuff. This makes me sound like such a pervert. I wanted her to be on relatively equal footing with him. The power dynamic between her and Tamlin is so unequal at times that I wanted her to at least have some control in the bedroom and know what to expect. (para. 11)

Having sex for the first time is a trope in YA Literature, but I think that it is vastly important to have narratives where characters have already had sex and are pursuing new relationships. As Maas says, it allows the sex scenes to break free from the complications of first-time sex. But also, it takes into consideration that many teens have already had

sexual experiences with one or more partners by the time they leave high school. Usually, characters who have sex are in their final year of high school and are at least seventeen or, safer yet, eighteen. It is known from national statistics that teens do have sexual experiences before their senior year, but it is still marginally acceptable to show this in literature.

Although not free of problematic content, especially in the literal depiction of Tamlin as “predatory”, this sex scene was one of the most positive, erotic, and full of pleasure that I read for this project. In regard to sex education standards, I would like to see some more reciprocation from Feyre towards Tamlin, but I think that a female-centric sex scene adds to a diversity of narratives in YA Literature. Sex scenes that are described in detail and focus on female pleasure and desire may provide young women with positive discourses about their desire and increase their sense of sexual entitlement. This sex scene shows a sexually-desiring young woman taking charge of her pleasure, being respected by a powerful man, and enjoying herself without shame, awkwardness, hesitation or self-consciousness. This is a rare, and commendable, occurrence.

6.2.7 Romance and Violence

For all of its positives, just like most conventional romances, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* does not operate outside of the problems of patriarchy. In particular, it eroticises and normalises sexual violence by containing contradictory messages about romance, violence, and sexual pleasure. As I have stated thus far, there are some excellent, clear examples of Feyre practicing sexual agency by giving consent to her sexual partners, either through personal invitation or in response to an invitation. However, there are also examples in the first book of the series where Feyre is the recipient of surprise or unwanted sexual acts that are violent in nature. I want to discuss two of these scenes to engage in a critical discussion of violence and sex. Jen Gilbert (2018) reminds in her article on “Contesting Consent” that sexuality “ventures into the realms of surprise, uncertainty, ambivalence, love and violence” (p. 277). Somewhat apprehensively, I will suggest here that in the interest of sexual freedom, care should be taken when setting limits on sexual expression. In particular, there needs to be accepting of sexual contracts made outside of affirmative consent and be able to distinguish between pleasurable

violence and harm. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* in particular provides an excellent space to discuss these tensions because it is contradictory and inconsistent in how it treats different acts of violence in the context of sex. I will show that it is this inconsistency and the confusion it creates, not the presence of violent sex itself, which is a cause for concern in romance novels, especially when young readers are involved.

Feyre and Tamlin begin their physically sexual relationship with a bite. On Fire Night, Feyre disobeys Tamlin's instructions to stay away from a mysterious ceremony that Tamlin is at the centre of. In this ceremony:

...[m]agic will seize control of [Tamlin's] mind, his body, his soul, and turn him into the Hunter. It will fill him with his sole purpose: to find the Maiden. From their coupling, magic will be released and spread to the earth, where it will regenerate life for the year to come. (p. 193)

Upon returning to the manor, half-wild, Tamlin pins Feyre against a wall and tells her that he knew she was at the ceremony. He tells her, "When I didn't find you...it made me pick another...She asked me not to be gentle with her, either...I would have been gentle with you though...I would have had you moaning my name throughout it all" (p. 196). Feyre then insults him by telling him she would not want him after he slept with someone else. He bites her possessively, hard enough to bruise her skin. But Feyre is not filled with fear, or pain, or rage at this. She is filled with desire, a "heat pounding between [her] legs" (p. 197). The courtship and sexual tension that has been building between them is broken. Only when Tamlin stops and begins to order her around does she become angry at his behaviour:

"Don't ever disobey me again," he said, his voice a deep purr that ricocheted through me, awakening everything and lulling it into complicity.

Then I reconsidered his words and straightened. He grinned at me in that wild way, and my hand connected with his face.

"Don't tell me what to do," I breathed, my palm stinging. "And don't bite me like some enraged beast." (p. 197)

At that point, Tamlin leaves and Feyre goes back to her room. The next day Feyre forgives him the circumstances and is even happy about the encounter.

These types of scenes are important sites to talk about the ambiguity of sexuality. Namely, when is it acceptable to act without the presence of consent? What does it mean when someone acts without consent, but the receiver is receptive? Is it still predatory? If no, would it be the next time if the receiver left feeling unhappy? These questions are not easily answered and I am wary of being misconstrued as overlooking the profound effects of sexual harassment on the lives of women. However, I do believe that there needs to be an allowance for occurrences of surprise sexual acts that do not abide by policies of consent to exist in narratives of sexual life, especially if there is no harm done. Janet Halley (2016) argues that affirmative consent requirements can easily become conservative in nature and interfere with sexual freedoms. She suggests that, among other consequences, affirmative consent requirements can reinforce many of the unwanted conceptualisations of young women that feminist sex education scholars such as Michelle Fine (1988) and Louisa Allen (2004) have critiqued for decades:

Men as active and women as passive in sex; women as subjective and men as objective; women with feelings and men with reason; women with no role in shaping events in the world and men with all responsibility for them: have we ever heard those ideas before? (Halley, 2016, p. 276)

Indeed, what strikes me most about the discourse of consent and sexual harassment is that it continues to position women as vulnerable and men as monstrous. Feyre's sexual response is a large part of her reaction to Tamlin's bite and why she forgave him the next day. The desire it aroused in her far outweighed her anger: "I wanted his mouth and teeth and tongue on my bare skin, on my breasts, between my legs. Everywhere – I wanted him *everywhere*. I was drowning in that need" (p. 197). Although Feyre did not consent to Tamlin's bite, her desire does have a role to play in the outcome of the event and whether or not this was a violation or a welcome surprise encounter between two lovers. While I am hesitant to suggest that an act like shoving someone against the wall and biting them hard does not need to be discussed between partners beforehand, I do see this scene as a surprise, but not necessarily unwanted, encounter. I also do not want to condemn rough sex, but because this scene is rough, fueled by Tamlin's hypermasculine aggression, it does create an uncomfortable grey area. Tamlin is fortunate that Feyre is receptive to his behaviour because his actions could easily be interpreted as harmful violence. However,

this scene of surprise rough sex between Tamlin and Feyre does make sense within the context of the narrative and their courtship up to that point.

There are other scenes of sex and violence in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* that do not make sense. While Rhysand does not appear very often in the first book, he becomes the hero in the remainder of the series. In the first novel, he is the beautiful, shadowy, despicable male rival. He first appears in the novel as a mysterious visitor to the Spring Court, rescuing Feyre from being gang raped on Fire Night. She describes him as the most beautiful man she has ever met. Near the end of the novel, Rhysand helps Feyre to complete the tasks laid out for her by the dark queen. But his assistance comes at a price. Rhysand coerces Feyre, who is about to die from blood poisoning, to bargain with him: if he helps her, she must spend one week per month with him at the Night Court. He brands her with a tattoo as a sign of her agreement. He also forces her to attend parties with him dressed in almost no clothing. At the parties, he all but forces her to become intoxicated and spend the night dancing for him and sitting in his lap. In a desperate situation and in need of his help, Feyre must play along. Their relationship is built on hatred, distrust, and fear.

There is one scene in particular where Rhysand physically forces himself on Feyre. After he finds Feyre and Tamlin kissing in a closet when the dark queen is otherwise occupied, he pins Feyre to a wall and reprimands her for her behaviour:

His tongue pried my mouth open, forcing himself into me, into the space where I could still taste Tamlin. I pushed and thrashed but he held firm, his tongue swiping over the roof of my mouth, against my teeth, claiming my mouth, claiming me – (p. 380)

Participant Madeline, who had read the series, critiqued this scene specifically, stating:

...Its portrayal of rape and how it was so natural and how it was so ok and she was like “Whatever, things happen, let’s move on.” I just don’t like how they portrayed that in the slightest.

Madeline was upset that Rhysand was not punished for his mistreatment of Feyre after it happened. True to the romance arc, it is later explained that Rhysand forces this kiss on Feyre not because he is a monster, but because he was protecting her. In the second

instalment of the series, Rhysand switches places with Tamlin. Tamlin falls out of grace with Feyre as he becomes extremely controlling, locking Feyre in his house and practically forcing her to marry him. She escapes with the help of Rhysand (her true love) and Tamlin is henceforth hated for his behaviour. Sarah J. Maas (2017, April 28) reveals that she wrote the relationship like that purposely, stating in an interview:

I wanted readers to experience book one with Tamlin and his controlling, alpha-male behaviour and be like, "Oh, it's kind of the norm," and fall in love with him the way Feyre does — not blindly, but accepting that that's how things are. So then in book two when Rhys comes along and Feyre has her own journey, they can look back at book one and see all those moments where things that kind of got brushed over by Feyre weren't exactly OK. (para. 17)

I cannot say that I feel entirely comfortable with this strategy. Nor do I fully understand her intent as it seems contradictory. Tamlin is a violent, prone to rage, aggressive male. But so is Rhysand, who receives an even greater brush-over when he becomes Feyre's new partner. Arguably, Tamlin is far less concerning than Rhysand. Regardless, it is evident to me that these plot points, although crude, are effective in pacifying the reader to be accepting and loving of Rhysand. Even though Madeline had read these novels and even critiqued the evidence of "rape culture" in the narrative, she also followed Maas' re-writing of Tamlin and Rhysand. She told me that after leaving Tamlin, Feyre "...went on to find someone else who met all of her expectations and what she wanted". This is where I see a problem arising in this series, when violence for pleasure and violence for harm become nearly indistinguishable. Tamlin's aggression, once pleasurable, has turned to frightening abuse. Rhysand's disgusting behaviour is explained away. I think that the opposite of what is often feared is happening with a narrative like this: the wrongness of violence becomes so accentuated later in the series that even violence as a source of pleasure becomes tainted and condemned. Not the other way around. There is no true allowance for violence that is not abuse, but at the same time, harmful violence is highly eroticised and acceptable. I think this only serves to create a message that men are ultimately unpredictable and violent and sex with them is dangerous. It may motivate readers to feel empowered to do-away with men who treat them poorly, but I also think that it also creates a limited view of healthy sexualities. Messages about romance, violence, and pleasure are too complicated, too contradictory, and too inconsistent in this

book to make reasonable sense of. As Tolman and Higgins (1996) describe in relation to consent and rape, the “threat of violence” (p. 21) is unclear because the distinctions between desire, consent, and violence are mixed-up.

In light of this, I have to assert that the act of consent needs to be represented in narratives of sexuality in a multitude of ways. In this study, gaining consent and feeling in control over one’s own body was an important aspect of sexuality for many of the readers. For example, Bonnie told me:

...the idea of me just having control over my own body. That’s something that I take with me in relationships or any encounters that I have. It’s very important because it’s something you always need to remember, the fact that you have control. You should have control and if you don’t you should leave the relationship because it’s unhealthy, right?

Madeline also concluded, “I would say 100% don’t show any type of rape culture like ever no matter what it is”. For the most part, I would have to agree. The prevailing fear here is that surprise rough sex in narratives of sexuality, nearly indistinguishable from actual depictions of sexual violence, creates an ambiguous situation that may validate sexual violence in real life. However, in these circumstances it is also important to remember that readers *are* able to differentiate fantasy from real life and will not necessarily apply what they read to their own life as some may fear (Knox, 2014a, 2015). I will not deny the power of literature to influence readers’ thoughts and behaviours, even identities. However, there also needs to be an acknowledgement that readers, especially young readers, are able to situate ethically and morally ambiguous acts into their own understandings of right and wrong. But I do think consent is important to include in YA Literature and there is really no reason not to. The pleasurable and overtly consensual sex scene between Feyre and Tamlin shows how consent can be portrayed in a way that is sexy, not a lengthy or dispassionate discussion. This is a standard to which writers and their readers could hold themselves to if they want to write consent as something necessary without sounding prescriptive. This means that writers need to get creative on how they can make content both ethical and appealing to readers who like to read sex scenes that contain spontaneity and rough sex. I do not think it would take much, and it

would provide readers with a greater set of narratives that show what it means to have control over one's body.

6.2.8 The Happy Ending

Janice Radway (1987) argues that all ideal romances end in a submission to hegemonic femininity: all romances "...eventually recommend that women take charge of the domestic and purely personal spheres of human endeavor" (p. 123). In the latest instalment of the series, *A Court of Frost and Starlight* (2018)²⁰, the characters in the novel are celebrating Winter Solstice.²¹ The war they have been battling for the past two novels is over and they take some time for leisure. Feyre and Rhysand are happily married and have settled into family life along with their friends. Feyre is then temporarily relieved of her diplomatic work to repeatedly go shopping, care for family members, and contemplate her future as a mother. Near the end of the novella, Feyre decides that she is ready to have a child with Rhysand, a son that was foretold by a seer. The book closes with Rhysand purchasing a large house for their growing family. He presents the house to Feyre as a gift, which she is responsible for decorating. In this culmination to the series, *A Court of Thorns and Roses* also fails to break away from the ideal romance narrative by portraying matrimony as the ultimate destiny for our heroine.

Radway's (1987) study found that domestic and familial life was a considerable cause of existential suffering for the readers in her study and that reading romance was their method of escaping it. This works as it does because romance novels offer a complete rendering of what Radway calls "The Promise of Patriarchy". It promises that, in the presence of true love and devotion, men and women can live purposeful, fulfilling, and easy lives through their complimentary gendered roles under patriarchy. In this way, heterosexual romances are at once satisfying and dissatisfying because they provide resolutions to the problems of patriarchy, yet readers are also conscious that this promise is unattainable. While I do want to assert that I believe motherhood and matrimony to be

²⁰ This is a novella published as a prequel to a spin-off series that Maas has in the works.

²¹ Similar to Christmas celebrations.

valid, valuable, and fulfilling life choices for all, it is more so the somewhat misleading promise of happiness that is promoted by these kinds of narratives that is problematic. An awareness that this promise is misleading can be seen in the way participants in this study both relished the “happy ending” trope but also knew that romances are not realistic in the context of real life. Some readers described the allure of the happy ending, the place where a relationship culminates in love and resolution. Participant Stacey told me:

I guess I am just always hoping for the happy ending. Even if it's not necessarily a happy ending as long as the characters are genuine and up front with each other. Because that's what I aspire to in my life...I don't know...it's not fulfilling if at the end of the novel they have all these encounters, sexual or not, and they...it's just economical, you know? I don't like that.

As Eva Illouz (2014) writes, conventional romance narratives that uphold heteronormative gender relationships provide a sense of certainty for the reader. She writes that the fantasy at the core of conventional romance (especially BDSM romance), “mixes the emotional power of the traditional patriarchy – economically powerful and sexually dominant – with the playful, multi-orgasmic, intensely pleasurable, and autotelic sexuality that is the hallmark of feminist sexual politics” (p. 62). It was important to Stacey that heroines were powerful, both sexually and socially. However, she also longed for sexual roles that were clearly defined and was averse to the feelings of uncertainty that were brought about by characters who struggled with their place in the world. Illouz argues that “[t]he longing for the sexual domination of men is not a longing for their social domination as such. Rather, it is a longing for a mode of sociality that in which love and sexuality did not produce anxiety, negotiation, and uncertainty” (p. 61). All of the participants in this study read critically and valued messages of female empowerment, but they also sought messages of hope. As can be seen throughout this thesis, messages of hope come in multiple different forms. In this context, the happy ending provides hope that women can have caring relationships with men without losing their sense of empowerment.

However, many of the readers in this study did not have the same relationship with romance as Radway's readers. Most participants in this study were jaded towards conventional romances and were unconvinced of the “fantasy” of hope that it provided.

What these readers recognised in conventional romance narratives is that they are not “realistic” and therefore cannot map onto their own realities. Participant Bonnie told me:

I just find it difficult to believe or buy into the ideas of conventional romance because I've seen so little of it myself. That in and of itself seems like a fantasy to me....I don't really enjoy conventional romance novels. Because usually I can pick up on what I think is realistic or what I think is unrealistic and just the fantasy of it, it doesn't entice me.

The unrealistic nature of conventional romance made it difficult for participants to relate the narratives to their own lives. For example, Kelly told me that she can never really identify with characters in the books she reads because of the fanciful nature of romantic relationships. Although many of the readers in this study did enjoy the romance genre in general, they were also disillusioned and aware that romance narratives are not necessarily translatable to real life. In other words, the promise of patriarchy does not necessarily provide them with a sense of hope about relationships. In light of this, I suggest that a new envisioning of what romance promises to its readers is needed. Having fantasies that fuel hope is vastly important in all narratives of sexuality and romance novels do have a role to play in this within the spectrum of sexually-themed literature. As Madeline told me:

I've never read a book and been like, that's exactly what life is like. I feel like it's not. But I also feel like it's kind of the point of a book in a way. It's not supposed to let you see what you're seeing in the real world. Because that would take away the pleasure of reading a book.

Thinking about reading and pleasure, I think too much is expected of romance and it is easy to forget about the possibilities it can create. Romances are really larger-than-life stories. Part of the strength of romance, although it is not realistic, is its work in the realm of fantasy. What is needed are fantastical stories that present the possibility of more satisfying, egalitarian relationships. Very few narratives of (hetero)sexuality present a possibility beyond heteronormativity that is as satisfying as the promise of patriarchy. Characters can reject gendered roles, forsake commitment, and resist biological destinies. However, in real life, very few women can fully reject patriarchy. As Scarlet told me, “...even as a lesbian, I find value in men, the male gaze, just because of my social conditioning or whatever it is”. So, what is the purest, most egalitarian form of love and

how can it be modelled for readers? The answer can be found in the promise of feminism. The promise that one can surrender to love without submitting to domination. But I do not believe that there is a truly satisfying answer to how this should come to be. In my mind, it is to begin the slow, arduous process of realising an ethics of care in all relationships (Lamb, 2010). This needs to be presented to readers in a multitude of narratives. This includes relationships that exist both within and outside of the family unit and includes the casual, unusual, or traditional relationships that can be observed in real life. *A Court of Thrones and Roses* is a good start. In the very least it shows that although heroines may not be able to escape the pitfalls of patriarchy completely, they can have an active and positive role in their experiences of pleasure.

6.3 An Erotic Education

The narratives of sexuality that can be found in erotic romance are imperfect. As I have outlined thus far in this chapter, erotic romance novels such as *A Court of Thorns and Roses* do not provide satisfying solutions to the problems that threaten women's emancipation from gendered norms. Namely, they continue to uphold hegemonic femininity/masculinity as ideal, eroticise harmful violence, and do not provide alternatives to a happy ending that resonate with the modern reader. Altogether, these messages do not support the ideal standards of sexual knowledge for young women in terms of relationship dynamics. However, erotica does provide a unique potential for learning about sexuality that other sexually-themed books, such as *Efferent Romance*, may not provide. As Eva Illouz (2014) notes, *Fifty Shades of Grey* was in part so amazingly popular because its effect was "performative", creating change in the sexual and romantic practices of its readers. Similarly, there is evidence in this study to suggest that the erotica read by participants also had a performative effect. While it may be concerning for adults to think about young people being aroused by literature, I think that if erotica has an informative value, part of that value lies in its ability to evoke pleasure in the reader. Sex education scholar Jen Gilbert (2004), who has written about sex education and the novel, has said, "the significance of literature for sex education rests not only in its ability to tell a story of love, but also to evoke being in love" (p. 237). Similarly, erotica has the ability to evoke feelings of pleasure. And I think there is something to this,

that when a young person is starting to explore their sexuality, that feeling aroused by a story and experiencing that feeling of pleasure or of love or of care, living vicariously through a character, that it is a kind of sex education. To refer back to Louisa Allen (2004), these narratives are “enfleshed” with information on erotics in a way that most other YA Literature, or sex education, is not. Therefore, erotica has the potential to show young women readers, through the feelings brought about through reading, that women’s bodies can have strong pleasurable physiological responses and have positive impacts on their lives. Amy Pattee (2006b) has also noted this aspect of the reading experience, stating “...as these sensual scenes have the potential to arouse the reader, the frank young adult novel can become a safe and private haven for teens to consider the physiology of desire” (p. 32). This can be observed in practice among the readers of this study. Below, I demonstrate how erotic stories have influenced the lives of these readers.

6.3.1 Supplying and Applying Fantasies

Participants in this study reported that they incorporated sexually-themed literature into their sexual thoughts and performances in a multitude of ways. First, erotic sex scenes evoked embodied pleasure in readers. As shown above, some participants reported that they were physically aroused by descriptive sex in literature. In this sense, they lived their sexual lives vicariously through erotica. As Juliet told me “...aroused girls want something to do! So, I saw it as, it filled the role that other people were having with having sex”. Second, erotica supplied readers with fantasies that they could potentially use in their real lives. For example, Arya told me about her experience reading Meg Cabot’s *Queen of Babble* in which there was a scene where the characters have sex on a table. She said:

...I was like, “Wait, people have sex not on the bed? Like, what?” So, I think in terms of the whole act of sex it was kind of, the book made it seem like sex was something that was very explorative. It wasn’t just like, missionary, on the bed, you know, done. So, I think that it helped me in terms of my own sexuality because I think I grew into a person where I started exploring sex and I started exploring my sexuality and I always like to think outside the box.

Third, erotic scenes motivated readers to apply new sexual acts in their real lives. In this case, readers made borrowed fantasies from erotica come to life. For example, Andie told

me, "...I've read certain things and I've been like, 'Oh, I'll try that next. Let's see if I can actually do this. Let's see if he likes this". She remembers specifically thinking this way after reading a sex scene with a blowjob and later tried this with her long-term boyfriend.

These responses are evidence of an erotic education and a sign of sexual literacy that was advanced by reading sexually-themed fiction. These types of interactions can provide an opportunity for young people to explore the embodiment of desire and pleasure first-hand in a safe, private, and risk-free space. It can also develop young people's sense of sexual desire by supplying fantasies even if they are not currently sexually active. Lastly, it can promote sexual explorations that contribute to better, more satisfying sex between partners. This does not necessarily mean that young people will take up these possibilities or respond in the same way as some of the readers in this study. However, I argue that the value of erotica is that it provides a space for this possibility.

For young women, these spaces need to exist and be untainted by adults' fears that if adults facilitate the presence of sexual pleasure in young people's lives that they will succumb to uncontrollable desire and risk-taking behaviour. If young people are to be recognised as sexual subjects, there also needs to be acknowledgement that the fantasies that are borrowed from sex scenes in literature are chosen by readers based on their interests, tastes, preferences, experiences, and evaluation. This is an expression of their sexual agency. If young people's inexperience is not be pandered to when writing about sex, as Lydia Kokkola (2013) asserts, here there needs to be recognition that young people can make choices about their sexual performances in ways that they are comfortable with. In evoking pleasure in the reader, erotica provides an education that cannot be wrought within traditional sex education and could arguably lead to greater sexual well-being. Described and even "sexy" scenes are a site for interacting with the pleasure that sex can bring. For those who have not had any of these experiences, it may prepare them for their future relationships. For those that have, it may encourage them to have better experiences.

6.3.2 How Much Sex Do is Needed?

I am certain that at some points throughout the reading of this thesis, some may wonder what it is exactly that I am advocating for. Do I think that YA Literature should be heavily eroticised with hard-core explicit sex? Well, I think that sex scenes are best presented in a way that makes sense within the context of the story. As Sarah J. Maas (2015, May 5) related in an interview on *A Court of Thorns and Roses*:

To be honest, when I write my books, I don't often think about where they'll wind up on a shelf. I just write the story as it unfolds, write the characters as they speak to me and see what the finished product looks like when I'm done. (para. 10)

If all writers wrote like that, there may be more narratives of sexuality that make more sense or are honestly realistic. Generally speaking, what I most advocate for is sex that is described. This does not mean that it needs to resemble something close to the sex in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Even if what is being written is boring, mundane, dispassionate sex, in the very least, it is important that sex is described. This means that it takes place “on-screen” and is described with at least enough detail to inform the reader as to the mechanics of sex. Describing physical acts, and not just the emotional response to sex, is important for representing female entitlement to sexual desire. As Linda Christian-Smith (1990) writes, “The control of sexual meanings is also achieved through the absence of a full range of sexual responses. By emphasizing the psychological and excluding the physical, the text legitimate a passive female sexuality” (p. 40). This does not necessarily mean that sex needs to be written to evoke sexual response in the reader, although I also think that there is incredible value, entertainment, and pleasure in reading sex scenes with erotic intent. It may not be something that every young person wants to read, and that is fine, but it is important that it is available, in the YA genre, for those who want it.

As I ask myself the question “How much sex is needed in YA Literature?”, I find myself coming to a rather conservative conclusion: not much. In my analysis of *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, this book has demonstrated to me that it is not necessarily the quantity of sexual acts but rather the quality of presentation of these acts and the intensity of desire that weaves its way throughout the story that makes it rich and informative. Part of this conclusion comes from my observation of how a single well-written sex scene can be

more instructive and positive about sex than numerous, briefly described sex scenes. Another reason is that readers in this study reported to me that they were not always prepared for intense, graphic, or hard-core sex in erotic literature when they were younger. Although I do firmly believe it is important that adults avoid pandering to an assumed naiveté about sex on behalf of a young reader, it is also necessary to consider the newness of sexual information to some readers and the effect this has on their emotions. Some readers, like Sarah, might not even know what they are reading about or looking at if it is something totally outside of their experience. Sarah told me:

...I didn't realise how innocent I was in the beginning. When I first got exposed to that hard-core sex between two men, I didn't even know what they were doing. I didn't even know that they were actually having sex. I just knew that they were both naked and that they were hugging each other or whatever. I thought it was so intense, and I was like "Oh, I'm intrigued". It took me a while to realise they were having sex, actually.

Sarah does not describe this encounter as necessarily negative because she responded with curiosity. However, while some young readers are able to interact with and enjoy "hard-core" sex on a page, others are not. For example, when Stacey read *Fifty Shades of Grey* for the first time she felt like she was "in over [her] head". Another example comes from Kelly, who told me with hushed laughter about an experience where she read a fanfiction about two women using a strap-on during sex. She said that she was so confused by what she read that she started crying. She explained:

I closed it. I remember being super confused or like shocked. I was like, "What? What does that mean? What is that?!" Because most of the content I was reading was, or the books and TV shows, were about male characters, doing guy things. So, either the stories were heterosexual or gay, like two males. So, I just didn't know that much about the female anatomy.

After Kelly thought about what she read for a while she understood what was going on, but her inexperience with this topic was jarring for her.

With these factors in mind, it is difficult to come to a definitive conclusion on how much explicit sex is needed in YA Literature to make the experience meaningful in terms of learning about sexuality. Participants had different opinions, based on their experiences, on whether or not YA Literature contained enough sexual content for them. Participants

often described YA Literature as transitional texts containing narratives that ease readers into the topic of sexuality. Bonnie had a fairly neutral opinion, telling me:

I feel like it was fine. But I feel like it depends on who you are as a person. As I said, there was so little that I was introduced to as a minor, I guess, when it came to sex. Even some of the teen books that I read, it was very eye opening, which I appreciated but I don't know if more would have been better *per se*. It wouldn't have been bad, but I feel like what I had was enough for me to take something from.

Christina explained that how much sex a person wants to read is a very personal choice. Personally, she felt that she was old for her years and that she was ready to read erotic literature when she was around twelve years old. But she also recognised the context of adolescence and what may or may not be relevant to teens at the time. She said:

It's just when you're starting getting into a relationship and you're contemplating losing your virginity and whatnot. So, maybe in that sense it's ok that it wasn't very detailed. I personally wanted it to be detailed. But I think that it's a little bit controversial in a sense of how much detail you want to put in.

Scarlet, who wanted to read about what it was like to have sex with a woman for the first time, felt that she could not find this narrative in YA Literature and had to turn to other, less relevant sources:

I think it's important for YA Literature to have elements of sex in it and different kinds of sex and different kinds of sexual relationships and different relationships in general. Because I obviously didn't find what I was looking for in YA books and moved to adult books to find, to satisfy my curiosities, and in that way I think I was over-exposed. Whereas, if there was more sex in the YA Literature that I read I would have not read book that's were inappropriate for me, I guess.

Again, how much sex is needed? Not much. *A Court of Thorns and Roses* only has one real sex scene beyond a few make-out scenes and the bite on the neck. The sex is not overwhelming, and for teens looking for a more affective experience than Efferent Romance provides, this book is a good introduction, or a good staple, or a good book to read and then move onto something more hard-core...if desired.

6.4 Conclusion

Do libraries house erotica that is written for and read by teens? Yes, they do. They blast into the collections as low-brow bestsellers and popular previously-self-published titles. Bestsellers and self-published titles are often overlooked as valuable works of literature because they are not considered to be “high literature”. This is especially true of YA bestsellers because they typically have a reputation of being artless, formulaic, and badly-written. I am not so much concerned with the literary value of texts as I am concerned with the potential for them to be a positive source of information on sexuality for young people. They are not synonymous. Bestsellers are the books that are more likely to get bought, shelved correctly, and read a lot more than obscure texts such as *And Every Day Was Overcast* or *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. While these texts might be more radical in their presentations of sexuality, they are not as accessible. Bestsellers, although touted as low-brow, mass-marketed drivel have an extremely important role to play in the normalisation of sexually-themed fiction, especially YA Literature. This is why: participant Andie, who read erotic *Harry Potter* fanfiction, told me that she felt that people would think that she was a “pervert” if they knew what she liked to read. She felt that this is why only a small group of people read the kind of literature she did. Then she pointed out to me the *Fifty Shades of Grey* phenomenon, which saw an explosion of female readers who publicly embraced reading about graphic, violent sex:

...it was the first book that everybody was like, “Ooo, I’m reading this book, and you all know what the book is about”. And so you would know that person is reading about sex and she’s just sitting there on the bus...reading about sex, right?

In effect, bestselling erotic romance, especially YA erotic romance, can work to normalise a *discourse of desire* in the mainstream that is specifically manufactured for women. These books, especially ones that are positive about sex, have the potential to promote sexual entitlement and empowerment for young women by both evoking feelings of sexual pleasure and supplying readers with fantasies that they can apply in their own lives.

Although *A Court of Thorns and Roses* does not break away from the plots, characterisations, and themes that are a cause for concern in conventional romance, it is

radical in the sense that it was one of the most positive about sex and female-centric books out of all the texts I read for this study. I think it is also necessary to remember not to expect too much of conventional romance and value it for what it is. These books are for entertainment and escape. They do not have the same didactic purpose as Efferent Romance or the philosophical purpose of high literature. As Loretta Gaffney (2017) advocates in her text on YA Literature and libraries, pleasure or entertainment should be considered as valid motivation for reading even if texts are not perceived as being of high literary quality. As Kelly showed me, it is also possible to recognise texts as problematic but still like reading them. She said:

I guess if I want to think about it critically, most romance plots aren't very healthy. There's people who are forced together or someone gets kidnapped or someone's under attack and they fall in love under duress, which is really problematic for like young girls...but I still think it's cute even though it's bad. I think it's cute when they fight and then stop and stare into each other's eyes. Like even if it's problematic and cheesy at the end of the day, as long as I know that it's not healthy, I don't think it's really harming me that much. I mean, I'll live with it.

In order to enjoy romance texts, one may have to “turn a blind eye” to problematic content because the arc of romance is in many ways exciting for readers. These kinds of texts do not, for the most part, as Garlick (2016) said, do the “work” of art. A problem arises here because, as I have established, reading erotica is not just about the sex. As participant Stacey emphasised throughout our interview, that although the draw of sex is a major part of the experience, reading erotica is also about the emotional aspects of sex. She said to me:

I think that what draws and what makes a reader more curious, especially maybe female readers, is the underlying emotional current that is between the relationship or individually what characters are feeling and maybe that they can't fully express or that they want to come to life. It's weird...

This signals to me that although the sex scenes in books like *A Court of Thorns and Roses* are wonderfully rendered, work needs to be done elsewhere in terms of the relationships. Outside of the sex scenes, conventional romance does not create a vision of a better world for both women and men that is reasonably attainable. For this, other texts need to be looked to. In the next chapter entitled “Reading for Alternatives” I will

examine a piece of *Harry Potter* slash fanfiction. In this chapter, I argue that slash fiction does do the “work of art” and provides a vision for sexual relationships that can enchant readers once again to feel a sense of hope that complicated human relationships can also include genuine care, compassion, and freedom from oppression.

Chapter 7

7 Reading for Alternatives

This chapter examines the reading experiences of the participants in this study who read online. I call this chapter “Reading for Alternatives” because the young women in this study who read online tended to seek out fiction in online spaces when they had sexual reading interests that are not typically addressed in conventional Young Adult (YA) Literature, such as Efferent Romance. All of the readers that read online read sexually-explicit erotica, stories meant to be titillating. They also tended to read stories that focused on non-normative topics such as LGBTQ, BDSM²², and other taboo relationships. In essence, stories read online by the participants in this study tended to be erotic and/or queer.²³ While erotic and/or queer texts exist in abundance online, they are few and far between in the YA canon. Some erotica does appear in the paranormal romance and fantasy genres, but most sexually-themed YA Literature does not contain enough detail, or is not written with titillation in mind, to provide the same experience as the erotica that can be found online. While there are a number of excellent LGBTQ novels in the YA canon, most focus on social issues rather than the expression of positive sexual desire that can be observed in online queer texts, such as slash fanfiction. There are also few novels about other non-normative relationships, such as incestuous or adult-minor, and you would be extremely hard-pressed to find a YA novel with a BDSM theme. Yet, these were some of the sexual reading interests that appeared in this study. It is little wonder then that the readers, both when they were teens and young adults, sought out erotic, queer texts from alternative sources.

²² Stands for bondage, discipline, domination, submission, sadism, masochism sex play.

²³ For this thesis, queer is defined in accordance with Cathy J. Cohen’s (1997) work in “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens: The Radical Potential of Queer Politics?” which argues that queerness can be defined beyond non-heterosexuality and apply to any group that falls outside of dominant cultural norms (for example, women of colour). In this chapter, I use the word queer loosely to describe both people who identify as LGBTQ and those who have sexual interests that fall outside of heteronormativity.

While all of the online readers in this study may have read different texts, in different forms, for different audiences, I focus on their commonalities in their reading experiences. I explore multiple dimensions of online amateur fiction, namely fanfiction, to demonstrate how this literature differs from conventional published YA Literature. First, I examine how open-source fanfiction repositories, such as *Archive of Our Own (AO3)*, create spaces that allow authors the freedom to write content with very few culturally mandated restrictions related to age-appropriateness. I then examine a piece of *Harry Potter* slash fanfiction, *Helix* by Sara's Girl (2015), to demonstrate how narratives of teen sexuality present differently in online, amateur spaces. I also discuss the role of comments sections as an aspect of the online reading experience and how interactive online spaces have the potential to extend readers' interaction with a text, act as a supportive community, and (in the case of fanfiction) normalise sexual desire and queerness. In conclusion, I assert that slash fanfiction presents a sexual utopia that comes, more than any other YA Literature read for this study, close to realising a positive discourse of sexuality that has the potential to inform young women readers about the diversities, complexities, joys, and tribulations of sexuality.

7.1 Online Amateur Fiction and Readers

7.1.1 The Online Difference: Fans, Sites, and Fanworks

Authors and Platforms

Stories published online by amateur authors, such as erotica or fanworks, are less constrained by cultural norms than published YA Literature. As participant Madeline expressed, based on her reading of fanfiction:

I find [fanfiction authors] make them so much more real because it's not an author, right? It's just someone writing a book and throwing it online. So, they don't have to follow any of the, you know...they have to use certain words. It's just raw, whatever they want to write on the page.

While Madeline is speaking of authors, limits on content are, for the most part, less dictated by authors themselves than by the conventions of the site in which they choose to publish their works. Online amateur fiction really is, in essence, a *laissez-faire*

literature in comparison to its commodity-status counterpart. In contrast to the mainstream book publishing industry, publishing online means that authors do not necessarily need to have their works reviewed, edited, or approved by anyone. As participant Kelly said, “If you want to write about sex you can, there are no publishers there to stop you”. For her this meant that it made it easier for her to learn about non-heterosexual couples and that the stories were “a lot more diverse and out of the box than any of the stories I read that were published”. Fanfiction is also part of a gift economy, where the giving and receiving of fanworks is what creates the community itself (Hellekson, 2009). Profit, and all of the rules authors have to follow to make it, have little to no bearing here. Authors may also remain completely anonymous and produce queer, strange, or obscene texts without fear of backlash in their real lives. Indeed, as Catherine Tosenberger (2008) and Jennifer Duggan (2017) have discussed, open-source repositories such as *Archive of Our Own* allow amateur authors the freedom to create and share works of fiction that bypass constraints on content and language that are often imposed by the book publishing industry, especially books written for a teen audience. As a platform, *AO3* is openly egalitarian and supports diversity and intellectual freedom as a major part of its ethos. This is codified into their policy, as stated in their *Diversity Statement*:

No matter your appearance, circumstances, configuration or take on the world: if you enjoy consuming, creating or commenting on fanworks, the Archive is for you... You are free to express your creativity within the few restrictions needed to keep the service viable for other users. The Archive strives to protect your rights to free expression and privacy. (n.d.a, para. 1-4)

AO3 is also a fan-created, fan-run, non-profit, non-commercial platform and is widely used with 1,575,000 users and 4,010,000 works archived on their site (*AO3*, n.d.b). *Harry Potter* slash in particular is an apt example of the array of unrestricted content that can be found online that is read by teens and young people, being both queer and erotic. As Tosenberger (2008) confirms, *Harry Potter* fanfictions are a “...space where queer

sexuality, whether teen or adult, can be depicted in its full, messy, exuberant glory, and the emphasis is on *jouissance*²⁴ (p. 201).

Age-Appropriateness

There is a clear, consistent approach to what is considered age-appropriate in YA Literature: mild swearing, mild violence, mild sex. Online amateur authors often break this pattern, and on AO3 they are protected by the platform. AO3 has clearly defined guidelines on minor users and the fanworks that they may interact with on their site, but they allow for considerable autonomy and flexibility for readers and authors in this regard. AO3's minimum age requirement to legally use their site is thirteen years of age and ratings, warnings and other tags are used to designate the appropriateness of fanworks for different age groups. Ratings are categorised based on the intensity of content, mainly related to sex and violence, and categories include General Audience, Teen and Up Audiences, Mature, Explicit, and Not Rated. What is considered age-appropriate content for teens is clearly defined by AO3's *Terms of Service* as excluding sexually-explicit content. However, AO3 also acknowledges the subjective judgment in ratings related to age and does not require any author to adhere to these guidelines:

People disagree passionately about the nature and explicitness of content to which younger audiences should be exposed. The creator's discretion to choose between "general" and "teen and up" or between "mature" and "explicit" is absolute: we will not mediate any disputes about those decisions. (n.d.d, pt. IV)

AO3's guidelines encourage authors to use ratings, warnings, and tags because they assist readers with choosing fanworks that are most appropriate for them. Nonetheless, the author ultimately has complete discretion over which ratings and warnings they use, and they may choose not to use ratings and warnings at all. If there is a legitimate dispute where ratings are misleading, AO3 may change the rating to "Not Rated" but will not add ratings. Unregistered users (of unknown age) must also consent to view "adult" content

²⁴ *Jouissance* can be defined in basic terms as supreme sexual pleasure or orgasm. The term *jouissance* is most associated with Roland Barthe's *The Pleasure of the Text* (1975) where he identifies it as a unique component of engaging with a text.

when selecting stories that are rated Mature, Explicit or Not Rated. This disclaimer puts the onus of responsibility and choice on the reader.

AO3's guidelines are clearly meant as a resource to provide a standard for users and authors, but unless someone is being harmed, it is only a guide. I would argue that despite the use of ratings and disclaimers on this site, the platform ultimately gives more autonomy of choice to the reader when it comes to diverse stories about relationships and sex than other repositories such as libraries and bookstores. The difference is in the sheer number of stories depicting queer, unrestrained pleasure that are easily accessed. Not to mention, these stories are also already situated within a space that is a facet of teen culture: teens are one of the major demographic groups that create and sustain the fanfiction community (centrumlumina, 2013, October 1).²⁵ Participant Kelly explained to me that she would consider all fanfiction that is tied to YA texts as YA Literature. She told me:

They're just all kind of Young Adult-ish because the fandoms themselves, like if you're writing a *Hunger Games* story, the *Hunger Games* is for young adults so the fanfiction sort of blends into that.

Readers may choose to adhere to the guidelines and disclaimers on the site in regard to age, but they often do not. Statistics show that 80 to 85% of teen readers on *AO3* read Mature rated fanworks and 70 to 80% read Explicit rated fanworks (centrumlumina, 2013, October 22). And, as Juliet flippantly told me in regard to age warnings online, "Well, what's going to happen if you're not eighteen?".

Sexual Explicitness

In published YA Literature, explicit sex is difficult to find. More often than not the details of sexual acts are brushed over or the scene simply "fades-to-black". A famous example of this can be found in Stephenie Meyer's *The Twilight Saga*, where, after three tomes of sexual tension (books that Christine Seifert (2008) famously describes as

²⁵ Approximately 20% according to this census.

“abstinence porn”), main characters Bella and Edward finally have sex for the first time on their honeymoon. The scene begins with them entering the ocean in the nude and ends shortly after with an embrace, picking up again the morning after. The act of sex is implied, but never described. Sex is also difficult to find in the sense that there are no tags, even on sites such as *Goodreads*, to let you know that sex in certain novels is depicted in its full glory. This is not the case online, where stories that contain explicit sex are plentiful, easy to find, and easy to access. As Andie told me, Drarry fanfictions are “pretty explicit”. In *Helix*, for example, there are four explicit sex scenes, two of which feature anal sex.

There are also very few limits as to what content is deemed suitable to appear on sites such as *AO3*. As a platform, *AO3* does not pre-screen content posted on their site. In fact, their *Terms of Service* clearly outline their commitment to author autonomy and freedom to write the content they want so long it does not go against their policies on harassment and child pornography (visual depictions of real people under the age of 18). They state to users of their site:

You understand that using the Archive may expose you to material that is offensive, triggering, erroneous, sexually explicit, indecent, blasphemous, objectionable, grammatically incorrect, or badly spelled. (n.d.c, pt. I.E.3.)

AO3 also acknowledges the subjectivity of what is considered offensive or inappropriate and does not “remove Content for offensiveness, no matter how awful, repugnant, or badly spelled we may personally find that Content to be” (pt. IV.I.). The filter on *AO3* specifically for “Teen and Up Audiences” tends to feature fanfictions that are not erotica nor sexually-explicit. However, there is nothing to prevent teens from accessing “Explicit” or “Mature” content. And as stated above, the Mature and Explicit ratings are very popular with the majority of teen readers. Participant Kelly attributed this not to any factors relating to age, but to writing quality. She explained “when I was young, I knew some of the best stories, the one that were very emotional and engaging stories, would tend to be M rated stories...”. This suggests that not only is there a wide variety of sexually-explicit materials available on *AO3*, they are also widely read and enjoyed by teen readers.

Profanity

The type and prevalence of profanity in *Harry Potter* slash fiction is strange and surprising to read, as it is notably absent from the original novels written by J. K. Rowling. In a study of profanity in Children's and YA Literature (ages nine and up), Sarah M. Coyne and her colleagues (2012) found that 88% of books in their sample contained at least one incident of offensive language with an average of thirty-eight offensive words per novel.²⁶ While these findings suggest that use of profanity is high, 51% of the profanity identified within their sample was categorised as "mild" profanity and only 30% of offensive words could be considered "strong". For example, the word "fuck", and its derivatives, was only found in less than 10% of the books in their sample with a total of 259 occurrences. In contrast, the word "fuck" was found in 100% of the Drarry fanfiction that I read for this project and it was used a total of thirty-seven times in *Helix* alone, including as a verb to describe the act of sex, such as "finger-fucks" (p. 181). Across J. K. Rowling's original series the word "fuck" is written precisely zero times.

More surprising than the use of the word "fuck" by *Harry Potter* characters is the use of sexual words such as "cock". Very few, if any, books that I read for this study used this word, but it is common in *Harry Potter* fanfiction. The word first appears in *Helix* on page 131:

...Draco trails his fingertips over the back of his hand, a touch so simple that Harry is embarrassed to feel his cock jump in response. (p. 131)

There is no use of the word "penis", the clinical word for the male genitalia, to describe their anatomy in this story. The word cock is frank, natural, and also charged with more eroticism than some of its other synonyms. Although derivatives of "cock" were on the list of offensive words in Coyne, *et al.*'s (2012) study, there was no mention of its actual occurrence in the novels. While profanity is one of the major reasons for contesting

²⁶ Coding scheme used by Coyne, *et al.* (2015): Seven Dirty Words (shit, piss, fuck, cunt, cocksucker, motherfucker, tits); Sexual Words (sexual body parts: *e.g.*, testicles, boobs; sexual behaviour: *e.g.*, jackoff); Excretory Words (*e.g.*, poop, pee, crap, asshole); Mild Other Words (*e.g.*, hell, damn, slut, and using the name of deity in vain); Strong Other Words (*e.g.*, bastard, bitch)

reading materials for young audiences – and studies such as the one done by Coyne and her colleagues only reinforce its perceived threat – it is not unreasonable to assume that profanity is already something that is known or used by teens in their real lives. In *Helix*, the only thing that stands out to me as deviating from the “normal” teen behaviour, and potentially throws these characters into the realm of adulthood, is that the characters drink a lot of coffee. This is, stereotypically, a very adult thing to do.

7.1.2 Readers of Online Fiction

Most participants in this study had some experience reading fiction online, but for Andie, Kelly, Sarah, and Juliet a significant portion of their reading materials were found online. Andie’s main online reading interest was Drarry fanfiction, a sub-category of slash fanfiction that depicts the sexual/romantic relationship between Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy (more affectionately known as “Drarry”) from J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series. Although Andie also read print texts, she spoke most passionately about Drarry fanfiction:

So, I discovered fanfiction and then I saw Drarry. Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy? Like, what the fuck, this is so weird. And then I read the stories and I was like, oh my god, it’s actually kind of interesting. So, that’s kind of how I got into it. I was pretty obsessed with *Harry Potter* before so I found fanfiction and I was like “Whaaaaa!”

“Slash” is a sub-genre of fanfiction that features homoerotic relationships between canonically heterosexual characters. It is most often characterised by gay male relationships, but it also extends to female-focused slash (femslash). The earliest known example of slash is the fan-created relationship between James T. Kirk and Spock from *Star Trek: The Original Series* that was popularised, controversially, in the 1970’s (Jenkins, 1992). The term “slash” itself originates from the use of the “/” symbol between characters’ names to denote a relationship, such as Kirk/Spock. The “/” is now commonly used in tagging languages on fanfiction sites, such as AO3, to identify and organise fanworks based on the main relationships found within. Tagged as Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter, this category of slash fanfiction has a well-established readership, with a total of 26,819 fanfictions tagged as “Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter” within the *Harry Potter* fandom on AO3. This number is at the top of the list for relationship tags within the

Harry Potter fandom and ranks 10/161 most popular relationships in the general fanfiction community on *AO3* (centrumlumina, 2013, August 17).

Kelly also read a variety of fanfiction including *Avengers*, *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Hunger Games*, *One Direction*, and *Percy Jackson* fanfiction as well as original online stories. Kelly told me that her first memory about reading sex in a text for the first time, when she was 11 or 12 years old, was an online series called “Peeta’s Pastry Puns”, a *Hunger Games* fanfiction where the characters “have sex nonstop”. She said that it contextualised sex for her in a different way than she was used to, namely it was about having sex for fun, but also it normalised sexual words that she had previous thought were “bad”. She told me:

Yeah, it was very explicit. That was the big awakening. It was just like people saying “cock, condom, penis, and fuck”. And I’d never really heard those terms in like a non-vulgar way. In middle school, you’d see that where it’s like, to shock each other and stuff. But they were just saying it [in the story] in a context that made sense for those words.

Kelly identified online stories as more diverse, falling outside of the norm, and just as well-written as published novels. She also told me that she tended to read online because access was easier, but that it was still easy to get YA materials because fanfiction to her was “Young Adult-ish” in terms of genre and it was also largely written by young people. She also said that because of the explicit nature of online fiction she learned about most sexual acts, like oral sex and sex using toys, from different online fiction over the course of her reading history.

Sarah’s main reading interest was in Japanese comics that had been pirated and uploaded online. In her early teens, Sarah’s initial interest was in male homoerotic comics (both Boys’ Love and comics for a gay male audience) because she had a deep curiosity about the male body. She also enjoyed reading *Shojo*, romantic comics about heterosexual relationships written for a young female audience. Later, she started reading comics that focused on lesbian relationships, stating that she found these stories to be more nuanced. She also read other comic genres such as *Shota/Lolita* (stories that eroticise young, underage characters) and comics that focused on taboo relationships such as incest

between siblings. While these comics are often, in their original format, published print materials, for an international audience, they are most accessible online. According to Sarah:

Japanese comics, they have a difficult time getting here. Because of licensing and translating. If they really want to read it, they can read it online, but it's been really difficult to get them here.

Due to these reasons, these comics may only exist online for an international audience. Additionally, the process of making comics unofficially available online alters their presentation, content and reading context. For one, a massive number of comics found online are scanlations: comics that have been scanned, modified, and translated from their original language into English by fans in the community (Welker, 2015). As Sarah describes:

Usually it's people like me who want to volunteer. I haven't volunteered before. But for example, we could volunteer our expertise in translating and cleaning up pages and then typesetting. And bringing it to the North American or just the international community.

In addition, as they are digitised and uploaded onto online platforms, the comics become materials for an online reading community. This means that they are indexed and tagged according to the rules and conventions of the sites they are hosted on. And just like other online texts, readers are able to respond to these comics and interact with other readers through accompanying comments sections or website forums.

Juliet read mostly online erotica on sites such as *Tumblr* and *Literotica* and had been reading this type of erotica since she was thirteen years old. The erotica she was interested in is geared towards an adult audience, falling towards the more intense versions of erotica and crossing into the realm of pornography. Juliet read content on *Tumblr* pages such as *PleasureTorture* and *Sadistic Games* where posts consist of short, titillating teaser stories, poems, or descriptions accompanied by corresponding pornographic or sexy images. These posts, on these pages, are female-centric and focus on arousing or piquing the sexual interest of the female viewer. These include what Juliet describes as BDSM "scenes", either fictional or autobiographical descriptions of BDSM themed sexual acts that are meant to arouse and inspire the reader to replicate. On

Literotica Juliet listened to audio versions of erotic stories. These stories can be better described as “fantasies” (Juliet’s word) that are related to the listener, told by the author in a sexually-animated voice. Although the materials read by Juliet have little literary merit – and would certainly vivify any debate about what is erotica and what is pornography – it was valuable reading material for Juliet. She told me: “They’re concise. It deals with themes that I like and are not like super extreme or super like whatever. So, they work. And it’s arousing so it’s fun. Yeah, really good writing and it gets the words out well...”. Juliet was very up-front about arousal as a primary motivation of her reading practices, but she also made it clear that she valued a well-written story.

Most of the other participants had at least some experience reading sexually-themed fiction online, although their main reading format was printed materials. Madeline talked about reading *One Direction* slash fanfiction and BDSM stories. Christina read erotic stories on *Literotica*. Scarlet read lesbian fiction on the erotica website *The Kristen Archives*. Jane also read Abbi Glines e-books that she borrowed from the public library. All of these texts, whether they were a major or minor part of participants’ reading repertoires highlight two commonalities: that the literature read online was erotic and, for the most part, queer.

7.2 Young Adult Slash Fiction, Queer Relationships, and Teen Relationships

7.2.1 Young Adult Slash Fiction

Harry Potter Slash Fiction

To exemplify the unique aspects of sexually-themed literature that can be found online, I have chosen to examine *Helix* by Sara’s Girl, a piece of Drarry slash fanfiction. Andie’s reading of Drarry fanfiction played a large role in my direction of reading for this chapter as *Harry Potter* fanfiction is, being based on a phenomenally popular book series for children and teens, the most conventionally YA of all the online texts read by participants. Since the first book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone*, was published in 1997 the *Harry Potter* series has since become a worldwide phenomenon. As of 2018, Rowling’s book series is the best-selling of all-time, selling

over 500 million copies worldwide (Pottermore News Team, 2018). Furthermore, this text is both queer and erotic, reflecting the two main characteristics of the online literature read by participants. My goal in choosing *Helix*, although it cannot be representative of all the online fiction read by participants, is to show an example of the kind of alternative YA texts that exist online and how they differ from published YA Literature.

M/M Romance

Andie was not just interested in *Harry Potter* fanfiction, but Drarry specifically. She was also not the only participant who enjoyed reading about M/M (male-male) relationships. Madeline read Real Person Slash about the fictional relationship between *One Direction's* Harry Styles and Louis Tomlinson. Sarah was also a reader of this dynamic in comics, in the form of Boys' Love and talked about this several times throughout our interview. On first blush, M/M romance seems like an unlikely candidate to appeal to young women readers, straight or queer. However, slash in particular has forever been a genre written for women by women, with the typical readership of teen and young adult women (centrumlumina, 2013, October 22). In terms of sexual orientation, heterosexual women were once considered to be the main readership, but newer findings reveal that a large portion of slash readers (and writers) are queer women (centrumlumina, 2013, October 7; MacDonald, 2006; melannen, 2010, January 16). The on-screen depictions of M/M relationships that are infused with the off-screen desires of female writers and readers is what makes slash and other M/M romance unique in its appeal. As Henry Jenkins' (1992) seminal study of slash in *Textual Poachers* asserts, slash presents "the possibility of existing outside of [gendered] categories, of combining elements of masculinity and femininity into a satisfactorily whole yet constantly fluid identity" (p. 199). This dynamic provides a space of liberation from gendered characteristics that often plague female fictional characters in conventional romance and often emphasises equality, tenderness, sensuality, love, and mutuality between partners.

While slash specifically refers to homoerotic pairings within the context of fanfiction, stories about M/M relationships written for a female audience also exist in other contexts

and reveal similar, if not identical, themes. For example, Sarah's reading and analysis of Boys' Love comics exposes similar reading dynamics that can be found in slash. In fact, Mark McLelland (2000) has identified Boys' Love as a parallel to slash, exhibiting many of the same traits and sharing a similar history that is grounded in stories written by female amateur authors. Boys' Love, like slash, is most often described as a genre for women by women, with the general market being teen and young adult girls, both heterosexual and queer (McLelland, 2000; Wood, 2006). Sarah labelled the readers of Boys' Love as "Trash Girls", a translation of the Japanese word "*fujoshi*" that has been used to name this readership, with both negative and positive connotations.²⁷ *Fujoshi* was initially used as a pejorative term meant to disparage Boys' Love readers, because, as James Welker (2015) explains, their fantasies "...entail male homoeroticism rather than the heteronormative romance that 'common sense' dictates" (p. 67). However, *fujoshi* has since been reclaimed by Boys' Love fans as a self-disparaging title meant to mock judgmental mainstream outsiders.

Sarah described the reading of Boys' Love by women as voyeuristic in nature. She told me:

Among my friends they generally don't read lesbian literature, they generally read gay literature. So, with them when we talk we usually talk about the female, we make fun of ourselves. We're like the female characters in the background peeking at the relationship. So, that's what we often talk about. There's a Japanese term for it called "*fujoshi*", the "Trash Girl". The way you come and hang in the back, you're kind of trashy that way, you're like "ohhh" and just watching.

As she describes, the reader observes the events of the story from a distance, lurking at the edge of the screen, rather than projecting themselves into the narrative. This voyeuristic presence of the female reader has been considered by scholars to be a subversive act against patriarchal norms or a form of the female gaze (see for example, Jenkins, 1992; Otomo, 2015; Wood, 2006; Yukari, 2015). Nakajima Azusa, influential

²⁷ While Sarah used the words "Trash Girls", the literal translation of *fujoshi* is "rotten girl". Rotten girl is the term most used by scholars and fans, not Trash Girls.

Boys' Love author and seminal researcher in the critical studies of Boys' Love, explains the significance of the lurking reader:

The standing position for these girls has already been removed from the world they create . . . there is no "opposite" sex as the object of love. Turning themselves into shadow, the girls can play to their hearts content with materials unfamiliar to them, connecting one person to another, or making someone fall in love with another, without fear of being made to enter the "ring" where she is on display to be purchased by men. (as cited in Otomo, 2015, p. 149)

Otomo (2015) describes this position of the lurking reader as "forgetting one's gendered body, or floating away from a fixed identity" (p. 148). As is pointed out, this does not dissolve gender, but allows the author to play with gender, making it indeterminate and "ultimately reject[ing] any kind of monolithic understanding of gendered or sexual identity" (Wood, 2006, p. 397). In essence, in M/M Romance such as Boys' Love and slash, removing the on-screen woman allows women writers and readers to escape sexual objectification and repressive gender norms that are often coded into heterosexual narratives of sexuality. However, some have criticised the validity of female depictions of M/M relationships and slash's ability to offer accurate commentary on social issues related to queerness (Jenkins, 1992). As participant Andie told me, "I don't know how real some of the things are. Sometimes it's girls that write them (the gay stories) and to be honest...how do you know that's what happens?". Participant Kelly was very critical of slash, saying that it fetishised gay male relationships making characters seem like "cute little toys to play with". She told me:

One of my issues with Drarry is that it is written by straight girls. And on the one hand, it's great that it's positive...but on the other hand, how much of it is written with the intent to make it cute and sexy without actually putting realism in it?

However, M/M Romance is not meant to provide realistic depictions of gay male relationships. Slash characters are a patchwork of varying genders and sexual orientations. They are female desires carried within the vessels of men, who are afforded a greater leniency for sexual audaciousness. In M/M relationships, female desire need not ask itself, what kind of young woman does one need to be in order to experience happiness, pleasure, and love?

Helix by Sara's Girl

In choosing *Helix* for analysis, I identified and closely read a sample of ten popular Drarry fanfictions archived on AO3 that fit within the criteria for literature included in this study. All were sexually-explicit, set when the characters are older teens (17 to 19 years old) and, for the most part, still attending *Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry* (see Appendix A). *Helix* is an excellent representation of those fanfictions in terms of story-line, tone, relationship dynamics, sexual content and writing quality. However, not all Drarry fanfictions feature teens. In fact, many of the stories with explicit content are set when the characters are well into their twenties. In addition, not all Drarry fanfictions are sexuality-themed, erotic, or sexually-explicit. However, *Harry Potter* fanfictions on AO3 tend to be erotic.²⁸ *Helix* was published by Sara's Girl on AO3 in January 2015. It is novel length (93,000 words) and, with over 120,000 "hits", ranks 36 out of 26,938 fanfictions with the tag "Draco Malfoy/Harry Potter" on AO3.

Helix spins a tale of romance between Harry Potter and his nemesis, Draco Malfoy, that blossoms into a joyous discovery of their mutual romantic and sexual attraction to one another. It is set in the characters' eighth year attending Hogwarts, after the war with Voldemort, in which Harry was proclaimed a hero and Draco was exonerated for his involvement with the Death Eaters. The characters are eighteen years old, Harry and his girlfriend, Ginny, who have decided they are better off as friends, and school life continues for them in a familiar way. However, Harry feels lost after the war. He is unsure about his future, barely eats, and for some reason feels the need to help Draco Malfoy. Still an outcast, Draco is a silent and tragic figure in the story, longing to heal but only gradually making amends with his somewhat hostile classmates. After a fight breaks out between Draco and Harry in transfiguration class, Headmistress Minerva McGonagall punishes the young men by assigning them to watch over the breeding of the school's fragile and dwindling frost snail population. Stuck together in a tiny tent, at night, for the

²⁸ The most popular fanfiction in the *Harry Potter* fandom is a collection of stories entitled *Harry Potter Futanari One-Shots* by futadom. This is a collection of short erotic stories featuring *futanari* (a girl with a penis) versions of female *Harry Potter* characters "having their way" with Harry.

most part of December, the young men begin to lose their animosity for each other and Harry continues his efforts to help Draco reintegrate into the school community. After Draco suddenly and unexpectedly kisses Harry, Harry begins to realise that he is in love with Draco. Slowly, and with some hesitation, they begin to act on their romantic and sexual desires. They also become a couple, doing their bests to make one another happy, and finally, going public with their relationship.

Sara's Girl

The author of *Helix*, Natasha Stawarski, better known in fandom by her handle, Sara's Girl, is from Lancaster, United Kingdom. As an amateur author, very little information is available about her in the form of biographies or interviews. However, she has a more immediate and personal presence on multiple websites such as *AO3*, *Fanfiction.net*, and *Live Journal*. On these platforms, she is easily accessible to fans: she shares information about herself in her profiles and forwards to stories; holds live question and answer periods to answer questions about her writing and personal life; and lists her personal e-mail for direct contact. Sara's Girl is an LGBTQ author, open about discussing sex, and a champion of equality. She openly identifies as a gay woman and frequently makes reference to her wife, Marie (a fellow Drarry fanfiction writer), who she met online. Her primary subjects are CSI and Drarry slash and she has stated that "My slash will always feature *men* and equality" (2018, September 7). She has a very transparent, forward, and humorous approach to presenting and commenting on sexuality. For example, in her *Live Journal* profile she states: "Life is too short to drink bad coffee, eat bad pizza or have bad sex" (2018, September 7). This is consistent with her presentation of sexuality, such as the sex scenes in *Helix*, which are ripe with pleasure. Sara's Girl's work can be found on *AO3*, *Live Journal*, *Fanfiction.net*, and the *Hex Files*.

7.2.2 Queer Relationships: Love is Possible in Any Form

In this study, the readers that were interested in queer texts found the majority of their reading materials online. Among these readers, there was a blasé sentiment held towards stereotypically heteronormative relationships in fiction as they were seen as falling short

in both entertainment and educational value. Sarah, who identified as straight but read mostly queer literature, told me that she was bored by heteronormative relationships:

The hetero literature just seemed boring to me. It was just the same thing happening again and again. And then in fact, after I got exposed to the [gay and lesbian] literature, going back to reading heterosexual, not just in comics but in other literature, even in films, I started seeing stuff well...you know he or she is actually better off with the best friend or something.

Like Sarah, Scarlet, who identified as lesbian, would read queer relationships into heterosexual narratives and specifically into the YA novels that she read as a teen. She told me:

Yeah, most of the time even in books where it was two friends, two girlfriends together, I would be hoping that there would be some kind of romantic thing that would happen between them. And it wouldn't be there in the book.

Having religious parents and attending youth group as a teen, Scarlet said that she just did not have the opportunity to be exposed to queer YA Literature. Her only other outlet was online erotica about lesbian first-time experiences that she read on *The Kristen Archives*. Juliet, who identified as pansexual and whose main reading interest was in BDSM erotica, had very little interest in YA Literature because it simply just did not appeal to her sexual interests. She described non-BDSM relationships as “vanilla” and “boring”, but more importantly she described reading outside of her interests as lacking in educational value and personal enrichment: “It’s just...I don’t learn anything. I like learning. I don’t learn anything and I don’t come away with any new fantasies or anything new that I want to try”.

For the most part, the readers in this study who wanted to read erotic and queer texts had a lack of interest in conventional YA Literature or, over time, gravitated away from it. There are two reasons why this lack of interest is significant. First, as I assert throughout this thesis, YA Literature has unique qualities and special appeal to young readers, and rather than abandon this literature for Adult Literature, I believe that it is essential to have a literature for teens that better reflects the lived experience and diverse interests of teens. Second, it matters to have positive, diversified discourse about sexuality within the context of teen sexuality. When talking specifically about reading interests that fall

outside of the norm, reading literature that appeals to each reader's unique context can promote positive change and provide personal support. For example, for Andie, reading sexually-explicit fanfiction about M/M relationships gave her a positive outlook on queer relationships. She told me in reference to slash relationships:

It makes it so much less taboo. If you don't know what it actually is, it's this forbidden thing you don't know about or anything. And now I see it I'm like, "Yeah, whatever...it's beautiful, they're so cute together".

The positive portrayal of M/M relationships was personally significant to Andie as, at the time, she was exploring her own bi-sexuality in her real life and she felt unable to discuss this with her friends and family. It was an important aspect of her reading experience that she found queer relationships to be normalised, embraced, and discussed transparently in fanfiction. Coming from a Catholic Hispanic background, Andie felt that even talking about sexuality was taboo ("good girls" do not talk about sex) and that revealing her interest in slash would not be well-received. Reading about queer characters allowed Andie to live vicariously through them, experiencing what it can be like to be in a same-sex relationship in a safe and positive environment. She told me:

I kind of always knew that I liked girls too. But again, Catholic Hispanic girl, nobody's going to say that. You don't say that. I never really thought about it, pretty sure my first kiss was with a girl. But I thought that it was just a little kiss, whatever. Now I'm reading this stuff and it's the only way I can really explore it. I'm in a committed relationship so I'm not going to date a girl anytime soon. It's like seeing what it could have been or what could be but without actually having to do it.

While Andie is specifically reading about M/M relationships, the erotic, gender-ambiguous nature of slash has been theorised to not only normalise queerness but to promote and validate female desire. As stated above, slash presents what Henry Jenkins (1992) describes as "a refusal of predetermined gender characteristics" (p. 194) and through this, keeps gender on the periphery. Linda Christian-Smith (1990) argues that heroines in YA romance learn that their bodies are a site of many struggles for control. In M/M literature, the interplay between "on screen" males and their performance according to the female gaze shows the possibility of sex that is, at least partially, relieved of power

struggles that limit sexual autonomy for young women. When talking of Boy's Love, Andrea Wood (2006) asserts:

Heterosexist understandings of gender generally affirm that being penetrated is de facto disempowering and ultimately feminizing, and that as a result penetration must be performed as an act that asserts power and masculine primacy. Boy-love manga, however, tend to argue visually for the pleasure of both penetrating and being penetrated, and relationships between male characters display equality and mutuality on an emotional level, especially in their erotic moment. (p. 401)

This dynamic can work to deflate the act of sexual intercourse as a disempowering or dangerous act for young women. An obvious and concrete example of this is that it removes the threat of pregnancy. As Christian-Smith (1990) argues, for so long in YA romance, sex resulted in pregnancy. Heroines learned that "biology is destiny" (p. 41). While this scenario has improved within YA Literature, young women learn this in other discourses, such as sex education. In contrast, the discourse of sexuality in slash closely mirrors the goals of the *discourse of desire*, as it relates to sexual pleasure, mutuality, and female empowerment. Jenkins (1992) supports a similar visualisation of sexuality in his study of fanfiction and writes that:

Slash may represent the fullest articulation of this new liberatory imagination, pointing to new directions in the construction of gender and the representation of sexual desire. Slash breaks as well with the commodification of pornography, offering erotic images that originate in a social context of intimacy and sharing. (p. 195)

Sarah, who read almost exclusively about queer relationships, from the ordinary to the bizarre, had the most diverse and far-reaching reading interests. When I asked Sarah what a highlight would be in terms of learning about sexuality from queer texts, she told me:

Certainly, I think the highlight would be that love is possible in any form. And I think obviously you should learn about hetero sex, but that is so mainstream. I think people already know. That's why I think queer relationships should also be taught in schools, so kids know that they're not alone.

This takeaway, that love is possible in any form, really cannot be presented to the same extent in narratives of heteronormativity that are so common in YA Literature. This not only applies to same-sex relationships but others as well, for very few YA texts depict

relationships outside of the heterosexual, same age, same ethnicity, same socioeconomic status that broach upon the “liberatory imaginations” of contemporary positive sexuality.

In general, the sense that I get from this group of readers is that queerness is perhaps not a taboo (a fearsome subject) to them so much as it is an unknown, even to some of the readers who identified as queer. I believe this is also reflected in contemporary YA Literature; queerness is not forbidden, but it is written within a framework of uncertainty. This uncertainty often manifests in what Trites (2000), Tosenberger (2008), and Gaffney (2017) describe as the text as bibliotherapy. Therapeutic stories that tell sympathetic narratives of injustice and repression, such as Emily Danforth’s *The Miseducation of Cameron Post* (2012) or Benjamin Alire Sáenz’s *Aristotle and Dante Discover the Secrets of the Universe* (2012), are important, but also overrepresented in queer YA Literature. Just as Gaffney (2017) describes the aim of therapeutic texts as “shepherd[ing] teens safely into adulthood” (p. 59), queer therapeutic texts aim to shepherd queer teens through their “deviant” sexual revelations. While contemporary queer YA Literature has gotten more positive, the central themes still revolve around a stereotypical coming out narrative (Duggan, 2017; Cart & Jenkins, 2006; Town, 2017). In a coming out narrative, even though they may be sympathetic, queerness is still portrayed as a kind of social “problem” because it goes against the grain of heteronormativity (Adams, 1997). These texts, unlike slash, are non-utopias. This is partly due to an obsession with realism that aims to create transparency about the true nature of queerness (one which is not a threat). This results in a mythology of queerness that becomes more like, to borrow from Michael Cart and Christine Jenkins’ (2006) review of Alex Sanchez’s *Rainbow Boys* (2001), an encyclopedia of queer issues. Or as Trites (2000) explains, queer YA novels “show how a genre can become more self-aware of a social issue without necessarily providing the reader with progressively transformative experiences” (p. 104). This makes me question, what is the purpose of these texts and who are they really written for? On one level, they could exist to support closeted, questioning, and harassed queer teens during their journey through disclosure and first-times. But I also think a large part of why these books exist (and are praised for doing so) is to educate unknowing heterosexual readers on the plights of queer folk in the hopes of inspiring sympathy, empathy, and compassion. While more compassion in the world is sorely needed, for the readers who are looking for more than

an education, these standard narratives neglect to imbue the story with “*jouissance*”, a sense of wondrous, euphoric pleasure.

It is little wonder then that queer and queer-curious readers turn to alternative sources for their reading materials. In 2004, Paulette Rothbauer’s dissertation research on queer young women readers revealed a dissatisfaction with uninflected “standard coming-out narratives” that depict queerness as an unending source of bleakness in one’s life. These young women desired to read narratives that showed queer characters in love and that demonstrated the positive possibilities of what life could be like for queer men and women (2004a, 2004b). They were, I would argue, looking for utopias. Foucault (1986) defines utopias as “...sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces” (p. 24). Even as unreal spaces, as Amy Pattee (2008) asserts, happy unions in fictional utopias serve to reify and reinforce the acceptability of relationships. Readers of heterosexual romantic utopias, as was seen in Chapter 6, are rewarded with a depiction of the happy union between men and women, the promise of patriarchy realised (Illouz, 2014; Radway, 1987). Although some queer utopias exist in YA Literature, there are few novels that depict queer characters living utopic lives within a utopic world. Realism is important, but utopian imaginings also have their role to play in normalising queer relationships in society. And as Michel Foucault (1986) writes in his essay on heterotopias, that without utopias, the other spaces in which to image life, “dreams dry up” (p. 27).

Since Rothbauer’s study, queer YA texts have become more nuanced, diverse, and positive, but not considerably so (Town, 2017). However, the progressive, transformative qualities desired by Rothbauer’s readers are clearly reflected in most slash and in the slash that I read for this project. In particular, the theme of coming out is marginal within slash and other M/M romance as well. Andrea Wood (2006) notes, in *Boys’ Love* literature, “...the love between male characters often transcends concerns about gender and sexuality, which tend to be seen as irrelevant or beside the point” (p. 406). In *Helix*, any conflict in the narrative is not about struggling against societal pressures to be

straight, but about navigating a relationship that is vexed by issues independent of one's sexual orientation, such as rivalry and family issues. When Draco suddenly kisses Harry, his surprise and confusion has more to do with the fact that he and Draco have been at odds for so long than it has to do with Draco being male. He comes to the conclusion that: "It doesn't matter that Draco isn't a girl; it only matters that Draco is Draco and that whatever their relationship is now, it has been built on years of intense emotion from both sides" (p. 105). Although this statement may draw attention to the idea that queerness is not a normalised state of being, the thought occupies little of Harry's time. Draco, in staying true to J. K. Rowling's original series, has historically been a petulant bully, almost universally disliked by the school community. That is what is most worrying to Harry and it is a fair, uncoloured reason to feel hesitation over loving someone. The issue of Draco and his antagonistic manner is also what his friends react to. For example, when Harry accidentally reveals to his friend Neville that Draco kissed him, they both address the issues of weirdness over the event as an issue of personality, not gender:

"I suppose the idea of me and Draco is a pretty weird one," Harry sighs, with a sharp little pang.

Neville shrugs and picks up Draco's parsnip rod, dangling the vegetable chunk in front of the confused snail. "I don't think it's that weird. There's always been something." (p. 64)

As in many other Drarry fanfictions, Sara's Girl paints the couple's history as a relationship somehow turned sour by circumstances out of their control, fueled by a well of intense emotions that are just beginning to reveal themselves as love and lust. If Sharon Lamb (2010) suggests that care and mutuality are the quintessence of healthy relationships, then the biggest questions one could be asking themselves when considering a relationship is: how does this person make me feel? Harry knows that for all of their history, he has always felt something for Draco, and he has faith that they can work through their differences.

As participant Sarah said, "love is possible in any form", and *Helix* really is about love, pleasure, happiness, and peacefulness. While some may label slash as a utopian ideal (Jenkins, 1992), one where characters are uncharacteristically indifferent to sexual

orientation (MacDonald, 2006), I think that is this literature's greatest strength and appeal. As was seen in Chapter 5 with *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*, dark and depressing content can have positive transformative effects. However, in relation to queer YA texts, a greater proportion of positive, utopic narratives are needed. Trites (2000) argues, even if the queer YA genre has "developed a sense of self-awareness, a largely negative rhetoric still denies the validation one might wish to find in YA novels about being gay" (p. 155). A state of calm over one's sexual orientation seems to be a luxury that is only afforded to heterosexual characters in YA Literature. Perhaps this is realistic in our current historical moment, but it is also unfortunate.

7.2.3 Teen Relationships: Sex for the First Time

For all of its differences, slash also presents sexuality within a familiar framework of teen sexuality. Most prominently, this refers to characters' level of sexual experience; they are engaging in sex for the first time. This is consistent with the larger body of slash fiction, of which the first-time experience is one of its defining characteristics (Jenkins, 1992). Similarly, the first-time experience is a trope in YA Literature, demonstrating for young readers what it is like to be in a relationship for the first time. As Jane described:

...if you're maybe fifteen and you want to start getting into [relationships or sex] or you haven't been in a relationship and you want to see what it's like then definitely, they are there...Most of the books are like that for girls.

While this trope may be tired and overrepresented in YA Literature, the first-time experience was identified by participants in this study as a scenario they were interested in reading as teen readers. Scarlet, for example, told me that when she read online as a teen she specifically sought out stories about lesbian first-time sexual experiences. At the time she knew she had feelings for women, was interested in learning more about same-sex relationships, and was looking for those narratives in literature. Participants in this study described YA Literature as a "bridge", "leeway", "introduction", or "transition" into the adult realm of sex. And while the first-time narrative does not account for the teens who have already had sex or may be interested in more advanced narratives, it may be an important stepping stone for teens who have not had those sexual experiences. As Bonnie said in regard to reading about first-time experiences, "I feel like for a lot of

young people who read Young Adult Literature that's sort of the whole point in reading it".

However, because fanfiction, belonging to the realm of online amateur fiction, has the freedom to be more sexually-explicit, the sex scenes present differently than in conventional YA Literature. Drarry fanfictions are not just sexually-explicit, they are also erotic. They describe in detail the mechanics of different sexual acts. They talk about the messiness of sex, the imperfectness of it. There is no shying away of the details of what is really going on. But sex is also not presented as a manual. The sex scenes in slash depict believable acts of pleasure. As Andie told me about Drarry fanfiction, "It's porn with feelings". Indeed, many other participants described erotica this way: it is not just about the sex. What does it mean to show young people engaging in sex for the first time in a positive, encouraging, and safe manner? I believe that slash offers some excellent, nuanced examples of this. This is demonstrated in *Helix* through an emphasis on presenting sexual relationships as, first and foremost, the tender exchange of pleasure and care.

Young people often have an imperfect sexual knowledge when they engage in sex for the first time. Harry and Draco are no different. At first, they are awkward with each other, not really sure how to express their emotions or desires. The narrator explains:

The trouble is, [Harry's] experience with this sort of thing is, at best, patchy, and in reality, useless. The thing with Cho had been a couple of awkward kisses strung together by a series of disasters and he and Ginny had always been better as friends than anything else... (p. 104)

With very little experience, Harry wonders how he should act towards Draco. But Harry also talks about "[a]llowing his instincts to take over..." (p. 108) during the act of sex. Combined with consideration for the other party, I think this is a simple yet effective approach to setting fictional first-timers up for positive sexual experiences. Notions of innocence prescribed to young people, especially young women, do not usually allow them to have instinctual sexuality that results in mutual pleasure. One must learn how to be sexual, within a carefully controlled environment, if they are to learn how to give and receive pleasure properly. Saying "no" to one's body and desires was a common theme

woven throughout girls' talk about their sexuality in Deborah Tolman's *Dilemmas of Desire* (2002). Their desires are not their own, but are shaped and validated by social norms that also wave a flag of threat over the expression of sexual desires. For young women, this results in passive sexuality, where their sexuality is moulded as response rather than action (Christian-Smith, 1990, p. 40). In YA Literature, very rarely does there exist characters, particularly female characters, who allow themselves to act out their sexual desires without feelings of insecurity or inadequacy. Their state of unknowing can render them passionless, unable to feel entitlement over their own pleasure. Harry does not have a perfect sexual knowledge or very much experience, but he does not fret about this very much. He also does not pay mind to the judgement of others. Harry follows his desires.

Draco, on the other hand, seems to be more knowledgeable. Before they have intercourse for the first time he asks Harry to grab a tin of lip salve (for lubrication), stating that he has used it before...on himself. Sara's *Girl* does not make this feel like a moment of didacticism, but like a standard practice. As the author states on her *Live Journal* profile, "I prefer the sensual to the clinical...and realism where possible - within the bounds of a pleasant narrative, i.e. I do not feel the need to write about characters going for a wee. We all do it, and we all know we do it. Right?" (2018, September 7). Although Sara's *Girl's* slash may not be as "realistic" as novels such as Judy Blume's *Forever* or Laura Hopper's *I Never*, they do not lack complexity. Not everything is hearts and flowers in Harry and Draco's world. They were, after all, enemies for a very long time. Their relationship is also fraught with the conflicting emotions that can arise when one takes a chance on opening themselves up to another human being.

One of those emotions is the terror of new love – a terror which is also exhilarating. These two young men, as inexperienced as they are, feel the wonder of physical intimacy in even the slightest touch. Engaging in new love is risky business for the ego or the heart: one never knows if the other person will reciprocate. Like Jane, who told me that she learned how to "flirty text" from a book, related to me: "The flirty text kind of thing. I tried that. It didn't work". Experiences like these can be disappointing. Sharing one's feelings and desires exposes us to vulnerability. Harry feels this keenly:

He's still terrified, and maybe he always will be, but it's a wonderful sort of terror, a swooping, exhilarating sensation in his stomach and heart and groin that carries him along and refuses to let him go. (p. 129)

This feeling lessens as Harry and Draco become more comfortable in their relationship. However, they continuously learn how to be vulnerable with each other. For example, when Harry gazes at Draco's naked body during an intimate moment "Draco throws his forearm over his face in a self-conscious gesture that is charmingly at odds with his small, breathless smile" (p. 130). These feelings of terror, of self-consciousness, are a product of the nature of erotic love, the mix of love and the threat of loss that one feels in the face of their desires. One does not always know the extent of another's feelings, and this can put one on edge.

Feeling comfortable with another human being comes with the disclosure of feelings, the sharing of pleasure, and the kindness shown towards each other. All of these are mediated through experience, a relationship built little by little. Harry and Draco's sexual relationship is also built little by little. They do not just go through an entire catalogue of sexual acts all in one night. Nor is penetration the first and only act that is performed. Indeed, this is something that stands out to me in YA Literature as strange: that sex means penetrative sex and this is what is happening when the scene fades to black. But going straight into penetrative sex leaves me with the feeling that something is mixed up. There must be a reason why the first base, second base, and so on analogy exists. As YA author C. (Christa) Desir (2016) has noted:

I think we're missing the buildup of sexual relationships...I feel like a lot of YA ends up being kissing and then, maybe, sex. The ramp-up feels all or nothing without any kind of sexual experimentation and figuring out what you like. (para. 19)

Christine Seifert (2015) identifies this jump from kissing to intercourse as a common sexual script found in the romance genre. In YA Literature, when sex does happen, there are few portrayals of sex other than penetrative. This includes digital and oral sex as well as masturbation. In contrast, Harry and Draco start out with a kiss. Then they dry-hump each other until they both ejaculate in their pants. Next comes a blow-job, a hand-job. Then, with the help of the lip salve, they penetrate each other. Draco first, then Harry

later on a different day. The only reason I can think of why there are not more stepping-stones towards intercourse in YA Literature is there is just not enough space in teen books for that many sex scenes. By this I mean that a greater frequency of sex scenes in YA Literature runs that risk of turning the genre into erotica. Especially if oral sex is involved. Oral sex is a sexual act outside of biology – it is strictly for pleasure. As Arya told me when she first read about a blowjob:

I remember asking one of my friends what a blowjob was because I had no idea...I was like, “You put what where?!”. Yeah, it was like very foreign. Because you try and relate it to the biology backbone of the actual act of sex and you’re like, “What? Why would they do that? I don’t get it”...it just seemed like it wasn’t just – have sex, make baby. It was sex as pleasure. Which was kind of mind-blowing to me at that point in my life because I would have never thought of it that way.

In slash, pleasure is a central theme, and it is both abundant and descriptive. This includes sexual acts other than penetration. As Tosenberger (2008) notes, “Fanfiction writers are not bound to a pedagogical imperative, which means they are free to concentrate on eroticism rather than on social issues” (p. 200). In the context of first-times, perhaps it is too much to hope to see a couple who instinctually know how to give and receive pleasure with no prior experience. It is definitely important that readers have a knowledge that sex for the first time may not be as perfect or as pleasurable as they see in slash. However, slash shows a possibility, that sex can be immensely pleasurable. This is not entirely unrealistic. As noted in Tolman’s *Dilemmas of Desire* (2002), her participant Eugenia reported that her first time was one of her favourite times, and even though she heard the first time was supposed to be awkward and not to get her hopes up, she found the experience pleasurable.

Stories like *Helix* also set an ethical context for pleasurable sex, first-time or not. The context for pleasurable sex is: a mutual want, the ability to be vulnerable, the desire to both give and receive pleasure, and the expression of care for the other person (whether this be love, basic respect, or something else). Most slash presents sexual relationships within the context of committed love. Christian-Smith (1990) notes sex only in the context of love as a central, and problematic theme, in YA romance as it does not validate other contexts for relationships. I believe this emphasis on love is partly an emphasis on

an expression of deep care. In reality, if care and mutuality are a priority in a sexual encounter, any number of relationships, from committed to casual, can produce an ethical dynamic. Readers in this study often reported that they were able to observe “good examples” of relationships within literature and this had a positive impact on their lives. For example, Juliet told me that while she learned most of the biological aspects of sex from scientific resources, she learned relationship dynamics such as care from stories. She told me:

But so with different stories it’s like... I like how he treated her in such and such way and I want to have a partner who treats me that way. So, it’s more giving me examples and what I want and what I don’t want.

Harry and Draco, despite their turbulent past and petty squabbling, care about each other. This is clear in their actions, especially in the context of sex. For example, during a sex scene after the young men had attended the funeral of Draco’s malevolent father, Harry stops to consider how Draco may be feeling and how this may play into his consent to have sex with him:

“Are you okay?” Harry whispers, suddenly and unhelpfully aware of Draco’s tiredness, the day he has had, and the horrible idea that he might, somehow, be taking advantage of it.

Draco smiles slowly and grips Harry’s arse with both hands, urging him to keep moving. “Yes.” (p. 159)

Draco urges Harry on with a clear, enthusiastic gesture of consent. Harry’s selfless consideration for Draco exists alongside his selfish need for pleasure. This is the nature of mutuality, a desire both to please and be pleased. This can also be observed in a scene where Harry gives a blowjob to Draco and forgets about his own pleasure.

“You’re not...” he says, propping himself up on one elbow and looking down at Harry’s neglected erection.

“No,” Harry says, shrugging, and he almost doesn’t care. (p. 129)

Harry finds happiness in the act of giving, so much so that he almost does not care that he did not achieve orgasm alongside Draco. Draco, however, does not just take his pleasure and leave Harry unfinished. He reciprocates by stroking Harry “slowly, steadily, until he

comes all over himself with a cry of relief” (p. 130). The desire to please and be pleased is both powerful and ethical. In the context of first-times, when one is perhaps feeling the most unsure or vulnerable, care and mutuality are keys to positive sexual experiences.

When participant Andie defines Drarry as “porn with feelings” it is the feelings within these narratives that are the most interesting. Yes, these scenes are erotic, written to titillate the reader, but that is only part of it. I think the biggest strength of these narratives *is* their ability to show love as a context for pleasure because it is not necessarily a heteronormative conceptualisation of love that is being shown. Although Harry does love Draco, and names this feeling several times, he never tells Draco outright, and vice versa. The emphasis is really on the care and compassion that is expressed through actions within the relationship between Harry and Draco. Oftentimes in Drarry slash, both Harry and Draco are in a state of healing after a really horrible war and, first and foremost, they help each other heal. What they have goes beyond erotic love, a severely flawed emotion. They demonstrate a different aspect of love: not *eros*, but the care, compassion, and selflessness imbedded in *agape* love. Perhaps this is how readers can change in conceptualising the words “I love you” in narratives of sexuality. Not as commitment, or monogamy, or heteronormative love *per se*, but what it really means to care about someone in a harsh and unforgiving world, whether it is forever or for just one night. This is how narratives of sexuality found in Drarry slash operate both within a familiar framework of teen sexuality and outside of it: they show characters fumbling through their first times, but also the possibility of positive, pleasurable sexual relationships that are not overshadowed by restraint and disappointment.

7.2.4 Comments Sections: Information, Community, and Queer Spaces

Some participants who read online reported that comments sections were a unique aspect of online reading that extended their interaction with sexually-themed texts. For example, Sarah told me that she would always read the comments section after every story she read and that the community often talked about complex and timely issues, such as consent, in a supportive and constructive way. She said, “I think it’s a wonderful setting [online]. I think it’s always the comments sections that really interest me after reading a story...It’s

really also where I got a lot more sex education”. Madeline reported that reading comments grounded the story she was reading in reality. After reading a BDSM themed fanfiction when she was in high school, Madeline read a comment from another reader that expressed her desire to try one of the bondage scenes in the story. She told me:

For me, I was like ok I guess this is an actual thing that people enjoy doing. And I think it kind of left me more open-minded walking away from it. Just being like, you know, there’s not just one way to have sex, you don’t just sit there and do missionary and move on from it. People enjoy different things. I think it opened my mind up a lot more after reading it.

Although reading offline can be a social practice, participants in this study often reported that they felt uncomfortable talking to their friends about their reading interests or with discussing sexually-themed books in a book club setting. Comments sections are a unique feature of online reading which, in many cases, especially surrounding the topic of sexuality, cannot be replicated with the solitary act of reading. For example, Andie, who felt that her real-life friends would judge her for reading Drarry fanfiction, found validation in comments sections. As she related in our interview:

It’s also the friendship that you can make with people on the internet, I feel. Like I haven’t really made that many friends, but you read these comments and posts that people make and you’re like, oh my god, there’s somebody out there who actually kind of thinks the same way I do. When I read a fanfic that totally I can relate with and I love, and I’m like oh my god, somebody is on the same wavelength I am. I feel like...it’s not feeling alone.

Reading in online, interactive platforms also changes the relationship between author, reader, and community. It makes the connection between them more immediate and also more indistinguishable. In fan communities in particular, readers are often authors, and authors are often readers. Especially when stories are posted chapter by chapter, readers are able to directly interact with the author and can influence the trajectory of their works. In this manner, readers act as “second authors”, active participants in the creation of fan texts and fandom itself (Gupta, 2009). While *Helix* was posted on AO3 as a completed

work,²⁹ another story that I read, *Temptation On the Warfront* by alizarincrimson, shows how this process unfolds. This story contained notes after most chapters where the author responded to readers' comments and it was clear she was reading and responding to readers' comments about the content, form, and pacing of her story. For example, after the first chapter she wrote: "Thank you so much for everyone's wonderful feedback! I am now going through each chapter and editing in hopes to bring you an even better experience! :)" (p. 25). It is also clear that the author is aware of community norms regarding alternate universe fanfiction and what her readers like and dislike about the directions she takes in the plot.

Helix has 625 comments on *AO3* and they are overwhelmingly positive and supportive. The majority of comments are from fans, both first-time and long-time readers of Drarry and Sara's *Girl's* work, expressing their love of the story. They describe the story as deftly-written, beautiful, adorable, cute, heartwarming, and worthy of tears. While there is no deep discussion of the themes within the story or debate over its content, I see this as part of the normalisation of slash within fanfiction communities. As Andie told me, "Like, the main thing is just that it's so open and people read and like comment and everything and it's so normal, like whatever". Indeed, I would even go so far as to say that fanfiction sites are queer spaces in and of themselves. This cannot be said of YA Literature. Slash and femslash are without a doubt the most popular category of fanfiction for both readers and writers of any age on *Archive of Our Own*: 90% of readers reported that slash was among their preferred reading, in comparison to 50% for heterosexual fanfictions (centrumlumina, 2013, October 3). Readers of slash are also predominantly queer (centrumlumina, 2013, October 22). As Tosenberger (2008) confirms:

Potter fandom is a lively, intellectually stimulating, and tolerant interpretive community, and fans reap great rewards not only in the form of increased literacy, but also by exposure to discourses outside of culturally mandated heteronormativity. (p. 202)

²⁹ Originally posted chapter by chapter on Sara's *Girl's* Live Journal.

This may be partly due to the interactive nature of online platforms, where readers have more control over the narratives that are being produced through their participation in tagging, comments, and the of writing their own stories. This, combined with the amateur or non-profit aspect of slash, is perhaps what keeps these discourses alive. As Mark McLelland (2000) has stated, slash remains a marginal genre and that “when slash fiction writers go mainstream, so do their themes” (p. 277). Participant Kelly specifically gave an example of what happens when online amateur fiction goes online with the novel *The Kissing Booth* by Beth Reekles (2012). This book was originally published on *Wattpad*, then published in print by Random House, and later made into a *Netflix* film. Kelly told me that in the online version there was a scene where the main character found out she had a miscarriage, a surprise to her because she did not know she was pregnant. This suggested to Kelly that the two main characters had been having frequent unprotected sex, but when she later read the print version she said that this scene was gone and stated to me that “they removed all the sexuality to make it more publishable”.

7.3 Ethnicity: An Alternative Unexplored

A topic that was rarely discussed in any of the interviews was the intersection between sexuality and ethnicity. Lack of ethnic diversity in YA Literature has been one of the greatest criticisms against the genre within the last few years. Statistics show that only 14% of Children’s and YA Literature are written by authors of colour in the U.S. market (CCBC, 2018) and only 7 % in the United Kingdom market (Ramdarshan Bold, 2018). This has spearheaded campaigns such as #WeLoveDiverseBooks to raise public awareness about this issue, promote stories written about ethnic minorities, and support authors that identify as people of colour. In their book *(In)Visible Presence* (2014), Traci Baxley and Genyne Henry Boston outline the importance and impact that culturally relevant texts have on readers of colour, especially young women. They write:

For a young reader not to see himself or herself reflected in the pages of this genre of literature implies the value or level of worth associated with the individual is minimal. And to be considered as “other” is more than not to belong but also to be considered an outcast. (p. 4)

Many (7/11) of the participants in this study identified themselves as a person of colour, yet only two participants, Bonnie and Kelly, specifically brought up ethnicity as a factor in what they choose to read and how they identify with characters. Some of the participants referred to their ethnicity in terms of cultural/familial views on sex and sexuality and how this has influenced their knowledge and practice of sex and relationships. However, there were very few instances where participants talked about identifying with characters in stories based on ethnic factors or, conversely, feeling like they could not relate to characters because of a lack of representation of people from their ethnic group. I do not think this suggests that representations of different ethnic groups in stories about sexuality are not important to readers. The lack of discussion may have been because I did not have a specific question about ethnicity in the interview schedule. There were opportunities for this topic to come up in some of the more general questions which were meant to draw on the participants' personal identities, but it did not. Seifer (2015) has also found in general that readers' favourite YA novels are lacking in any discussion of race and sexuality. This topic just might not have been something readers were exposed to while reading the novels themselves. Surveying for demographics earlier in the interview process, a question of this nature could have been included in the interview where appropriate. Alternatively, this could be investigated further with ethnicity as an inclusion criterion for a more specific study on YA Literature, sexuality, and ethnicity.

Due to the fact that ethnicity was not a major theme in the interviews none of the books/stories I chose to analyse takes ethnicity as its focus. In fact, relatively few of the texts I read for this study had a main character that was a person of colour and many of them did not even include one character that was non-white. It was difficult to include stories that featured people of colour that were also sexually-explicit and corresponded to the other major themes of this study. The one thing that Kelly did say was that, in similar fashion to queer YA texts, "A lot of books that feature racial minorities are about life in the gangs, life in the ghetto. It's like no...I want to see happy stories about happy people of all types". There were a few exceptional books that I read for this study that reflect a more diverse reality for characters of colour and that also fill an important gap in sexually-themed YA Literature, whether they fit into this study or not. In particular, Robin Talley's *Our Own Private Universe* (2017) was unlike any of the other books I

read for this study. The main character, Aki, an African American, bisexual, daughter of a Christian minister falls in love with an older Caucasian young woman while they are on a church youth group trip in Mexico. This book not only features complex characters and depicts complex social relationships, but it was also sexually-explicit. Robin Talley is not African American, but she writes about LGBTQ characters and inter-racial couples.

Calling My Name by Liara Tamani (2017) was also a beautifully written coming-of-age story about a young African American young woman, Taja Brown, that has great literary value. Other works that feature main characters of colour include *Eleanor and Park* by Rainbow Rowell (2012), *Huntress* by Malinda Lo (2011), *The Summer Prince* by Alaya Dawn Johnson (2013), *The Kingdom of Little Wounds* by Susann Cokal (2013) and *Dreams of Significant Girls* by Christina Garcia (2011).

7.4 Conclusion

For young women who feel as though their reading interests surrounding the topic of sexuality are not addressed within conventional published YA Literature, online fiction can be a liberating alternative. There are, of course, problematic aspects to seeking out sexually-themed fiction online as a young person, especially if they do not know where to find what they are looking for. Except for Juliet, who had no regrets about interacting with erotica and pornography online at a young age, readers such as Scarlet and Sarah identified online pornography as a negative exposure. These readers were seeking erotica, “porn with feelings”, something less intense but equally as explicit as porn. For example, Scarlet, who wanted to know what it was like to have a sexual experience with a woman for the first time, encountered a lot of pornographic materials that were unhelpful to her. She told me:

...looking for those first time stories...sifting through erotic or pornographic material on the internet is daunting. There is so much there. If I had just known about books that were depictive of a first time lesbian experiences, I wouldn't have been exposed to porn for men who enjoy girl-on-girl.

She described the nature of these unhelpful stories as “somebody writing for an audience who wasn't me”. The issue is not that these pornographic materials exist on the internet and that teens read them, but rather that it may be difficult for young readers to find the

literature that they can relate to. This is one of the strengths of having a genre specifically about the lives of teens. Although it is imperfect and in need of reform, it at least attempts to be relatable to a specific audience. Sites such as *AO3* do an excellent job of directing readers through ratings, categorisation, and tags, but this cannot be said of all sites. While there are limitless possibilities for narratives of sexuality online, some teens may want a system that is familiar and easier to navigate, even if it means having gatekeepers decide what is and is not relevant to young, female audiences.

There are other advantages for teens to interact with printed, published materials. Many of the participants that I interviewed for my thesis research told me that they were from conservative families and/or had limited sex education. For these participants, sexuality-themed YA Literature and other printed books were a safe, and protected, space for them to interact with information about sexuality. In these cases, the materiality of a book was important. As Madeline told me:

...growing up my mom would take me to *Chapters* and I'd pick out a couple books. And she didn't really look at them because she just assumed that "books are books", they're always going to be kind of safe with what you read... I feel like because it was a book my mom wouldn't question it.

As you can see in this quote from Madeline, her mom did not question the books she read, even if they had sex in them, because "books are books" and reading is a good thing. Indeed, in her 2006 article for YALSA, Amy Pattee dubbed YA Literature the "Secret Source" on information about sexuality. Printed books, vetted and financially supported by publishing imprints, adds legitimacy to readers' choices in narratives and also affords them freedom and privacy to read. As Christina told me about reading sex within printed novels:

I feel like it's special because it's a little bit private. It's within a book and even if someone walks in on you, you're just reading a book.

However, readers' interactions with YA Literature echo the same dilemma that Scarlet faced with reading unsuitable literature online, reading "for an audience that wasn't me". The alternative, which I suggest repeatedly throughout this thesis, is a more diverse, free, authentic set of narratives of sexuality to be adopted in YA Literature so that readers who

have interests that are currently outside of published YA Literature can be afforded that same kind of validation and protection. Online amateur fiction beloved by teens and young adults can give us cues as to what narratives have positive outcomes for young readers when learning about sexuality. For example, M/M Romance, such as *Helix*, is an excellent example of a genre that matches the hearts and desires of its intended audience and can result in positive outcomes, especially for young, queer, women readers. I can see this directly in Andie, who was just beginning to explore her sexual orientation. She talked with passionate adoration for Drarry fanfiction and felt that she had never seen the same kind of themes expanded elsewhere. When I asked her if it had become an important part of her life, she told me:

I didn't know how much I'd been repressing until I started reading these things and started like, "Oh my god, yeah" and accepting different parts of me. I think this has helped me.

The greatest strength of literature is that it provides hope – especially to anyone who feels alone, unrecognised, or disparaged – that love and life can be pleasurable and profound in any form. The alternative reading done by the participants in this study shows some of the potential gaps in sexual content in published YA Literature. It shows that teen readers may gravitate outside of YA Literature when they are seeking to read stories about non-normative topics such as LGBTQ relationships, BDSM, or adult-minor relationships because the depth, complexity, and variety of stories are much greater online. And, above all, these young women readers read online when they were seeking to read stories about bountiful, utopic pleasure. As Pattee (2008) asserts, "Utopian narratives are stories of wish fulfillment and, as such, draw upon fantasies to imagine a changed reality" (p. 167). In many ways, the framework set out by sex education scholars Michelle Fine, Sara McClelland, Deborah Tolman, and Louisa Allen draws upon a utopian ideal. Harsh realism are needed in narratives of sexuality so that the struggles of everyday life are not forgotten, but there also needs to be utopias to carry readers forward by modelling the worlds in which suffering is minimised. Unsanctioned online spaces are places where one can observe many different envisionings of utopia, other spaces, so that hopeful narratives can be provided for young people who live in conflict with heteronormativity. In looking to these online spaces, one can also gain a knowledge of the wider-array of

sexual reading interests of young people and observe the outcome of narratives written within a community that has normalised unrestrained female desire.

Chapter 8

8 Conclusion

In conclusion to this project, I outline the key findings of the study. In addition to a summary of chapters, I also provide a summary of the types of information on sexuality found in Young Adult (YA) Literature and the unique qualities of YA Literature as an information source on sexuality. I then describe the implications of the project, including my suggestions for how to improve YA Literature, and how this research can inform library practice, the writing of YA Literature, and the work of researchers who study YA Literature and teen readers.

8.1 Summary of Key Findings

8.1.1 Summary of Chapters

RQ1: What are the experiences of young women who read sexually-themed Young Adult Literature and how might they be informed about relationships and sex when engaging with sexually-themed Young Adult Literature?

RQ2: What narratives of sexuality are present in sexually-themed Young Adult Literature and how might these narratives potentially inform young women readers about relationships and sex?

The two main research questions for this project are best addressed together. They are inextricably linked and each chapter of this thesis focuses on the interplay between participants' experiences with YA Literature and texts themselves. Participants in this study had a wide variety of experiences with sexually-themed literature, including YA Literature, and it informed them in varied, deep and unexpected ways. Within the entire corpus of YA Literature there are also many different kinds of narratives of sexuality and they all have the potential to inform young women readers about relationships and sex in a multitude of ways. Across each chapter, I address both of these research questions.

In Chapter 4, I examined the quintessential YA novels on relationship and sex, what I call Efferent Romance. *I Never* by Laura Hopper was the text that I used as a prime example

of this type of literature. Based on participants' engagement with YA Literature, I argued that Efferent Romance provides a comprehensive script for young people on what happens when in a "standard" or average relationship. Efferent Romance aims to carefully guide the reader towards envisioning a healthy relationship that reflects both what teens might want to know about sex but also what adults/parents believe would provide a good example of a sexual relationship for teens. On the surface, Efferent Romance can be a comprehensive source of information for young women on sexuality. It is realistic, it is usually positive about sex, and the information it contains extends far beyond the scope of traditional sex education. Efferent Romance also offers the most information on physical health related topics such as contraceptives, pregnancy, menstruation, STIs, and abortion out of any of the literature examined for this thesis. It also provides an in-depth look at the social and emotional aspects of sexual relationships. This includes both the joys and tribulations of relationships, especially the challenges faced by young women in their everyday sexual lives. Participants reported that having realistic, common-place stories about relationships and sex that were unique to the context of adolescence was an important characteristic of YA Literature. However, because Efferent Romance often defaults to characters and situations that represent the status-quo, it does little to meet the calls of feminist Sex Education scholars to acknowledge young women as sexually autonomous beings with diverse sexual subjectivities. Heroines in Efferent Romance are often the epitome of North American "normalcy", "good girls" who live the carefully curated script of romance that is viewed as most acceptable by adults. They are often flat characters, lacking in their own sexual identity, and do not provide alternative ways of being a young woman under heteronormativity. In many cases, participants reported they did not find what they were looking for within YA Literature, especially when it came to diverse sexualities.

In Chapter 5, I examined more complex narratives of sexuality, what I call *difficult stories*. *The Diary of a Teenage Girl* by Phoebe Gloeckner was the text that I used as a prime example of this type of literature. Participants in this study described interactions with stories about sexual relationships that were confusing or disturbing to them and this affected them in both negative and positive ways. I argued that difficult stories are the antithesis to Efferent Romance because they often lack didacticism, clarity, and positive

examples of sexual relationships. Although difficult stories usually focus on the confusing or disturbing aspects of sexual relationships, they have the potential to influence young readers in positive ways. Participants reported that although they often had negative reactions to difficult content in stories of sexuality, this often led to them question the negative aspects of sexual life and how these aspects might unreasonably affect their own lives. In this chapter, I also discussed the role of autobiography in fiction about adolescent sexuality and how it can bring readers closer to the lived reality of teens and to the darker, taboo dimensions of sexuality that adults may not want to acknowledge in relation to young people. I also argue that characters such as Minnie Goetz are empowering because they are complex with developed interests, strong sexual subjectivities, incredible flaws, and they live life with a disregard for normalcy. In contrast to Efferent Romance, characters in difficult stories may experience more negativity and pain in their lives, but they also directly confront social norms that often led to the disenfranchisement of young women. These are often the narratives that stuck within the minds of readers and provided possibilities for positive transformations within their lives.

In Chapter 6, I examined conventional erotic romance using *A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas as a prime example of this type of literature. In contrast to Efferent Romance, sex scenes in these stories are written with titillation in mind. All of the participants in this study read erotic literature, some from a very young age. Yet, erotica in YA Literature is a rarity because of its close link to pornography. Furthermore, conventional romance has often come under fire for being particularly anti-feminist and for failing to provide good examples of relationships between men and women. In this chapter, I argued that although erotic romance is still fraught with the problems of patriarchy, as identified by many prominent scholars of romance, the informative value of erotica is in the sex scenes and not necessarily in the dynamics of the relationships. In *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, the sex scene was one of the most erotic and female-centric that I read for this project. Romance heroines also tend to be coded with more feminist values, such as independence, sexual empowerment, and strong personalities, even though they still live their lives largely under patriarchy. In this chapter, I also examined the role of violence and pleasure, something that participants were curious about. Out of

this came a more in-depth discussion of consent, masculinity, and female empowerment. In conclusion, I argued that the value of erotica in the lives of readers is its ability to evoke physical pleasure within the reader. In relation to feminist Sex Education values, this ability not only shows the young reader that young women are capable and entitled to sexual pleasure, it invites the reader to join in and experience it for themselves.

In Chapter 7, I examined online amateur fiction, specifically slash *Harry Potter* fanfiction. I used the text *Helix* by Sara's Girl as a prime example of this type of literature. Participants in this study reported that they often turned to online amateur fiction when they were seeking alternatives to the narratives of sexuality typically found in published YA novels. I argued that slash fanfiction, for a variety of reasons, presents the most positive examples of narratives of sexuality within the entire scope of literature that I encountered in this study. I demonstrated in this chapter how online amateur authors are under less restrictions in regard to what they publish and, therefore, are able to provide a more diverse set of narratives of sexuality for readers of all ages. In this chapter, I turn to Drarry fanfiction to demonstrate the similarities and differences between amateur written narratives of sexuality and those in published YA Literature to exemplify how slash can provide a more positive reading experience for young women. I argue that because slash, and Drarry fanfiction in particular, is written for women by women, is queer, emphasises caring and compassion, and often contains erotic sex, that it creates the feminine utopia that is sought by feminist Sex Education and Children's Literature scholars alike. Readers in this study who had queer desires often felt liberated and comforted by the stories and reading communities that celebrated LGBTQ couples, BDSM, and other taboo sexual topics. In summary to this chapter, I stress the importance of importing narratives of sexuality such as those found in slash into published YA Literature because it provides young readers who want to read about erotic or queer content with a sense of validation, recognition, and permission from adults.

8.1.2 Summary of Fiction as an Information Source on Sexuality

In summary to this project, I also want to provide, in list form, the extent of information on sexuality found in YA Literature and the unique qualities of fiction as an information source on sexuality as identified by participants. Each finding is listed in descending

order of most to least frequent references. Each of these categories was referred to by at least two of the eleven participants.

8.1.2.1 Types of Information on Sexuality Found in Sexually-Themed YA Literature

Six major categories of information on sexuality in YA Literature were found within the interview data as identified by participants.

Sexual Acts

Participants learned three types of significant details about sexual acts from YA Literature:

- It introduced them to new sexual acts such as different sexual positions, non-penetrative sex (oral/digital).
- It taught them the mechanics of sexual acts. For example, how oral sex is performed.
- It presented sexual acts as pleasurable as opposed to strictly reproductive.

Types of Relationships

Participants reported that YA Literature taught them about different types of relationships. Foremost, this was in reference to LGBTQ relationships. However, it also extended to the possibility of other non-normative relationships such as incestuous or age-gap relationships.

Relationship Realities

Participants reported that YA Literature presents a broader and more realistic picture of what relationships are like in practice: how people meet, start dating, engage in sex, face obstacles together, and more.

Strategies for Dealing with Relationship Problems

Participants reported that reading about characters who were going through difficult situations in their sexual or romantic relationships provided good examples of how to deal with their own relationship problems or reflect on their own personal issues that affect their relationships.

Abusive Relationships

Participants reported that YA Literature taught them about different aspects of abuse. Predominantly, it provided nuanced examples of what abusive relationships can look like. In some cases, it also provided information on how to deal with abusive relationships and provided emotional support for readers who have experienced an abusive relationship.

Consent

Consent was often discussed in relation to instances of rape, where consent was violated and in turn readers thought about what it means to give consent or to have ownership over one's body. One participant, Madeline, noted that not all instances of sexual assault or rape are presented with clarity in YA Literature, which suggests a need to address consent explicitly instead of implicitly.

Other information included – contraceptives, STIs, pregnancy, and mental health.

8.1.2.2 Unique Qualities of Fiction as an Information Source on Sexuality

Participants in this study also identified unique qualities of fiction as an information source on sexuality. I have divided this section into two parts. The first addresses fiction as a whole, no matter the genre. The second addresses YA Literature specifically.

Participants reported that fiction:

Presents the Emotional and Social Aspects of Sexual Relationships

Participants reported that fiction describes the emotional and social aspects of sexual relationships. This included positive aspects such as dating, courtship, romance, flirting, passion, care, respect, intimacy, pleasure, and love. It also included negative aspects such

as abuse, cruelty, confusion, confusion over sexual orientation, hurt feelings, and heartbreak. In this regard, it made participants view sex as more than just a biological act and to see it as an emotional, social, and pleasurable act.

Fills in the Gaps of Sex Education

Participants reported that an emphasis on the emotional, social, and pleasurable aspects of sexual relationships helped to fill in the gaps of traditional sex education. Presented within the context of social life, they reported that they were able to read about relationships that were more organic and realistic. However, they also tended to emphasise that fiction works best as an information source on sexuality in conjunction with other sources such as sex education, non-fiction textbooks, health information, and peer groups.

Is Detailed and Descriptive

Participants reported that fiction often describes relationships and sex in great detail. They noted that because readers are often following a character's inner monologue, that readers can get a detailed view into the thoughts and feelings of a character experiencing a sexual relationship. They also referred to the amount of time that one spends with a written narrative as longer than one would spend with other sources such as a health website or movie scenes. This made it possible to live vicariously through the characters.

Is Pleasurable to Read

A focus on the emotional, social, and pleasurable aspects of sexual relationships that are described in detail made fictional content about relationships and sex interesting in a way that "banal" or "hospital clean" health information is not. Although participants recognised that fiction reading can be educational and that they did learn from it, they read it foremost for pleasure. Some participants felt that because fiction is pleasurable to read, that you can "take more" from it and remember information better than you can with non-fictional sources of information. In some cases, it was also physically pleasurable to read sexually-themed fiction.

Can Lead to Deep Questioning

Participants who read complex narratives of sexuality reported that it often led them to ask more questions, demand more answers, and investigate sexuality more deeply. Some participants reported that they had complicated relationships with different texts that left them feeling confused, disturbed, angry, or annoyed. However, these experiences also led them to question their assumptions or question societal norms that they felt repressed by.

8.1.2.3 Unique Qualities of Young Adult Literature as an Information Source on Sexuality

All of these qualities listed above can also apply to YA Literature, but participants also identified qualities that were unique to YA Literature. Participants reported that YA Literature:

Provides a Script for a Relationship

Participants reported that YA Literature provided them with a complete “standard” for what a relationship is or should be like. This included the progression of a relationship: meeting, dating, becoming committed, getting physical, and then maybe breaking up at the end. It also meant that readers got a sense of what was a “good” relationship and what was a “bad” one so that they could compare these with their own relationships. This script also dealt with a wide variety of topics that would be helpful in navigating a relationship: minimising physical and emotional risks, gaining consent, dealing with relationship issues, having sex, and feeling heartbreak.

Are Transitional Texts

Participants noted that YA Literature is a pathway into the world of sex for young people. They noted that YA Literature is not usually as explicit or complicated as Adult Fiction and that is because it is targeted towards teens who are experiencing a relationship for the first time.

Is More Relatable to Teens

Participants reported that because YA Literature is about teen characters and set within the unique context of adolescence that it is more relatable to teens. They often described a feeling of “seeing myself” in YA texts or being better able to empathise or live vicariously through teen characters.

8.1.2.4 Summary

Participant Christina provides a great summary of what fictional narratives of sexuality uniquely offer to readers when considering them as an information source on sexuality.

She told me:

I think that books give you an incorporation of all aspects. From health you learn anatomy...this is what happens, be safe. And then in terms of porn it's very vulgar, it's not very representative of real life sex. You know what I mean? I feel books incorporate all of that. Relationship aspects, dynamics between characters, it shows sex as the whole thing not just one specific scene or the biological aspect or something. So, I think it wholly encompasses everything.

However, it is also important to reiterate here that participants in this study were also critical of YA Literature as a whole. They reported that YA Literature often lacked the information about sexuality they sought, contained stereotypes, and had poor representation of LGBTQ characters. I have discussed this at length throughout this thesis and have suggested areas for improvements in regard to creating more complex characters, avoiding didacticism, including descriptive sex scenes, and writing positive narratives about relationships that challenge the bounds of heteronormativity.

8.2 Transforming Young Adult Literature

What does this study tell us about the state of YA Literature and how it can transform to become a better source of information on sexuality for young people? Foremost, I think it is time that teens are given the freedom to read literature that does not teach a lesson, or pass clear judgement, or contain messages of good citizenship. Here, I am mostly referring to the overt didacticism that can be observed in most YA Literature. When only didactic literature is validated for teens, their approaches to reading are limited. As a result, they are only given permission to read one way: the way where they believe everything they read to be a truth, a truth with their best interests at heart. They learn to

read with the assumption that adults have both written and approved the content and that it therefore falls within the range of behaviours that are appropriate, expected, and accepted of teens. This does not set teens up to read critically, but only to read literature as a transmission about how to be a good person or a good citizen. When a book does not contain these qualities, that is where conflict and fear arise because YA Literature has long carried the torch of appropriately socialising teens.

More “on screen” sex in YA Literature is also needed. By more I do not mean that sex scenes in YA Literature need to be more frequent. As I argued in Chapter 6, what is more important than frequent sex scenes are sex scenes that are described in detail, show unabashed pleasure, and convey a sense of care between partners. As can be seen in *A Court of Thorns and Roses*, the single sex scene in the book was only a few pages of the entire text, but it was one of the most positive presentations of a sex scene within all of the novels that I read. It was also written to be erotic, and as I outlined in Chapter 6 as well, being aroused by literature is a kind of sex education and has the potential to show young women that women are capable and entitled to sexual pleasure. Every type of sexually-themed literature has its own purpose. Efferent Romance aims to guide the reader, and this type of narrative was welcomed by many of the readers in this study. However, they also demonstrated a strong interest in erotica as well. I am not suggesting that YA Literature become more pornographic, but I am suggesting that writers and publishers do not need to shy away from descriptive sex as much as they currently seem to do.

When writing, publishing, classifying, and selecting materials one needs to keep in mind that teens are smart, can read critically, are thoughtful, deep, and capable of engaging with complex ideas. This can be seen first-hand in the experiences of the young women I interviewed for this project. Even in the cases where they were confused or misled by complex narratives of sexuality, they were often able to look back on that experience and eventually come to their own conclusions about the negative aspects of sexuality. Not including content that requires active questioning removes the potential for nuance to exist in these stories. Teens deserve to have well-written and interesting literature available to them and there needs to be more acceptance of teens as familiar with and

capable of navigating the difficult aspects of their lives. As Michael Cart (2010) rightly points out, just as YA authors are often considered B-rate authors, teens themselves are considered B-rate citizens: “discounted, misunderstood, ignored, patronized” (p. 9). This is why it is especially important to recognise the less-than-savoury aspects of teens’ lives – the hardships they face, the “adult” situations they find themselves in, and their “deviant” desires – because in avoiding this content one may “discount, misunderstand, ignore, and patronize” this audience and by doing so contribute to reinforcing their disenfranchisement in larger society.

A literature for teens should come as close as possible to the lived experience of teens. This requires us to acknowledge the imperfect, challenging, and perhaps unsettling aspects of everyday life that exist in the lives of teens and to relinquish the need to feel that teens need constant intervention when they engage with these aspects in literature. A literature of this kind would constitute what Lydia Kokkola (2013) calls a “radical literature”.³⁰ Adult writers of YA Literature are already predisposed to reinforce hegemonies related to age, as they are generally no longer living the experience of teens. As Jeanie Austin (2016) notes, “children and youth remain abnormal, strange, and queer to the world of adulthood” (p. 264), but there are fantastic works of YA Literature written by adults that tell more authentic stories of adolescence free from didacticism or overt stereotypes.³¹ Writing of this kind is best done by authors who have led counter-hegemonic teen lives: people of colour, women, members of the LGBTQ community, misfits, rebels, nerds, and loners. Essentially, anyone who defies dominant cultural norms, or has lived a “queer”³² life, and may be more attuned to repressive/oppressive power structures. Both Jeanie Austin (2016) and Lydia Kokkola (2013) have directly

³⁰ See Chapter 2 for further explanation.

³¹ See especially the works of Melvin Burgess, Francesca Lia Block, and Phoebe Gloeckner. Their works also tend to be highly controversial and contested.

³² Austin’s (2016) linkage between childhood and queerness is built upon the work of Cathy J. Cohen (1997), who argues that queerness can be defined beyond non-heterosexuality. Dominant cultural norms in North America have been well described in the context of adolescence by Nancy Lesko’s (2001) *Act Your Age* and Mary Louise Adams’ (1997) *The Trouble with Normal* as deriving from white, middle-class, male, heterosexual, Christian values.

acknowledged adolescence as a queer state of being. As Austin (2016) writes: “A shared history of surveillance, control, regulation, and enforced behaviours join childhood and queerness at the hip...” (p. 263). This intersection can bring about greater understanding when adults write stories about teens. We – writers, publishers, teachers, and librarians – need to begin to actively privilege and celebrate more voices that tell different stories of adolescence, especially when it comes to sexual content.

8.3 Implications of the Project

8.3.1 Implications for Library Practice

RQ3: How can the knowledge gained by this investigation directly inform and improve library collections and service practices?

Libraries have a long and continuing history of tense relations with sexually-themed materials for young people. A prime example is Judy Blume’s *Forever*, one of the most repeatedly challenged and banned novels in school and public libraries due to its frank depictions of sexual acts. Challenges to *Forever* describe the text as “pornographic”, as not promoting “the sanctity of family life” and as lacking in any “aesthetic, literary or social value” (Sova, 1998, p. 52-53). As a response to an anticipated public complaint, librarians may engage in a multitude of censorial practice to avoid controversy. I do not blame them for this. There are very real consequences for people who stand up for access to materials that some view as harmful to young people. However, my hope is that this thesis shows that at least some, if not many, young people enjoy and gain valuable insights from sexually-themed literature...especially literature that is sexually-explicit, disturbing, or “deviant”. Librarians may not see this in their everyday practice; teens seem to breeze through the YA stacks like ghosts and may leave without asking advice from librarians. But they are there, they are reading this material, and it is important work to continue providing young people with unfettered access to these materials. It must not be forgotten that libraries provide unique access to sexually-themed materials. One thing that participant Jane said really stood out to me in this regard. She explicitly acknowledged that free access to materials led her to expand her reading. She said:

It's good in the way that you don't have to pay for the book. You can just pick one up and see how you like it. Whereas, if you go to the bookstore you have to think about it. So, with the library you can borrow a bunch of books and see how you like them. Especially the *Forbidden* book, I didn't expect to like it, so borrowing it and reading it, it was pretty good. Otherwise, in the bookstore, I wouldn't have chosen it.

Participants in this study acknowledged public libraries as neutral and safe spaces. But they were also realistic about the challenges that libraries face as public institutions and recognised that libraries are influenced by politics or community norms, especially of a conservative nature. They did not think that it was the library's job to actively promote sexual materials, but access to those materials was important for them. As Jane told me, "I don't think books like that should be cen...hidden. Just because they should be available just like how sex ed should be available. You shouldn't hide away from it". Participants had a wide variety of experiences when it came to accessing sexually-themed literature at libraries. Some had great experiences at libraries and were able to access materials without any issue. Others felt uncomfortable taking out sexually-themed materials from the library because they were afraid they would be questioned or judged by library staff.

Primarily, this thesis can help practicing librarians better understand the reading motivations, interests, and practices of young women readers when it comes to sexually-themed literature as expressed by young people themselves, not necessarily adults. In addition, it can help librarians to better understand narratives of sexuality in YA Literature and to critically evaluate them. This can inform both collections and frontline library workers in their daily practice. Here, I make suggestions for how libraries can help to improve library collections and services for teens based on the findings on this research. These suggestions are all related to access, not necessarily the direct promotion of materials.

Libraries can build diverse collections of sexually-themed fiction for young people. This applies most directly to librarians in charge of collection development. Many libraries already have diverse collections for teens, but I think even more efforts can be made. In order to do this, librarians need to be aware of the sexual worlds of teens and how this

relates to their reading interests. Reading a thesis such as this would be a valuable start. As I have previously mentioned, libraries do have a role to play in the publication and distribution of books. The books they choose to collect both support and legitimise authors and types of content. Amy Pattee (2006b) acknowledges that "...our professional acceptance of a need for these materials has allowed more explicit materials to be produced" (p. 36). In addition, participant Kelly specifically identified libraries as a point of access to send messages to publishers as to what she would like to read. She told me that when she reads an excellent book, in this case books that portrayed LGBTQ relationships in positive ways, she would advocate on their behalf:

I try to buy them and go to the library and make sure libraries are getting them. Because I want to show...even one person asking a library to buy the book, it still somehow helps. And I want to show publishers, "Hey, I want books that give positive portrayals".

Here, the collecting of these books is important because it helps improve access to more and better sexually-themed materials. However, I think the most important consequence of this action is that if diverse books are on the shelves in the YA section, frontline librarians may feel more confident in recommending and displaying these texts as well.

Frontline librarians can consistently support easy, unrestricted access to sexually-themed materials. Based on the responses from this study, sexuality is still regarded as a very private, personal, and taboo topic for young people. I will not suggest in this thesis that frontline librarians need to become more aggressive in recommending sexually-themed books to teens or even use them in programming. This was once an idea I had, but it was not a wildly popular idea with the young women I spoke to. For the most part, participants in this study were uncomfortable with the idea of discussing sex outside of their peer groups, which were safe spaces for them. They also were not keen on discussing these topics with parental-like figures.

Frontline librarians can help by becoming more aware of intellectual freedom and privacy issues associated with young people's access to information. Some participants in this study reported that they felt awkward at the library when taking out materials that were considered taboo for young people. In the case of Juliet, she told me that she did not even

try to take out sexually-themed materials of the library because she felt that a librarian would tell her, “Hey, that’s not for you”. This actually happened to Madeline, who told me:

100% I remember I took out, it wasn’t a youth book, it was an adult book. But it was still not necessarily a sex book of any means but it was an adult book. And I was probably Grade 8/9 area and I remember the librarian being like “Are you sure you want to take this out?” and I kind of felt weird about it but I was like “Yeah”. And they were like “Ooook” and I was like.... “oooo”.

This type of barrier to access should not happen in libraries. It would be absurd to say something like that to an adult. Librarians can help by recognising that young people have the same rights to privacy and to access as anyone else who uses the library and its collections.

Frontline librarians can also help by having an in-depth knowledge of adolescent sexuality, adolescent everyday life informational needs, and information sources on sexuality, including fiction. Participant Sarah described to me a scene where she went to the public library and asked to be directed towards the queer books that had previously been displayed for Pride season. She described the lack of knowledge of the person on desk as a barrier to her access. She told me:

...I went to the teen section person, help desk, and I was quite embarrassed actually. I can be quite shy in public. And I was like, “Where’s the queer section?” and she’s like “What?! Queer? What’s that?”...And then I had to say stuff like “homosexual, lesbian” and she was like, “No...” and I was like “Ok...”. Which was weird because I’ve seen it before at that very library...So, that day I just left. So, the library has given me mixed experiences. At times it’s been very open, and at times it’s been a little closed because that person had no knowledge about what it was. She didn’t even know what the word queer means.

Reading a thesis such as this can also help librarians to understand young people from more of a cultural perspective than a scientific perspective and increase their ability to respond with confidence to inquiries such as Sarah’s.

Frontline librarians can also facilitate access in simple ways such as book displays or special sections during certain times of the year such as Freedom to Read Week or Pride Month. Passive readers’ advisory services such as book recommendations and displays

were seen as very valuable to some readers in this study. For example, Sarah told me that the library played an important role in accessing sexually-themed materials. She said:

...I wouldn't have found these books if it wasn't for the library. They were all really organised, right there in the teen section, and they were always in a pretty bright, noticeable colour. Sometimes even in neon so I could see it better. I find that very helpful to get exposure.

These are all reasonable and simple tasks, but I believe they would go a long way in improving access to sexually-themed literature for young readers.

Libraries can help by choosing to house print copies of sexually-themed fiction read by young people as much as possible. Having physical copies of books in libraries makes a statement about what is considered appropriate sexual content for teens. For example, participant Jane, who read e-book versions of Abbi Glines' novels (some of the most sexually-explicit and erotic novels in the YA/New Adult genres), commented that she could only find these online from her local public library and suspected that perhaps they were only available in this format because of their content. She told me:

...they were still from the library but maybe they thought it was too explicit to maybe have in the library. I don't know. I just find it interesting though how they're just there.

The fact that Jane came to this conclusion signals to me that young readers may be aware that "explicit" books are treated differently – as potentially dangerous – at the library. Having print copies adds legitimacy to texts, more visibly supports the authors who write these books, and makes creating displays easier for library staff.

Special attention can be paid to how school libraries collect and provide access to sexually-themed materials. Participants in this study seemed to have the most issues with access at their school libraries. For example, participant Kelly told me:

I know at my middle school library there was like a special section for the older students and you had to get like a signed letter of permission to read those books and I remember *Perks of Being a Wallflower* was in that section which deals with like mental illness and sexuality and stuff like that.

Arya also described taking out a book from her school library. She said “It was kind of tucked away too. It almost felt like they didn’t really want you to find it, but I found it”. In Emily Knox’s (2014a) article on book challengers she explained that book challengers would justify the removal of books from school libraries by stating that young people could always find these books at their public library. However, school libraries are also an important access point for teens. This is purely anecdotal, but during my work as a Youth Services Librarian I asked a member of the Teen Advisory Group what we could do to draw more teens into the library. She told me that teens were too busy to come to the library and also that “we have a school library, so we can just go there”. Linked to an institution where attendance is compulsory for almost all young people coming from a wide variety of backgrounds, school libraries are under a lot more pressure to restrict access to controversial materials. I am not convinced that schools will ever be a place where comprehensive sexuality education will happen, and neither am I convinced that school libraries are a place where access to sexually-explicit materials will ever be unrestricted. However, more light needs to be shed on school libraries and their struggles with intellectual freedom and censorship.

As I have stated above, young people can be best served by providing comprehensive and unrestricted access to a wide variety of sexually-themed literature read by teens. I believe that if these small recommendations are taken in earnest, that they would radically improve services to teens, especially teen girls.

8.3.2 Implications for Young Adult Writers

Throughout this thesis I have written about YA writers, their triumphs, their failings, and their role in improving YA stories about relationships in sex. For the most part, this includes removing overt didacticism within narratives, writing more interesting female characters, and writing more diversity into narratives. As stated above, I believe that this kind of writing is best done by anyone who has lived a “queer” life or authors who have led counter-hegemonic teen lives. Like Judy Blume’s *Forever*, I hope that reading this thesis will empower YA authors to write outside the bounds of what is currently considered acceptable sexual knowledge for young people, especially young women. Many authors already do this well. I have gained many heroes during this project. I hope

that if YA authors do read all or part of this thesis that they can gain a better understanding of the reading interests of young women and how they respond to a wide variety of literature. In it, I hope they see that young women often crave sexy stories, that they can see through didactic efforts, and that they need stories about queer sexualities.

I especially want to reach out to authors of slash fanfiction. I was briefly in-touch with Natasha Stawarski (*Sara's Girl*) and also had a conversation with birdsofshore, author of another excellent piece of *Harry Potter* slash fiction, *Hungry*, who got in touch with me about this project. Slash authors strike me as deeply passionate about their work and keenly aware of the importance of slash in their largely female-centric communities. I implore these authors to take what they have learned writing slash in fanfiction communities and publish their own original works. They would be valuable contributions to the YA canon.

8.3.3 Implications for Researchers of YA Literature and Teen Readers

In 2011, Judith Hayn, Jeffrey Kaplan, and Amanda Nolen suggested that research on YA Literature needed to move away from textual analysis to empirical research in order to be taken seriously as a legitimate area of study. As an interdisciplinary researcher, I see the value in both textual analysis and empirical research. As a Reading Studies scholar in the field of LIS, I have seen how textual analysis and empirical research can come together to paint a more comprehensive picture of young people and their experiences with the literature that they read. Louise Rosenblatt's seminal research on *The Text, The Reader, The Poem* (1978) has been around for a long time now, yet it is underutilised as a framework for research methodology within the larger scope of literature studies. Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* is a shining example of how to do this kind of research. The work done by Reading Studies scholars, such as Catherine Ross, Paulette Rothbauer, and Lucia Cedeira Serantes, also foreground this kind of research and have provided a foundation for this thesis specifically. Rita Felski's *Uses of Literature* (2008) also offers a clear justification for incorporating the reader's voice from a Literary Studies perspective. This approach to research makes the most sense to me when studying the phenomenon of reading because it acknowledges both the meaning of the words on the page and how

readers respond differently to these words, often in unexpected ways. Most importantly, in line with feminist research methodology, I think that research on marginalised or queer groups needs to include the voices of that group. I hope that researchers can use this work as an example of studying these different components of the reading experience, learn from my successes and mistakes, and try this approach to inquiry.

I have a number of suggestions for future research. First, I would suggest a similar study be done with participants aged within the range of typical adolescence (12-18 years). This may produce different results and provide more insight into this phenomenon. I also think that the experiences of young male readers need to be heard, since this project focuses specifically on young women readers and the literature they tend to read. I would also like to know more about *difficult stories* and how readers respond to negative or disturbing messages about sexuality. This is a major topic of discussion in most critical studies of YA Literature, but more systematic, conclusive research needs to be performed to draw generalisable conclusions. Lastly, the voices of librarians are obviously lacking in this thesis and I am sure that their perspective would provide valuable insight into some of the conclusions that I have drawn and suggestions that I have made. Future research could also be done here on library holdings and library services with sexually-themed materials

8.4 Conclusion to the Project

Overall, the findings of this project provide empirical evidence that YA Literature, broadly defined, can act as a valuable source of information on sexuality for young people. Moreover, the inclusion of information on sexual pleasure, non-normative sexual relationships, and consent are especially significant as many sex education scholars have identified this information as missing from formal sex education (see for example Allen, 2004; Cameron-Lewis & Fine, 2013; Fine, 1988). In sum, YA Literature has the potential to give a more nuanced portrayal of sexuality that goes beyond the biological and includes the social, emotional, pleasurable, and painful aspects of sexual relationships that are traditionally excluded from sex education. However, it is also important to remember that while the participants in this study talked about a wide range of information on sexuality found in YA Literature, some participants also felt that YA

Literature as a whole did not contain the information that they were seeking. In my analysis of each piece of literature that I examined for this thesis, I discussed both the positive and negative aspects of these texts when considering them as an information source on sexuality for young people. One thing that I want to emphasize here is that although singular books may stand out in readers' minds, or one may be concerned about the messages that certain books contain over others, what I have observed is that learning from fiction never happens in isolation. The information gathered from a single book enters into a constellation of knowledge that the reader has gained from other books, school, family, peers, and media. I see value in every type of YA Literature that I have analysed in this study and I would never wish to do away with a particular type of narrative. As Rita Felski (2008) argues about all genres of texts:

Each of these genres, whether fictional or factual, poetic or theoretical, creates a range of schemata, selects, organizes, and shapes language according to given criteria, opens up certain ways of seeing and closes off others. Each is composed of varying parts of blindness and insight, a condition as endemic to the theoretical text as the imaginative one. (p. 103)

In light of this, I suggest that all of these books are needed and more. Read together they form a network of knowledge that can inform the reader on an array of aspects of sexuality. But in particular, more books that have more complex characters, lack didacticism, contain descriptive sex, and celebrate diverse sexualities are needed.

This project is the result of my first attempt at investigating YA Literature as an information source on sexuality by investigating the interaction between the words of a text and the reader, or as Rosenblatt would call it, "the poem". It was my hope to add to the conversation about how YA Literature informs the sexual lives of young people, especially young women, put forth by admirable scholars such as Linda Christian-Smith (1990), Roberta S. Trites (2000), Paulette Rothbauer (2004), Amy Pattee (2006b), and Lydia Kokkola (2013), by incorporating the voices of young women readers. The participants in this study exceeded my expectations in their experiences with sexually-themed fiction, their insights into their reading experiences, and their own personal vivaciousness. They often took me by surprise, contradicted my views, and pushed me to think outside my own realm of thought. I view this project as largely exploratory. I have

done some work in separating and defining different sub-genres within sexually-themed YA Literature, showing how readers respond differently to their major themes, incorporating different formats, and painting a picture of the kind of literature that young people could benefit from the most. More targeted and refined work needs to be done in each of these areas, but my hope is that I have opened up new avenues for studying this phenomenon in both LIS and Children's Literature.

I want to end this thesis with a quote from participant Sarah about what she learned from reading narratives of sexuality. What I found myself coming back to, time and again, throughout this project was that the most important quality of sexually-themed literature of any kind was that it inspired a sense of hope in the reader, hope that one could find happiness in their relationships with others. This is what Sarah described as the highlight of her reading experience:

...when I was a kid and even now a little bit, I am quite sceptical about love. But through reading these stories I realise that it's possible between people, when people are finally opening up to each other. After letting go of their fears and opening up, letting their vulnerabilities show to each other and accepting each other's vulnerabilities, true love can happen. So, that was wonderful. I did learn that from the stories.

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Appendices

Appendix A. Booklists

Sexually-Explicit Young Adult Texts Read for Project

Young Adult Novels, Comics, Short Stories, and Verse

101 Ways to Dance by Kathy Stinson (2007)

About a Girl by Sarah McCarry (2015)

A Court of Thorns and Roses Series by Sarah J. Maas (2015, 2016, 2017)

A Court of Frost and Starlight by Sarah J. Maas (novella) (2018)

Anatomy of a Boyfriend by Daria Snadowsky (2007)

Anatomy of a Single Girl by Daria Snadowsky (2013)

And Every Day Was Overcast by Paul Kwiatkowski (2013)

Beauty Queens by Libba Bray (2011)

Before I Die by Jenny Downham (2007)

Between Us and the Moon by Rebecca Maizel (2015)

Black Hole by Charles Burns (2005)

Blue is the Warmest Color by Julie Maroh (2013)

Calling My Name by Liara Tamani (2017)

The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures by Phoebe Gloeckner (2002, 2015)

Doing It by Melvin Burgess (2004)

Dreams of Significant Girls by Cristina Garcia (2011)

The F – It List by Julie Halpern (2013)

Fallen Too Far by Abbi Glines (2014)

Firsts by Laurie Elizabeth Flynn (2015)

Forbidden by Tabitha Suzuma (2011)

Forever for a Year by b.t. gottfred (2015)

The Handsome Girl & Her Beautiful Boy by b.t. gottfred (2018)

History is All You Left Me by Adam Silvera (2017)

- I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika L. Sanchez (2017)
- I Never* by Laura Hopper (2017)
- If I Stay* by Gayle Forman (2009)
- In Sight of Stars* by Gae Polisner (2018)
- The Infinite Moment of Us* by Lauren Myracle (2013)
- The Kingdom of Little Wounds* by Susann Cokal (2013)
- Kiss It* by Erin Downing (2010)
- Let's Talk About Love* by Claire Kann (2018) (Not sexually-explicit, about asexuality)
- Likewise: The High School Comic Chronicles of Ariel Schrag* by Ariel Schrag (2009)
- Looking For Alaska* by John Green (2005)
- Lost It* by Kristen Tracy (2007)
- Love in the Time of Global Warming* by Francesca Lia Block (2013)
- The Miseducation of Cameron Post* by Emily M. Danforth (2012)
- My Life Next Door* by Huntley Fitzpatrick (2012)
- The Nerdy and the Dirty* by b.t. gottfred (2016)
- Not That Kind of Girl* by Siobhan Vivian (2010)
- Not the Girls You're Looking For* by Aminah Mae Safi (2018)
- Of Fire and Stars* by Audrey Coulthurst (2016)
- Our Own Private Universe* by Robin Talley (2017)
- Release* by Patrick Ness (2017)
- The Ring and the Crown* by Melissa De La Cruz (2014)
- Skin* by Donna Jo Napoli (2013)
- Summer Days and Summer Nights: Twelve Love Stories* Edited by Stephanie Perkins (2016)
- The Summer Prince* by Alaya Dawn Johnson (2013)
- Ten Things We Did* by Sarah Mlynowski (2011)
- Twenty Boy Summer* by Sarah Ockler (2009)
- Tilt* by Ellen Hopkins (2012)
- Empire of Storms* by Sarah J. Maas (2016) (Throne of Glass Series, Book 5)
- Under the Lights* by Dahlia Alder (2015)
- Until Friday Night* by Abbi Glines (2015)

Drarry Fanfiction (For Chapter 7 Analysis)

An Issue of Consequence by Faith Wood

Azoth by zeitgeistic

Helix by Sara's Girl

Hungry by birdsofshore

Salt on the Western Wind by Sara's Girl

Temptation on the Warfront by alizarincrimson

The Potter-Malfoy Problem by who_la_hoop

The Standard You Walk Past by bafflinghaze

The Ties that Bind Us by Faith Wood

Then Comes a Mist and a Weeping Rain by Faith Wood

Other Fanfiction

Dark by H28

Post Traumatic by GhostMomma

Peeta's Pastry Puns Series by PeetasandHerondales

There's a Pure-Blood Custom for That by Lomonaaeren

Too Cold for Angels to Fly by bratmin

Japanese Comics

Citrus Ch. 1-13 by Saburo Uta (not sexually-explicit)

Maka-Maka Vol. 1 by Kishi Torajirou

Not Equal Ch. 1-11 by Ike Reibun

Renai Idenshi XX by Eiki Eiki

Watashi ga Motete Dousunda Ch. 1-55 by Junko

Sexually-Themed Texts Read by Participants

Published Texts

- A Court of Thorns and Roses* by Sarah J. Maas (2015)
- The Abominable Mr. Darcy: A Pride and Prejudice Variation* by J. Dawn King (2016)
- Airhead* by Meg Cabot (2008)
- Accident* by Danielle Steele (1994)
- Anatomy of a Boyfriend* by Daria Snadowsky (2007)
- Are You There God? It's Me, Margaret* by Judy Blume (1970)
- Beach Blondes* by Katherine Applegate (2008)
- Beautiful Bastard* by Christina Lauren (2013)
- Beauty Queens* by Libba Bray (2011)
- The Black Sheep* by Yvonne Collins and Sandy Rideout (2008)
- Captive Prince* by C. S. Pacat (2015)
- Carry On* by Rainbow Rowell (2015)
- Dear John* by Nicholas Sparks (2006)
- The Diary of a Teenage Girl: An Account in Words and Pictures* by Phoebe Gloeckner (2002, 2015)
- Divergent* by Veronica Roth (2011)
- Drama! Series* by Paul Ruditis (2007, 2008)
- Eleanor & Park* by Rainbow Rowell (2013)
- Fangirl* by Rainbow Rowell (2013)
- Forbidden* by Tabitha Suzuma (2011)
- Forever* by Judy Blume (1975)
- The Fault in Our Stars* by John Green (2012)
- Fifty Shades of Grey Series* by E. L. James (2011, 2012)
- The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Stieg Larsson (2008)
- The Glass Castle: A Memoir* by Jeanette Walls (2009)
- Go Ask Alice* by Beatrice Sparks (1971)
- Gone Girl* by Gillian Flynn (2012)
- Gossip Girl* by Cecily von Ziegesar (2002)
- Harry Potter Series* by J. K. Rowling (1997, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2007)

The Hunger Games Series by Suzanne Collins (2008, 2009, 2010)
If I Stay by Gayle Forman (2009)
l8r g8r by Lauren Myracle (2007)
Lolita by Vladimir Nabokov (1955)
Looking for Alaska by John Green (2005)
Love in the Time of Cholera Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1988)
The Lovely Bones by Alice Sebold (2002)
Me Before You: A Novel by Jojo Moyes (2012)
The Notebook by Nicholas Sparks (1996)
OCD Love Story by Corey Ann Haydu (2013)
On Beauty by Zadie Smith (2005)
Openly Straight by Ben Konigsberg (2013)
The Original Sinners Series by Tiffany Reisz (2012)
Paint it Black: A Novel by Janet Finch (2006)
Pants on Fire by Meg Cabot (2007)
Perks of Being a Wallflower by Stephen Chbosky (1999)
Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen (1813)
The Princess Diaries by Meg Cabot (2000)
Queen of Babble by Meg Cabot (2006)
The Scarlet Letter: A Romance by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1850)
Lust by Robin Wasserman (2005)
She's Come Undone by Wally Lamb (1992)
Six of Crows Duology by Leigh Bardugo (2015, 2016)
Speak by Laurie Halse Anderson (1999)
The Summer I Turned Pretty by Jenny Han (2009)
Twilight Series by Stephenie Meyer (2005, 2006, 2007, 2008)
Water Baby by Sophie Campbell (2008)
White Oleander by Janet Finch (1999)
White Teeth By Zadie Smith (2000)
Wicked Lovely by Melissa Marr (2007)

Online Stories

A Brother to Basilisks by Lomonaaeren

Dark by H28

Inject Me Sweetly by JordanLynde

The Kissing Booth by Beth Reekles (original version)

No Matter What by Ayns and Sky

Peeta's Pastry Puns Series by PeetasandHerondales

Post Traumatic by GhostMomma

Too Cold for Angels to Fly by bratmin

Threads by ELatimer

Waist Deep in Walmart by JordanLynde

Japanese Comics

\$10 by Kano Shiuko

Antique Bakery by Yoshinaga Fumi

Citrus by Saburo Uta

Collectors by Nishi Ukon

Fragtime by Sato

I'll Send Her Home On The Last Train by Amagakure Gido

Maka Maka by Kishi Torajirou

Makoreipu by Sushipuri (Kanbe Chuji)

Mukaishi by Box (Tsukumo Gou)

Not Equal by Ike Reibun

Parfum by Nishi Uko

Renai Idenshi XX by Eiki Eiki

Sono Kuchibiru ni Yoru no Tsuyu by Fukai Youki

Sora o Daite Oyasumi by Kyuugou

TRASH by Yamamoto Kenji

Watashi ga Motete Dousunda by Junko

Websites

*Mangafox.com**The Kristen Archives**Tumblr**Literotica.com*

Authors (when titles not remembered)

Abbi Glines

Charlotte Bronte

Emily Bronte

John Green

Jane Austin

Margaret Atwood


Sarah Dessen

Other Media


A Girl at My Door (2014) directed by July Jung*Friends with Benefits* (2011) directed by Will Gluck*Law & Order: Special Victims Unit**Rent* (2005) directed by Chris Columbus*Sex and the City TV Series*

Appendix B. Recruitment Materials

Recruitment Poster

Western 

Version Date: January 27th, 2016



**PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH IN EROTIC YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE**


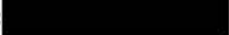
**WE ARE LOOKING FOR VOLUNTEERS TO TAKE PART IN A STUDY INVESTIGATING
THE EXPERIENCES OF YOUNG WOMEN WHO READ EROTIC OR
SEXUALLY THEMED YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE**

WHO MEET THE FOLLOWING CRITERIA:

- LIKE TO READ YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE! (EROTIC/ROMANCE/SEXUALLY THEMED)
- 18-24 YEARS OLD
- IDENTIFY AS FEMALE

If you are interested and agree to participate you would be asked to: participate in an interview that asks about your experiences reading erotic or sexually themed Young Adult Literature. Your participation would involve **one** session about **60-90** minutes long.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Student Researcher: Davin Helkenberg, Ph.D. Student (female)
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
E-mail: 
Phone: 

Recruitment Script for Classroom Recruitment



In-class recruitment verbal script

Hello, my name is Davin Helkenberg. I am a PhD student in the Faculty of Library and Information Science. I would like to invite you to participate in my very exciting doctoral research which is on the experiences of young women who read erotic or sexually themed Young Adult Literature. I am interested in how these kinds of materials have potentially informed your life.

I am recruiting participants who:

- **like to read Young Adult Literature! (erotic/romance/sexually themed/fanfiction)**
- **are 18-24 years of age**
- **identify as female**

This research will hopefully lead to a better understanding of the potential role stories about relationships and sex have in the lives of readers and help to legitimize these stories in society.

If you volunteer for this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview about takes approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

If you are interested in participating, or you know someone who would be interested, please contact me at the information provided. If you don't have time now or are leaving London after exams, that's perfectly fine. I will be conducting interviews over the summer and I also can do them over skype.

Thank you very much for your time and I look forward to hearing from you.

Appendix C. Letter of Information



LETTER OF INFORMATION AND CONSENT

STUDY TITLE: Narratives of Sexuality in the Lives of Young Women Readers

Student Researcher: Davin Helkenberg, LIS Ph.D. Student
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
E-mail:
Phone:

Supervisor:
Dr. Paulette Rothbauer, Associate Professor
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
E-mail:
Phone:

What is this study about?

I am a female doctoral student interested in learning about your experiences reading erotic or sexually themed Young Adult Literature and to talk to you about how these materials have potentially informed your life. This study is about the role of erotic or sexually themed Young Adult Literature in the lives of young women. You are invited to participate if you:

- like to read Young Adult Literature (erotic/romance/sexually themed)
- identify as female
- are between 18-24 years of age

The study will require an interview and a short demographic survey that will last anywhere from 60-90 minutes. You will be asked questions about your experiences reading erotic or sexually themed Young Adult Literature. You will also be asked to complete a short demographic survey.

Interviews may be conducted in person (if geographically feasible) at a mutually agreed upon location between the researcher and participant, or by teleconference (telephone or Skype) if geographically unfeasible. These interviews will be audio recorded using a digital audio recorder. If the interview is conducted via teleconference, only the audio component of the interview will be recorded and not the video component. The

participant must explicitly consent to be audio recorded (either in writing or verbally). Due to the limitations of the researchers, interviews will be conducted in English.

Before the interview you will be asked to write a list of any erotic or sexuality themed Young Adult book titles that you feel are relevant to you or this project. These can be in the form of novels, graphic novels, short stories, poetry, fanfiction or other online stories, etc.

Possible Risks and Harms

You may feel some discomfort talking about topics of sexuality. You will not be required to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. If you have a history of sexual trauma you may want to consider if discussions of sexuality may be potentially re-traumatizing for you before you consent to participate in the interview. If you do experience emotional upset or distress please contact the following local resources.

Mental Health Helplines

Ontario: <http://www.mentalhealthhelpline.ca/> or call 1-866-531-2600

British Columbia: <https://www.cmha.bc.ca/get-informed/crisis-information> or call 310-6789

Helplines for Survivors of Sexual Violence

Ontario:

British Columbia:

Western Student Health Services - Mental Wellbeing

Website: http://uwo.ca/health/mental_wellbeing/self/student.html

Phone:

Location:

Is my participation voluntary?

Yes. You may refuse to participate, refuse to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time without having to give any reasons.

What will happen to my responses?

If you consent, our interview will be audio-recorded, and then transcribed into print, which will then be used in this research. You may also participate if you would prefer not to be audio-recorded. In this case the researcher will take written notes during the interview to use in this research.

All information that could identify will be removed from the data, and pseudonyms will be used to further protect your identity. It will be securely stored in the principal investigator's university office and will be destroyed five years after the completion of the study. All personal information collected will remain confidential and will be accessible only to the researchers. Representatives of The University of Western Ontario Non-Medical Research Ethics Board may require access to your study-related records to monitor the conduct of the research.

The results of this study, including the use of direct quotes from interviews may be published in papers, books, or presented at conferences or used in teaching materials. Your name will not be used in any research publications. If you are interested, you may request copies of the interview transcripts as well as copies of any future possible publications.

While we do our best to protect your information, there is no guarantee that we will be able to do so. If data is collected during the project which we may be required to report by law we have a duty to report. The researcher is under ethical obligation to report any instances of abuse if there is credible evidence or reasonable grounds to suspect that you are in need of protection.

Will I be compensated for my participation?

There is no financial compensation for participation.

To sign-up for study or for more information:

If you are interested in participating in this study please contact:

Davin Helkenberg, Ph.D. Student

Phone:

Email:

Supervisor:

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant or the conduct of this study you may contact:

The Office of Research Ethics

Phone:

Email:

Thank you.

Your interest in participating in this research study is greatly appreciated!

This letter is yours to keep for future reference.

STUDY TITLE: Narratives of Sexuality in the Lives of Young Women Readers**CONSENT FORM**

I have read the Letter of Information, have had the nature of the study explained to me and I agree to participate. All questions have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to be audio recorded in this research: **YES** **NO**

If no to above, I agree to allow written notes to be taken during the interview: **YES**
 NO

Participant's Name (please print):

Participant's Signature:

Date:

Person Obtaining Informed Consent (please print):

Signature:

Date:

Appendix D. Interview Schedule

Narratives of Sexuality in Erotic Young Adult Literature

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Before the interview begins:

Explain the purpose of the project and the interview procedures.

Provide participants with a copy of the Letter of Information and consent form.

Remind participants that they are free to not answer any or all questions and to stop the interview at any time should they wish to do so.

Questions

Focused Life History

- 1) When you were growing up, where did you get your information about sex?
- 2) How did you become interested in YAL about relationships or sex?
- 3) Can you describe to me one of the first memories you have of reading a book that dealt with the topic of sexuality: for example, coming of age, relationships, sex, exploring sexuality, etc.? (probes: title, author, sexual content or themes) Did you learn something from the experience?
- 4) Have you ever read a book about relationships or sex that changed your life? What book? How did it change your life?

The Details of the Experience

- 5) How many YA books do you read about relationships or sex per month or year? How many of these do you: purchase, borrow from friends, loan from the library or access online?
- 6) What was the last book you read that was about a romantic or sexual relationship? Why did you choose it?
- 7) What are your favorite kinds of stories about relationships or sex: conventional romance, realistic depictions, LGBTQ, fantasy, erotic, etc.? Do you read stories about relationships or sex online? Probe: fanfiction reading/writing, etc.
- 8) Are there any kinds of stories about relationships and sex that you don't like to read? Why?
- 9) Can you describe to me an experience you had where you read a story about a romantic or sexual relationship and it taught you something new or about something you knew little about?

Related questions:

- i. gained a better understanding of relationships – what they're really like
- ii. been able to sympathize/empathize with a certain character or situation you were unfamiliar with before
- iii. Taught you something new about sexual acts

- 10) Can you describe to me an experience where you strongly identified with a character that was in a romantic or sexual relationship? Did their experience teach you anything?
- 11) Have you ever strongly identified with or learned something from a character that was going through a difficult situation in terms of relationships or sex? Can you tell me about it?
- 12) Have you ever read a book about a relationship that you felt strongly against? If so, what about it didn't you like?

Reflecting on the Meaning

- 13) How likely are you to apply something you've learned about relationships or sex in a book to your own life? Can you remember a time when you did this?
- 14) Have you ever had a conversation with a friend about something you've learned from a book about relationships or sex? Can you describe the experience?
- 15) What do you think is special about YA books about relationships and sex?
- 16) Do you think teens could learn valuable information about relationships and sex from YAL? Why or why not?


Other

- 17) How would you feel about reading a book about sex in a book club setting with your peers and discussing what you learned from it openly? Do you think the public library would be a good place for teens to do this? Why or why not?
- 18) Is there anything you think we forgot? Or is there anything else you think I should know?

Following the interview:

Administer short written demographic/follow-up survey.

Appendix E. Research Ethics Board Approval Notice



**Western
Research**

Research Ethics

**Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board
NMREB Delegated Initial Approval Notice**

Principal Investigator: Patricia Rothbauer
Department & Institution: Information and Media Studies/Faculty of Information & Media Studies, Western University

NMREB File Number: 107658
Study Title: Narratives of Sexuality in the Lives of Young Women Readers
Sponsor:

NMREB Initial Approval Date: March 08, 2016
NMREB Expiry Date: March 08, 2017

Documents Approved and/or Received for Information:

| Document Name | Comments | Version Date |
|---------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|
| Western University Protocol | Received February 26, 2016 | |
| Letter of Information & Consent | | 2016-02/22 |
| Instruments | Interview schedule | 2016-01/27 |
| Instruments | Demographic survey | 2016-01/27 |
| Recruitment Items | Recruitment poster | 2016-01/27 |
| Recruitment Items | Class recruitment script | 2016-01/27 |

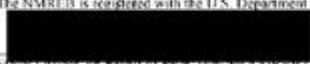
The Western University Non-Medical Research Ethics Board (NMREB) has reviewed and approved the above named study, as of the NMREB Initial Approval Date noted above.

NMREB approval for this study remains valid until the NMREB Expiry Date noted above, conditional to timely submission and acceptance of NMREB Continuing Ethics Review.

The Western University NMREB operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2), the Ontario Personal Health Information Protection Act (PHIPA, 2004), and the applicable laws and regulations of Ontario.

Members of the NMREB who are named as Investigators in research studies do not participate in discussions related to, nor vote on such studies when they are presented to the REB.

The NMREB is registered with the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services under the IRB registration number IRB 0000941.


 Ethics Officer, or Chair or Deputy Chair or Vice-Chair or delegated board member

Ethics Officer to Contact for Further Information: Erika Basile ___ Nicole Kanuki ___ Grace Kelly Mira Mekhal ___ Vikki Tran ___

This is an official document. Please retain the original in your files

Curriculum Vitae

Name: Davin L. Helkenberg

Post-secondary Education and Degrees: University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2019 Ph.D. LIS

University of Western Ontario
London, Ontario, Canada
2011 M.L.I.S.

University of Northern British Columbia
Prince George, British Columbia, Canada
2010 B.A. English Literature; minor in First Nations Studies

Honours and Awards: Student to CAIS/ACSI Award – Best Student Paper
2019

Province of Ontario Graduate Scholarship
2016-2017

University of Western Ontario Entrance Scholarship
2013

Related Work Experience: Course Lecturer
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
Summer 2015, Fall 2017

Research Assistant
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
Supervisor: Dr. Daniel Robinson Winter 2017 – Present
Supervisor: Dr. Paulette Rothbauer Fall 2017

Graduate Teaching Assistant
Faculty of Information and Media Studies
University of Western Ontario
2013-2017

Professional Work Experience: Reference/Youth Services Librarian
Okanagan Regional Library
Fall 2018-Present

Student Assistant
University of Northern British Columbia Library
Fall 2007/2008/2009 – Spring 2008/2009/2010

Publications:

Helkenberg, D. L. (2019). Paul Kwiatkowski's *And Every Day Was Overcast* and redefining Young Adult Literature. *InterActions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies*, 15(1).

Helkenberg, D. L., et.al. (2018). Education for the common good: A student perspective on including social justice in LIS education. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 59(4), 265-71.

Helkenberg, D. L. (2017). Teaching disruptive literature in precarious times: A case study from Library and Information Science. In E. J. M. Knox (Ed), *Trigger Warnings: History, Theory, Context* (pp. 239-256). Lanham, MD: Roman and Littlefield.

Presentations:

Helkenberg, D. L. (2019, June). Young Women Readers Encountering Information on Sexuality in Young Adult Literature. Paper presented at the Annual Canadian Association for Information Science Conference at the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences 2019, Vancouver, BC.

Helkenberg, D. L. (2018, May). Reading for Alternatives: The Experiences of Young Women Who Read Sexuality-Themed Fiction Online. Paper presented at the Annual Canadian Association for Information Science Conference at Congress 2018, Regina, SK.

Helkenberg, D. L. (2017, June). Reading Difficult Stories: Girls and Sexual Knowledge in Text and Lived Experience. Paper presented at the 25th Annual Society for the History of Authorship, Reading, and Publishing Conference, Victoria, BC.

Helkenberg, D. L. (2016, May). "Everything's so loveless and mediocre": Complex Narratives of Sexuality, Heartbreak, and Melancholy in *The Diary of a Teenage Girl*. Paper presented at the Moving Forward International Symposium: Schooled Bodies, Identities, Sexting, and the Curriculum That Frames Us, London, ON.

Helkenberg, D. L. (2016, April). The Noise that Fascinates Them: Girls and Sexual Ambiguity in Young Adult Literature. Paper presented at the 6th Annual Western University Women's Studies and Feminist Research Conference, London, ON.

University Service:

Doctoral Forum Committee - Canadian Association for Information Science Conference
Committee Chair Fall 2018 – June 2019

mediations Workshop Series Committee – University of Western Ontario
Committee Chair Fall 2016 – Winter 2018
Member Fall 2015 – Summer 2016

LIS Doctoral Students' Association – University of Western Ontario
Representative on Doctoral Programming Committee 2014 – Winter 2015

MLIS Student Council – Western University
Summer 2011

Librarians Without Borders – Western University
Summer 2011