

SEX IN YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Choices and Consequences

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## **Sex in Young Adult Literature: Choices and Consequences**

“The whole problem about the sexual problem,” said Hammond, who was a tall thin fellow with a wife and two children but much more closely connected with a typewriter, “is that there is no point to it. Strictly there is no problem. We don’t want to follow a man into the W.C., so why should we want to follow him into bed with a woman? And therein lies the problem. If we took no more notice of the one thing than the other, there’d be no problem. It’s all utterly senseless and pointless; a matter of misplaced curiosity.”

—D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*

### **Introduction**

Many people fancy themselves gatekeepers to the content of Young Adult (YA) literature. In the past, the same kind of people were involved in the banning of such authors as Henry Miller or D.H. Lawrence or Vladimir Nabokov, but since being rebuffed by the courts in the UK and US, they have trained their eyes on a new cause: Protecting the Innocent Children.

Drug use, rape, incest, eating disorders, profanity, criminal delinquency, and gay and lesbian characters are just a few of the subjects that get challenged by such modern scolds. The world has a spectrum of sadness and ugliness that some people are bent on protecting young people from, but none is more objected to than sexual content in books meant to be read by adolescents.

I could trace such attitudes back to our Puritan forebears or examine the dichotomy of a culture that uses sex as a marketing trick designed to sell but forbids sex for all except those in certain exclusive and ordained situations. Certainly, there is a marked diversity of opinion on what sex itself should be, and whom it should involve, so

any depiction of it is sure to be controversial, even in a society that considers itself enlightened on matters of the body and biology.

The issue is additionally complicated by the recent growth in the genre of YA literature. Many adult readers who have read current publications in this genre remark with shock about the content of the books. A common reaction is, “I didn’t think you could have sex/drugs/rape/violence in a YA book!”

In the last decade, YA literature has changed from stories meant to instruct and offer good role models to books about the experience of growing up and enduring adolescence. This means that the problems of acne and prom dates aren’t the last word in this genre. There are also many subgenres of YA— science fiction, romance, paranormal/supernatural stories, fantasy, dystopian and post-apocalyptic, horror—and, with all that variation, what marks these stories as YA is the simple fact that they feature teenaged characters (Karre). Adolescence is a global experience, though varied from continent to continent, which only further enlarges what content the genre may approach.

### **Scope**

For the purposes of this discussion, all sexual scenes referred to will involve activity that involves a degree of nudity, vulnerability, potential or realized physical pleasure, negotiation, and engagement of genitalia or erogenous zones. Many YA books also show rape, sexual assault, and incest, but such scenes offer a completely different aesthetic than consensual sexual scenes. To treat consensual sex as if it was of the same cloth as rape and other sexual violence is to degrade and corrupt the concept of sexual experience for young people just entering this arena of life. Violent imagery combined with sexual

titillation is a seriously damaging combination for readers and viewers of television/film imagery.

Roxane\_Gay, in an essay for *The Rumpus* about rape and its portrayal in the media, proposes that “we need to find new ways, whether in fiction or creative nonfiction or journalism, for not only rereading rape but rewriting rape as well, ways of rewriting that restore the actual violence to these crimes and that make it impossible for men to be excused for committing atrocities.” Young male readers need to understand and absorb images of rape and sexual assault as a possible, deviant path their sexual journey might take, but a clear taboo. We live in a culture where most rapes are not reported; where many rape survivors are not believed; where men are conditioned to view their sexual desires as irrevocable, instinctual, and unstoppable. Many current representations of rape, continues Gay, “ignore the material realities of rape, the impact of rape, the meaning of rape.”

I do not advocate overt moralizing in writing, especially when writing about adolescence, because preachiness generally interferes with good storytelling and is counterproductive, as well (nobody has a sharper meter for sermonizing than a teenager). However, writing and publishing titillating rape or sexual assault scenes is essentially promoting these crimes by putting them on the same level as erotica. Conversations around youth sex and sexuality are negative and limited enough that writers of YA literature have the responsibility to communicate to young people the important difference between consensual and nonconsensual sex.

## **Categorization**

YA authors treat sexual content in a story in these four main ways:

1. Fade-to-Black. Scene takes characters to point of significant sexual contact but doesn't describe anything further or merely ends the scene.
2. Feelings-Focused. Scene focuses on emotionality or inner thoughts, not on what is happening with anyone's body.
3. Physicalities-Focused. Scene focuses on physical details, often journalistically, without commenting on emotionality or reflecting on the experience in a larger sense.
4. Feelings- and Physicalities-Focused. Scene offers a balance of interior and exterior events.

Each approach will be examined using relevant examples, with an analysis of why the author may have chosen to depict sexual content as such, including possible advantages and disadvantages in each portrayal, with respect to the service to young readers and to the problems of craft itself.

While not every author will feel comfortable writing about sex—and not every YA story will demand it—the most honest depiction of sexual activity, and the one we owe readers in the face of the monolith of porn and the absence of sexuality and health education in so many public schools, is depiction #4. However, there are many reasons why an author would choose to select the other three approaches when it comes to sex in YA fiction. The reasoning behind those choices as well as their success in executing those approaches will also be discussed.

## **Character Point-of-View and Sexual Content**

YA is an incredibly expansive genre, containing many subgenres and mash-ups: horror, science fiction, romance, mystery. Despite that, there are two main routes that YA

authors take when writing sexual content, should they choose to include such content in the first place.

In most YA that features sexual content, we experience it either through the main character or via a good friend or loved one of the main character. The latter approach often highlights how the adjacent or secondary character's experience is a kind of warning against the perils of sex as an activity. Often this secondary experience is used as a clichéd showcase of dire consequences that the main character observes as evidence not to have sex (or at least not within the temporal confines of the narrative).

For example, in Sarah Mlynowski's *Ten Things We Did (and Probably Shouldn't Have)*, April, the main character, has a best friend, Vi, who decides to have sex in an effort to cast off the label of "virgin." Vi picks Dean, a boy she's been friends with for years:

"But Dean is your best friend. What if sex...changes that?"

She shook her head. "It won't. It's not going to change anything for me. I'll still think of him as a best friend. And what's the worst that it does to him? Make him want to have sex with me all the time? He already wants to have sex with me all the time."

"But it could change the dynamic of the friendship."

"Not if I don't let it. You can control these things." (153)

But Vi cannot control the fact that Dean ends up having "more than friends" feelings for her, and, predictably, their relationship becomes complicated. The Vi/Dean subplot showcases for April how messy sex can be while still offering the reader some titillation. In this way, April can retain her good-decision-maker status, while the reader

gets some vicarious thrills, and everyone learns a little something about the gravity of sex. We can judge Vi easily and silently root for April not to make her mistakes.

Because adjacent/secondary characters are often viewed through a didactic lens, the discussion here will deal only with books that feature main characters directly involved in sexual activity. Another method (which I will not address in depth) for presenting sexual content using the main character is a dream sequence: sex happening in the character's head, and on the page, but not *really* happening. This method is often seen in fantasy/paranormal. For example, in Melissa Marr's urban faery fantasy, *Radiant Shadows*, Devlin and Ani are linked into a dreamscape where they are able to touch without complication (one of Ani's powers is to suck energy from other supernatural beings, so she cannot touch Devlin without danger). In Libba Bray's *The Sweet Far Thing*, Gemma and Kartik are united in a physical way through a dream portal in the Realms where Gemma must battle the forces of evil. (Marr includes some suggestive touching and ends with a Fade-to-Black scenario, while Bray takes a more Feelings-Focused approach.) While this dream format can be lovely for a reader, it's a kind of cop-out. The author can have her cake and eat it too: she can magically enjoy the seamless pleasures of sex without being accused of endorsing teen sex or handling uncomfortable logistical details involving age of consent, pregnancy, or disease.

### **Erotic, Graphic, or Honest?**

The terms "erotic," "graphic," and "honest" are often used to describe sex scenes in all fiction, not just that for adolescents. Generally speaking, the term "erotic" and YA don't go together, mainly due to the discomfort many authors, readers, and publishers have

with the blurred boundaries between adult writers and teenaged readers as well as the idea of adolescent sexual agency. Since erotica is meant to titillate readers in private, and because adolescence is a phase of life marked by an astonishing lack of privacy, and because many adults do not wish to acknowledge sex in the lives of young people, the term “erotic” is largely absent from the academic analysis of sexuality in YA literature.

In addition, the term “graphic” -has negative connotations when used in conjunction with sex. Objecting to this word is actually disingenuous, as data or visuals deemed “graphic” are often the ones that provide the most information to the uninitiated. “Graphic,” then, is usually shorthand for “shocking” or “inappropriate.”

But “graphic” is in the eye of the beholder. It seems to scold or stifle, not encourage deeper inspection. For this reason, the term I value and prefer when discussing and crafting sexual content in YA fiction is “honest.”

As writers, the best we can do is offer a view of the world as we truthfully see it. Readers may disagree with this, of course, but well-executed, truthful portrayals of the human experience will thrive on such disagreement. The opposite, undesirable response from a reader would be disengagement and disinterest. So, though the word “honest” can be debated, I prefer it when characterizing an effective and compelling sexual scene for young adult readers.

Adolescence is a time when many of the preconceptions and lies we’ve been told start to disintegrate. A time when the admonitions of our parents inhibit us even as we’re driven toward risk and experimentation. Readers in that phase of life deserve a writer’s best attempt at honesty, in all things, but especially in that forbidden, hidden realm of sexuality. They deserve more than Photoshopped theater or clinical medical descriptions.

Yet, concerns linger in every writer's mind when it comes to sex. Will people understand this? Will it disgust them? Will it literally turn them off? Will I be mocked in the press, as happens formally in annual lists like *Literary Review UK*'s "Annual Bad Sex Awards"? Will I be accused of depravity or salacious speech? Self-censorship is always an easy option when writers are faced with the issue of sexuality in their work. The question is simply answered by asking oneself, "Who will care if I don't include sex in my novel?"

The answer, I've found increasingly as a reader of YA fiction, is me: I will care. I will wonder why the author didn't choose to enter this realm, especially given that he or she is writing about adolescence, a time marked by intense biological and hormonal changes as well as sexual identity development, and I will be disappointed by the author's artistic reticence and the missed opportunity for discussion.

### **Fade-to-Black**

In the 1970s and 80s, when YA was solidifying as both a genre and an audience, any stories that featured sexual content usually used it as an allegory or a teaching tool (albeit, a very crude teaching tool). Sex in these books typically included consequences like pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, abortion, rape, social isolation, and sexual harassment. The underlying message was this: adolescents who have sex do so at their own peril.

It was really Judy Blume's *Forever* that kicked the door open on this subject as something a reader could relate to emotionally as well as physically, and regard as simply another risk adolescents encounter in their lives. *Forever* features two teenagers, the

college-bound Michael and the responsible Katherine, who fall in love. Both come from privileged, loving families; both are smart and caring. They decide to have sex and plan for it, visiting a birth control clinic, planning the “right” time. The book catalogs their journey into a sexual and emotional relationship, ending with their breaking up and moving on. One would think this book, published in 1975, would be considered tame by today’s standards, but there remains an odd prudishness against literature about or aimed at young adults. Despite all the well-intentioned steps Michael and Katherine take prior to having sex, *Forever* is still one of the YA books whose inclusion in school and public libraries (ALA) is most challenged by parents.

*Forever* actually reveals how the times have regressed. Adults casually smoke marijuana in this book; Katherine’s grandmother is very open and encouraging about sex. It’s no surprise, then, that given the current abstinence-only rhetoric of most schools and school libraries, consequence-free sex and drug use in books remains controversial. This may be why many contemporary YA authors choose the Fade-to-Black option.

This was famously done by Stephenie Meyer in her wildly popular vampire series, *Twilight*. Stringing along the readers for three-and-a-half books, she finally allows Edward and Bella to have sex (after they are married) in the final book, *Breaking Dawn*, but even then, the scene fades to black as they swim nude together in the ocean on their honeymoon night:

This moment was so perfect, so right, there was no way to doubt it. His arms wrapped around me, holding me against him, summer and winter. It felt like every nerve ending in my body was a live wire. “Forever,” he agreed, and then pulled us gently into deeper water. (85)

That sex between two legally married and very-much-in-love virgins is given no more ink than I've given it here is a travesty, and the reason why many people have called the *Twilight* series "abstinence porn" (Seifert). A few chapters later, Meyer devotes over a dozen pages to the graphically bloody and violent birth of Edward and Bella's child, yet the act that created the child is not worthy of documentation, even though this entire series' plot hangs on the question of romance and love.

Many authors (and readers) argue that the Fade-to-Black method is preferable because it lets the reader's imagination fill in the blanks. I'm not sure how this makes sense. If one is reading a book, one's imagination is already clocking in on the job. Why should the author be allowed to punch out on his or her timecard, then?

But Fade-to-Black can also serve writerly purposes that aren't about avoidance. Often it is used in scenes where a character is engaging in repetitive and markedly negative sexual behavior, as in Alison McGhee's *All Rivers Flow to the Sea*. The narrator, in grief over her dying sister, seeks oblivion in the arms of a string of young men. Interestingly, sex between characters who don't have fond feelings for each other can occur as a Fade-to-Black. Perhaps this is the author's way of insisting that readers are not supposed to root for the eventual coupling of these characters, and so don't deserve the particulars of the event. In *This Lullaby*, Sarah Dessen does not flesh out Remy's sexual encounters with boys prior to her relationship with Dexter, as she has no emotional connection with those boys. The emotionlessness of those encounters is later underscored by her head-over-heels love for Dexter, with whom she never has sex in the story.

Sometimes sex scenes signal a moral judgment. In Trish Doller's *Something Like Normal*, the main character Travis has just returned home after a tour in Afghanistan. His homecoming is troubled for many reasons, not the least that his ex-girlfriend Paige has now started dating his younger brother. But this does not mean Paige is done with Travis; she seems to think seeing Travis on the side is okay and Travis just slides back into his old physical relationship with Paige. These encounters occur in scenes, not summaries and that their sexual encounters get more ink than any others points up their shameful one-dimensionality. This is perhaps what D.H. Lawrence meant back in 1930 when he decried the idea in pornography that "real sex feeling shall only be shown by the villain or villainess" (70). Paige is definitely a character with a negative bent, shown to be selfish and only interested in her own satisfaction, not the best interest of either Travis or his brother. The physical relationship is shown, perhaps, to underscore that this is the only connection Travis has with Paige.

But with Harper, the girl Travis comes to know on a deeper emotional level, the sex occurs off-page. Harper is the girl who wants to know Travis as a person, who he feels comfortable with sharing his issues with his family and his PTSD. She represents a positive movement forward, not an old bad habit. Doller never really divulges whether they have sex at all, but instead just leaves the reader with a passing reference to a tattoo that Harper said she couldn't show Travis in public: "Also, I've seen Harper's tattoo" (208).

Doller's use of Fade-To-Black doesn't feel prudish, though. It makes sense with Travis's character. He doesn't see Harper as just a sexual tool, but neither is he a person that is willing to turn down easy sex. Travis being both a nice guy and a guy with a

sexual appetite strikes true for his particular situation (being a Marine returning home after a long deployment). The reader gets more than mechanical action build-up and emotion in the scenes with Harper because Travis, as the first person narrator, is also much more entwined in the relationship, as if he wants to give his own feelings (and Harper's as well) some privacy.

Kirstin Cronn-Mills uses a Fade-to-Black sex scene in *The Sky Always Hears Me: And the Hills Don't Mind* to show the sexual evolution of her main character, Morgan. Morgan has been sexually active with her boyfriend Derek, who is nice enough but doesn't share her desire to escape life in a small Nebraska town. Their sex life hasn't been noteworthy in terms of pleasure for Morgan, and sex remains something she does ambivalently, always hoping it'll improve. As the novel also circles around Morgan's sharing a drunken kiss with a female classmate and her crush on Rob, her co-worker at the grocery store, all aspects of sexual experimentation are open to Morgan. Even though our witnessing a sex scene between Derek and Morgan might make us more sympathetic to their romantic pairing, Cronn-Mills still goes on record about the milestone this sexual activity is for Morgan:

He caresses my face and looks into my eyes, really looks. "I want to make love to you the right way. In a bed. In a house. Happy birthday, sweetheart."

"Where'd you get the idea?" Against my will, almost, I nibble his ear. "I Googled 'how to make love to a woman,' Good plan, huh?" He's nuzzling my neck.

Booty calls and Google. Of course. Rob is in my mind's eye for a split second. Then I am instantly ashamed, so I pull Derek closer and nibble some more so I don't see his face and he can't see mine. "What a great gift. Thank you."

I don't deserve this.

Derek kisses me. It's a long, slow, deep, incredible kiss. We lie down on the bed and kiss for a long, long time. Then we get down to business. I don't think about anybody but me. Derek goes slow. And I love it. For the first time. (108)

Given that this scene could elicit the reader's sympathy for Derek—which Cronn-Mills doesn't want, as he's clearly not the person who understands Morgan best—Fade-to-Black is a good option because readers are likely to become attached to him if they go move-by-move through the scene where he provides Morgan with her first experience of shared sexual pleasure.

In *Where Things Come Back* by John Corey Whaley, the book's one sex scene also fades to black after the narrator, Cullen Witter, has his first sexual encounter:

[T]wo and a half hours later, I found myself sitting on Alma Ember's bed. I was completely naked save for a pair of gold-toed socks and a cross necklace that I'd found in my brother's room. Alma Ember wore even less than that. After she showed me what being a good wife had taught her—her words, not mine—I fell asleep under the watchful eyes of a dozen or so porcelain dolls. (61)

Because Cullen Witter is consumed with worry and grief about his missing brother Gabriel, the plot is not consumed with his sexual coming-of-age; he does not spend much time obsessing about whether he'll get laid, and, indeed, when Alma Ember crosses his path, he has mixed feelings about her role (she's an older girl and newly divorced.) Because the sex has no transformative powers for Cullen, Whaley doesn't focus on it as anything more than a complication that wends the plot down the road for discovering Gabriel's fate.

Perhaps the most upsetting Fade-to-Black scene I've read recently occurs in John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*. The adolescent sex in this book is between the story's narrator, Hazel, who has lung cancer and uses an oxygen tank, and Augustus, who has lost his lower leg after a bout with bone cancer and wears a prosthetic. Hazel offers a few details about negotiating these issues: her oxygen tubes get tangled as she undresses; she mentions that Augustus, self-conscious about how his stump looks, warns her about it beforehand. But just when we might want to see how sex would work between two people with such physical challenges, Green fades to black in a summary:

The whole affair was the precise opposite of what I figured it would be: slow and patient and quiet and neither particularly painful nor particularly ecstatic. There were a lot of condomy problems that I did not get a particularly good look at. No headboards were broken. No screaming. Honestly, it was probably the longest time we'd ever spent together without talking. (207–208)

There are so many incongruities with the way this scene is handled. First, why are they using condoms? Both characters are virgins, and Hazel, due to constant

chemotherapy since a very young age, no longer menstruates and likely sterile. Yet, Green adds the idiotic condom detail as if he cannot help but put in a sensible public service announcement about sexual protection for the young reader.

Second, for two kids who are facing their mortality in a stark, undeniable way, the way that Hazel dismisses the whole sex act as not being “particularly” noteworthy is ludicrous. Maybe she is dying, but Hazel is a still young girl, one filled with deep feeling for Augustus and the mysteries of his body. Seeing a naked body, even one riddled with and deformed by cancer, still remains an enthralling rite of passage for a young person. While it is true that sex at this age is often marked by the female’s lack of pleasure, Hazel’s disinterest is too overstated and thus unimaginable. Indeed, she seems more energized about writing a love letter on the hotel stationery after Augustus falls asleep than anything else. This also doesn’t track because, for the first portion of the book, Hazel never misses an opportunity to discuss how “sexy” and “hot” Augustus is. The idea that she wouldn’t find pleasure in at least touching his body is incredulous.

Perhaps the most disappointing aspect about this scene is that, if you subscribe to the notion that porn today functions as a *de facto* sex educator (Savage), kids likely have no idea about what sex looks like between people with physical problems or disabilities. Green had this educational opportunity right at his fingertips and chose instead to glide past it, a glaring letdown in an otherwise beautifully written book.

### **Feelings-Focused**

In sex scenes that are Feelings-Focused, the character involved (usually a girl, often a virgin) narrates what is going on mentally and emotionally as she steps across the pivotal

sexual threshold. The reader is in the character's head, not her body; and often what's going on in her head is related to her emotional response (realizing she's in love, marveling at her daring, enumerating a cascading variety of thoughts or worries) and is some extended metaphor about what this sex means in her life.

In Brent Hartinger's *Geography Club*, the main character, Russel, is a closeted gay boy with a secret crush on Kevin, a popular jock. Soon Russel discovers that Kevin is gay, too, after a coincidental meet-up one night. When Russel and Kevin finally get physical, the scene focuses first on Russel's feelings:

...I stepped up to Kevin and kissed him. In the close confines of his arms, it felt like I had stepped right up into the stars themselves—like I had become one with the sky, and that together we were as clean and pure and wide as the universe itself. (125)

Lovely as that passage is, though, it hardly offers any vision of how two closeted gay kids might come to touch each other intimately, across many taboos and barriers. In fact, Russel waits an entire chapter more to relive the scene for the reader, and even then Russel is cagey about details: "We kept kissing, only this time there may have been some groping and fumbling and hugging. I think I'll end this scene here, though. After all, a guy should be allowed to keep some secrets, shouldn't he?"(129–130).

Of course, Russel is free to disclose what he wants. But given that he's a closeted gay kid, one could make an argument against the effects of too much secrecy. That Hartinger does not have Russel further describe the sexual interaction between the boys is a missed opportunity (though it's certainly possible that an editor or publisher made this choice, not Hartinger himself). In any event, I imagine a teen reader living in a situation

similar to Russel's would highly appreciate a scene that tracked the physical actions between Kevin and Russel during that first incident.

In Jenny O'Connell's *The Book of Luke*, the sex scene's focus seems to follow the tone of the plot. Emily is on a mission to punish Luke, a popular boy who has wronged one of her friends. The only problem is that Emily finds herself more and more attracted to Luke as the ruse continues. The weekend before many unflattering revelations will come out at school, Emily decides to have sex with him:

When we lay down on Luke's bed, he didn't start unbuttoning my shirt or try to unzip my pants. Instead we just lay there together, my head resting against his shoulder.

"What's with the glow-in-the-dark stars?" I asked, pointing to the ceiling.

"Leftovers from years ago...I went through a phase where I was all into space and planets and that stuff. I always forget they're up there until I go to bed, and then I don't feel like taking them down."

It wasn't the perfect beach scene I once envisioned. There were no waves lapping at our feet, no sunset or shooting stars. Just glow-in-the-dark planets stuck to the ceiling above us. It wasn't how I'd always pictured it, but for some reason it still felt perfect...

I rolled on my side and faced Luke.

"Do you have something?" I whispered.

Luke propped himself up on his elbows and smiled, like he was getting ready to make fun of me. “*Something?* Like a can opener or a bag of frozen peas?”

Despite myself, he got me to laugh. “You know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” Luke closed his eyes and kissed my neck. “I know what you mean.”

I could tell Luke had had sex before, who knows, maybe even with the sophomore from St. Michael’s on New Year’s Eve. But as he looked down at me, his eyes barely an inch from my own, I knew I was different. And I swear, right before I closed my eyes. Luke muttered something that sounded an awful lot like, “I love you.” And then I heard myself saying, “Me, too.” (244–245)

Though birth control is negotiated slightly, there isn’t much physical detail about what happens between Emily and Luke. Mostly the scene seems flushed with the idea of crossing over from childhood to adulthood, which is beautifully alluded to in the glow-in-the-dark stars above Luke’s bed. Because Emily believes that their sexual activity will take place this one time, given the revelations to come, perhaps O’Connell thought it best to point up the emotional connection that will be lost once Emily’s betrayal becomes known to Luke instead of focusing on the physical aspects of sex.

In Meg Rosoff’s *How I Live Now*, a post-apocalyptic mix of war and romance set in England, the main sex scene serves to enhance our understanding of the main character, Daisy, who has been sent to the UK from New York to ride out the current political and societal difficulties as well as her own issues with anorexia. Amidst her

struggle to deal with her eating disorder and her life away from home, Daisy finds herself falling in love with her first cousin Edmond, with whom she shares a very distinct mental connection:

We were quiet for the longest time just listening to the rain on the window with his leg resting against mine and a feeling flying between us in a crazy jagged way like a bird caught in a room. The feeling which had been starting up for a while now was so strong it made me dizzy and so far we'd just been pretending it was what cousinly love felt like and all that garbage you tell yourself when you want to pretend something's not really happening.

After some time I tried an experiment by thinking about something very very quietly to myself, and then nothing happened for ages. *[sic]* Edmond just lay there with his eyes closed and I felt a little disappointed and a little relieved all at the same time and then just as I was moving on to other things in my head, he propped himself up on one elbow and looked at me with a little half-smile and then kissed me on the mouth so gently and sweetly, and then we kissed again, only not quite so sweetly.

And after a little while of this my brain and my body and every single inch of me that was a live was flooded with the feeling that I was starving, starving, starving for Edmond.

And what a coincidence, that was the feeling I loved best in the world.

(44–45)

That Daisy chooses not to describe the physicalities of sex with Edmond is understandable in terms of characterization: she is an anorexic girl who already denies the needs and signals of her body. Perhaps Rosoff wanted to acknowledge that Daisy is discomfited by her attraction to her cousin and so cannot narrate this upfront, either (which also elides over a reader's potential distaste at such a relationship). What's most intriguing about this scene is that Edmond and love itself somehow push her disordered eating mentality aside and replace the "starving" feeling that Daisy has prized so well.

But metaphors for sexual feeling can also be strained and clichéd. In Meg Cabot's *Underworld*, the second book in her modern retelling of the Persephone myth, Pierce is dragged to the Underworld by John Hayden, a modern-day keeper of the gates of hell. She is a prisoner there, for her own safety—the Furies are after her on Earth—and soon she succumbs to her attraction for John. However much Cabot describes their passionate kissing and touching—"each caress leaving my nerve endings feeling as tingly as if they'd just been kissed by a shooting star" (277)—she seems intent on overindulging the metaphor of sexual feelings as planetary phenomena when Pierce and John consummate their relationship:

Apparently the only thing he'd been waiting for was my permission. Once he received it, he took decidedly emphatic action. It wasn't long before the shooting stars returned, only now they were entire galaxies of sparkling suns and planets that seemed to expand and expand until finally they collapsed, showering us both with little bits of stars and moons and cosmos. (278)

As *Underworld* takes place largely in, well, the Underworld, the conflating of sexual pleasure with “heavenly bodies” is understandable, but it’s still quite tired. This type of description, at best, contains no real sexual information and seems poised to deliver up a whole raft of swoony mystery versus lived, sincere experience. At worst, this metaphor seems to indicate that Pierce’s role in her sexual life is to receive the touch of a man as some kind of button-pushing magic in which she is not an active participant.

### **Physicalities-Focused**

In sex scenes that are Physicalities-Focused, the narrating character is intent on describing the action, whatever that may be, in an at-times journalistic fashion: where the sex takes place, how the clothes come off, what kind of birth control or protection is used, if any, etc. These scenes can read as very detached and cold, because the sexual activity is either happening with someone the main character doesn’t really like or know well, or happening not out of love or connection but as a dare or act of will. These scenes often recount first sexual experiences, but can also be used to establish that a character is mentally broken or making self-destructive choices.

In Jenny Downham’s *Before I Die*, a dying Tessa is given just months to live. Accordingly, losing her virginity tops her list of things to do before her end, and one evening she finds a boy for the task:

He pulls up his T-shirt, over his face, his arms raised. For a second he can’t see me, but he’s exposed—his chest, freckled and young, the dark shine of hair under his armpits. He chucks the T-shirt on the floor and kisses me again. He tries to unbuckle his belt without looking, with only

one hand, but can't do it. He pulls away, looking at me all the while as he fumbles at button and zip. There's a moment when maybe he's uncertain, and he hesitates, seems shy. I notice his feet, innocent as daisies in their white socks, and I want to give him something. (22)

Tessa's narration is measured and clinical. She barely knows this boy and is determined to see the act through, though she seems disconnected from it, even as it happens:

He lies down, moves my legs apart with his, presses himself closer, his weight on top of me. Soon I'll feel him inside me and I'll know what all the fuss is about. This was my idea.

I notice lots of things while the red neon numbers on his radio alarm move from 3:15 to 3:19. I notice that his shoes are on their side by the door. The door isn't shut properly. There's a strange shadow on the ceiling in the far corner that looks like a face. I think of a fat man I once saw sweating as he jogged down our street. I think of an apple. I think that a safe place to be would be under the bed, or with my head on my mother's lap.

He supports himself with his arms, moving slowly above me, his face turned to one side, his eyes tight shut. This is it. It's really happening. I'm living it now. Sex. (25)

Tessa's experience is certainly weighted and motivated by the knowledge of her own impending death. But this scene is like many narrated by girls in YA books, in that all the waiting and anticipation leave them feeling underwhelmed and cheated, the

breathless feelings leading up to sex much more intense than the actual event. Stacking the observations one upon the other reinforces such disconnection in a beautiful and sad manner.

Daria Snadowsky's narrator in *Anatomy of a Boyfriend* has a similar experience. Dominique, a high school senior and aspiring pre-med student, views her sexual encounters with her first boyfriend, Wes, in very clinical, medical terms, as the title suggests. Though Dominique has deep feelings for Wes, she narrates their shared sexual experiences with a technical eye that is both quirky and realistic for an intelligent, reflective character navigating her first steps into sex:

He reaches to pull down my undies, and I lie back next to him. His left arm is around my shoulders, and his right hand is between my legs. He's much gentler and slower than last time. But as he bobs in and out of me, I don't really feel anything. Soon he thumbs my clitoris simultaneously, which feels...okay. I fake some moaning noises every few seconds so he'll keep going, but I wouldn't say I'm enjoying it. (144)

Dominique, having discussed sex with her best friend and aware that things can feel good with the right touch, is somewhat nonplussed by the whole event. As they continue physically exploring each other, and her feelings for him intensify, Dominique begins to see how much power she has over Wes sexually, while she herself feels very physically unfulfilled. Even with her knowledge of anatomy, she seems to be waiting for something magical, for Wes to declare his love or somehow hit the right spot at the precise moment. When they finally get to intercourse itself, Dominique finds it very painful. Her close attention and narration of the proceedings seem to blind her to the

relationship's impending doom, as well as distract her from her own physical satisfaction. This depiction helps underscore Snadowsky's subtext, which is that there is more to being sexually active than anatomy and physiology.

In Adam Rapp's *Under The Wolf, Under The Dog*, we see a reversal of Dominique's situation. The narrator, Steve, is a patient in a mental health clinic for teenagers and is slowly disclosing, through the narrative, the traumatic events that brought him there. One day he finds himself alone in a supply closet with a female patient everyone calls Silent Starla and is somewhat gobsmacked by Starla's "masterful" seduction:

Then she turned the light off and removed her shirt. Her breasts were maybe the best things I've ever felt in my life. Sort of soft and round, and her nipples were highly aroused. Someone had forgotten to turn off the clip light on the other side of the room...but I could still see her pretty good.

"Call me Sinead," she said while she ran her hands through my hair, which has grown out enough by now to actually grab onto a bit, which she was doing, which was making everything even more masterful than it already was.

"Sinead," I said, kissing her breasts, "Sinead."

Then she took my clothes off—all of them—just like that, and I was standing there naked, trying to sort of cover my erection, when she started touching me. At first she sort of touched my stomach and then she touched my knees and then she touched the scar on my shin and then she did some

other stuff that I won't gross you out with, and then she took her clothes off, and she has a pretty masterful body, I must say, and her pubic hair was nice and trim and sort of glistening, and then she produced a condom from some unknown region and then she was putting it on me and then leaned back and sort of pulled me on top of her and she made me touch her between her legs for a while and then she pushed my hand away and put my penis inside of her and we made love. (226–227)

How Rapp conveys Steve's rapt concentration mixed with shock is beautiful and smart. Long, extended sentences that flip from past to present tense, combined with repetitions of all the moves of Silent Starla/Sinead ("and then she..."), fully immerse us in the action while also keeping us in the past with the "virgin" Steve, the boy for whom this act has only ever been a fantasy. The final sentence "and we made love" coming on the heels of so much just-the-facts reportage is especially funny and poignant.

Paul Griffin's *Stay with Me* features a sex scene that focuses on physical details, but not the traditional ones. The narrator, Cece, after meeting Mack at the restaurant where they both work, has sex with him on the rooftop of his apartment building. It is Cece's first time, and while she narrates what happens physically with very few feelings, she chooses to describe many physicalities beyond the erogenous zones:

His fingertips trace the lines of my ribs. I can feel his heart beating through me. The tip of his thumb rides a soft slow circle around my belly, winding into the button. I feel myself breathing faster as his thumb arcs down, and his fingertips are at the band of my underwear. Under the band now...

It happens fast: We're naked. He's kissing me everywhere. "You got any—"

"Yes," I say. The ones they give you in school. To carry with you, just in case.

His hands are shaking as he gets ready and my hands are shaking as I help him and then it happens and I take in the biggest breath and then another one and I can't let the air out of my lungs. Hot tears coast over my cheeks into my ears. I'm holding his face and touching his open lips, and still I can't breathe, and he's looking at me. Looking into my eyes. And he isn't turning away. And finally I let the air out, but right away my lungs pull in another huge breath, and I can't breathe, don't want to breathe, just want to stay like this. (97)

Cece's narration of this scene is specifically moving because, from a female perspective, the idea of being receptive, waiting for something to happen—holding in a breath, preparing to feel pain—is a very realistic response to a first sexual encounter. As with a Fade-to-Black scene, the reader must imagine why she's holding her breath, why she's crying, what Mack might be doing with his "shaking" hands, but Griffin has given us enough previous cues for such imagining. Cece's physical descriptions of their faces and her tears dripping into her ears let us know how she feels without saying it outright.

Some Physicalities scenes don't stick only with what's happening with the characters' bodies but make setting a factor as well. In Sarah Ockler's *Twenty Boy Summer*, Anna goes away to the beach with her best friend, Frankie, to mourn the death of Frankie's brother, Matt, who was also Anna's secret boyfriend in the days before he

suddenly died. Anna hopes to make the summer a time when she can have fun adventures with Frankie and forget about Matt. When Anna meets Sam at the beach and they become involved romantically, she decides one night that she wants more with him than what she had physically with Matt, noting that “[s]omewhere beneath my newly tanned skin I know that I should wait, that it should be special, that it should be with someone I can wake up with in the morning, tomorrow and always” (210).

But Anna doesn’t want to miss this opportunity with Sam, so instead of being practical about their chances at a long-distance relationship and about the fact that they are outside on the beach at night, Anna makes a decision: “I don’t want to stop. I want to devour everything about him. I want to taste his mouth and smell his shampoo and then die with this memory, immediate and swift, before anything can take it away” (211).

Moments later, after she inquires if he has a condom and he puts it on, Anna narrates their sex act with a beautifully descriptive mix of physicalities, landscape detail, and metaphorical imagery:

Sam kisses me hard, breathing through his nose as he unzips, unties, unbuttons, and pulls our clothes down, kissing my stomach as he goes. His mouth moves slowly back to my lips, murmuring softly as I wrap my legs around him and pull him inside.

It doesn’t hurt exactly—it’s just kind of—*strange*. At first I hold my breath, my shorts and bikini bottoms clinging limply around one of my ankles like they didn’t run off in time and now have to sit through the whole act without making any noise, lest they be discovered.

Sam tangles his hands up in my hair, pushing back and forth against my body like the waves in front of us. I sense his rhythm and relax as my shoulders and hips dig trenches in the sand beneath our blanket. Through the silk of his hair, I watch the low, orange moon, tasting the salt of his skin on my mouth, breathing hard, waiting for the stars to fall down around us. (211–212)

Ockler allows Anna to tell what is happening physically but also lets the descriptions tell the story of her feelings. Her clothes caught around her ankle seems to be a wry metaphor for her own leap into this life passage; the idea of the stars falling around them seems thrilling and dire at the same time. Anna, then, doesn't have to state her feelings in an obvious way that might interrupt the flow of the action, but the reader gets the point regardless.

### **Feelings- and Physicalities-Focused**

One of the most dramatic ways to depict sex in YA literature is to create a scene that is both Feelings-Focused and Physicalities-Focused. Lack of experience is almost a given with teenaged sex, so the already high self-consciousness factor goes through the roof when it comes to negotiating this act, with exponential awkwardness if both parties are new to sex. Obviously, feelings are a big part of the act, as well: fear, anticipation, happiness, lust, sadness, loss.

Well-written Feelings-and-Physicalities scenes aren't necessarily marked by a heavy eroticism, nor do they always detail all the sexual action. But they are all marked

with a beautiful, harmonic blend of emotion, sensation, and physical movement resulting in an honesty about sex that is commendable, and unfortunately, rare.

In Jessica Warman's *Breathless*, we meet Katie, who is dealing with her schizophrenic brother and the damage his illness has wrought on her family. She also has a longtime boyfriend, Drew, who refuses to have sex with her due to his religious beliefs. Katie loves Drew but, like Daisy in Rosoff's *How I Live Now*, is fiercely hungry for a touch that affirms she's present and alive. Her first time having sex happens in an unmistakably dingy (but realistic) situation, with her boyfriend's best friend in a college dorm room crammed with partying kids, after everyone has passed out, including Drew, her chaste-yet-loyal boyfriend:

...Stetson's fingers are smooth and boyish. They're sweaty on my neck.

We start kissing and I feel tingles in my whole body, partly because it feels good to kiss him, and partly because I've got one eye open, looking at Drew, trying to figure out how it feels to hurt him. It feels awful, worse than I could have imagined, but I don't stop.

"Let's go into the bathroom," Stetson whispers.

I hesitate. But only for a second. I'm so tired of being the one trying to convince someone—my own boyfriend, for godsakes—to want me. (268)

The scene continues with Katie justifying the cheating—"Drew already thinks I'm going to hell" (268)—and then more physical details emerge, as the decision starts to get serious:

Stetson pushes his hands up my shirt, down my pants, rubbing against me, tugging my clothes off. I am leaning against the wall, self-conscious as

Stetson stands a few feet away, gazing down at my body. All that's left are my underwear. He nods at them. They are pink with tiny images of Tweety Bird printed on them. "Take those off." (268)

Katie hesitates; Stetson asks if she's a virgin. When she says yes, Stetson goes on: "Drew doesn't deserve you. He's going to end up in a monastery someday, and you'll be left with a bunch of memories that don't mean a damn thing" (269).

These words motivate Katie, and she and Stetson have sex. But, of the actual act, Katie narrates very little: "It seems to last forever, but I know it hasn't been more than five or ten minutes at most" (269). The important part of the sex isn't the physicalities—though they are there—but Katie's transgressive and risky decision-making. She harbors no deep feelings for Stetson as a person; he's merely a handy vehicle for revenge, a way to move from one phase to another. In fact, she feels sick as she dresses, and then she and Stetson are caught by another girl at the party. Given Katie's earlier urgency when making the original decision to get physical with Stetson, one might expect she'd confess to Drew. But she and Stetson deny it all, and when everyone goes back to sleep, Katie remains awake with her thoughts:

I've heard from plenty of my friends that, after you have sex with a boy, you feel full and alive and like a woman for the first time. But I don't feel that way at all. Instead, I feel like something inside me has died. I think I'm supposed to feel like things are coming together, like I'm finally a grown-up. Instead, everything feels like it's falling apart. And I have no idea how to fix any of it. (272)

Kudos to Warman for creating a character with such thoughts. A first sexual experience can be so anticlimactic, especially if one has delayed and waited for it. Additionally, the circumstances following the act are hostile, dramatic, and full of lies. There is no afterglow for Katie; sex hasn't solved anything for her. In fact, it's made her more confused and unsettled. Stories that present sex as a plot point designed to harbinge doom ring false to many readers, but those same readers are often just as suspicious of a story insisting that they accept sexual activity as a happily-ever-after route.

But not every Feelings-and-Physicalities scene has a negative outcome. In Mindi Scott's *Freefall*, the narrator, Seth, describes his first time having sex with Rosetta by listing physical details as Steve does in Rapp's *Under The Wolf, Under The Dog*. But after a few sentences of that, Seth returns to awkward reality:

My lips were on her face, mouth, neck, breasts.

Her fingers were on my hair, face, chest, back.

I took off her pants, then mine.

Her skin was soft, smooth, warm. She smelled so good, tasted so good, felt so good.

I was touching her. Everywhere.

And her hands were all over me.

This was really happening. Or it was about to happen.

“Do you have...?” she asked.

“I think so.”

I forced myself to pull away from her, pushed back the blanket. Walking to the dresser, I felt self-conscious and made sure not to check if she was watching me. I mean, it was dark and all, but the lights next door were coming through the curtains somewhat, so we could still *see* each other.

I dug through my sock drawer, ripped open the box that had shown up at some point courtesy of the Condom Fairy, reached in, and grabbed one. A whole chain of five or six others came flapping out with it. *Jesus Christ. Who needs that many at once?* (239)

In addition to being funny, the fumbling with the surplus condoms and the note of insecurity on Seth's part is endearing and adds to the honesty of the depiction. We can imagine Rosetta observing him, too, and feel the tension and humor in that, as well. But before they actually have sex, Seth insists on being straight with Rosetta about his own sexual history, as his only other sexual experience happened while he was blacked-out drunk. When Rosetta says, "Just let me know what I'm supposed to do, okay?" (240), Seth must come clean about the fact that he's basically clueless, too:

"What I'm saying is, I've been with a girl before. It's just...I don't remem—"

"You don't have to tell me this," she interrupted.

"I just thought—"

She pressed her hand over my mouth, smiling, "No, really, Seth. I'm begging you not to tell me." (240–241)

Clearly, Seth's and Rosetta's dialogue as well as their physical actions mark them as highly vulnerable and sincere, which makes the fact that the actual sex takes place off the page acceptable. The reader doesn't feel cheated, imaginatively, as we've gotten to be quite intimate with and empathetic to both characters.

Rob Thomas's *Rats Saw God*, however, offers a less-connected portrait of a first sexual encounter, this time from the point of view of Steve, who has finally decided to have sex, after much discussion and contemplation, with his girlfriend, Dub. Steve, like Rapp's protagonist of the same name, is obsessively self-referencing. He views Dub's naked body with enthusiasm, sure, but the entire scene is a running commentary of his actions and how he feels about them. He notes their joint attempts at making the experience epically beautiful—"We undressed each other as if the process would later be described in sonnets" (150)—and their awkward devolvement as well: "Okay, the part involving shoe removal would have best been described as a limerick" (150). Once undressed, Steve resists the urge to cover up his penis, worried that it isn't "the right size? The right shape? The right color?" (150).

Once on Dub's bed, they struggle to make it happen, which makes Steve even more nervous and embarrassed, but he dutifully notes each movement and change. When things finally begin to work, Steve goes back into this head:

I realized five or six seconds after the actual event that I was inside her, that I was no longer a virgin, that I would finally be allowed to hunt buffalo with the village elders. For autobiographical accuracy, I noted the digital clock read 9:20. (152)

But Thomas rightly doesn't let Steve stay in his head. Steve returns soon enough to what his body is doing vis á vis Dub, as their awkward problems getting in rhythm aren't over: "[I]t seemed like every time she zigged, I zagged. Twice I fell out and had to be reinserted" (152). But finally, they get it, and Steve realizes the inevitable is happening, this time in the presence of another: "After years of self-service, I recognized the signs of impending orgasm—the tingle, the shortening of breath, my testicles' desire to join my lungs" (152). When it's over, Steve notes the time ("the clock read 9:26" (150) and then puts in an acceptable amount of cuddling time; but because he's nervous about "renegade sperm" (153) that might leak out of the condom and impregnate Dub, he soon gets up to dispense with the mess in the bathroom.

After he returns to Dub's bedroom, however, he feels the same body shame from earlier and is glad she isn't looking at him directly. But Dub is contemplative and distracted; she asks Steve if he feels any different. He says no, and asks her how she feels:

I feel sad. Like I've closed a door behind me and I'll never be able to go back. Like my dad doesn't have to love me anymore." She rocked herself back and forth in her chair. "And it really wasn't as big a deal as I thought it would be." (154)

Obviously, this isn't the reception Steve expected, especially since he's been so fixated on his own response to the event. To now find that another feeling human, a girl he thought he knew well and cared for, was also present for the sex but came away feeling completely hollow is a blow, an echo of Katie's response post-sex in Warman's *Breathless* (one that Stetson, Katie's sex partner, never witnesses). All the preparation in

the world on the part of Dub and Steve to make sex perfect—purchasing condoms, securing an empty house, preparing a good meal prior to the big event—doesn't actually matter. All their concern about steps in the process and making their equipment work preoccupied both Dub and Steve to the point that neither considered how they'd feel afterwards. Sex was supposed to connect them but has ended up just delineating their differences.

The process that takes one through a first sexual experience is often more important than its culmination, and while this can be journalistically described in Physicalities scenes, in Eireann Corrigan's *Ordinary Ghosts*, it is written in a time-stopping, summarizing way that is both poetic and flowing yet rich with details. The story opens with 15-year-old Emil home alone when his father goes away for a business trip. Grieving his mother's recent death, Emil comes across a skeleton key that opens all the doors at his private school. Exploring the school late at night, Emil befriends Jade, the 18-year-old daughter of the school's art instructor, and soon they become involved romantically. After eating together at a diner on Valentine's Day, Emil brings Jade back to his empty house, and she accepts his invitation inside:

“Okay.” And she keeps saying that. Okay to the candy I find in the fridge, to a glass of wine, okay to checking out the milk crate of records that I pretend are mine. Okay to putting on a record from some dude whose name I can't pronounce and believing me when I say it's my favorite. And then okay to sitting on my bed and lying back and letting me unbutton and unwrap and unfasten things. When she tugs my tie and both the shirts over my head and reaches to touch the key dangling from my neck, I shake my

head instead of explaining. And even then Jade says, “Okay.” And when I can’t stop shaking and one of my legs trembles so much that I think it’s some kind of seizure, that’s okay, too. And she lets me fumble around and find the way to move and then she shows me how to make it okay for her, too. And maybe even better than that. Once in a while she sounds a little like it’s better than okay. (266–267)

Instead of being a step-by-step narration, Emil’s summary flows on a theme of easiness, everything being okay, which follows Corrigan’s characterization of Jade as the older and more experienced of the two. There’s no clinical detail but enough small physical notes—the trembling leg, the dangling key, the clumsy fumbling—to get a sense of Emil’s vulnerability and shock. Afterward, Emil reflects about sex in general:

We sleep together. I mean we do the other stuff, too, and that’s unbelievable. I understand how people write songs about sex and manuals on it. I get why people buy it. And why people tell you not to have it. Because, I mean, there doesn’t seem to be any point to doing anything else afterward. (267)

Emil’s internal voice throughout the book is thoughtful and descriptive, but worlds apart from what he actually says and does; so much is tamped down inside him while his mind whirls with opinions. When he wakes to find Jade dressing to leave in the middle of the night, he feels “flattened by grief. So weird that this feels like the biggest loss of the year” (267)—in a year when his mother has died. Still, his inability to express what he feels has not been conquered as he tries to get Jade to stay with him in bed: “I

can tell by her face that when I speak, nothing coherent comes out, but what I mean is between something shabby like ‘Thank you’ and ‘I worship you’” (267).

In YA literature, we are well acquainted with the female POV on sex and its concurrent emotions, but to be inside the head of a boy at his most vulnerable is an exciting change-up that elicits the reader’s empathy -where cliché and cultural stereotypes otherwise offer a shorthand override: boys are pigs, boys are thoughtless, boys are predators, boys only think about themselves. Corrigan’s handling of the sex act between Emil and Jade demonstrates this complexity beautifully.

Melina Marchetta’s *Jellicoe Road* features a sex scene that is very moving despite the minimal physical details offered by Taylor, the narrator. The drama, then, mostly comes from the buildup between Taylor and Jonah: their shared history together as well as their search for information about Taylor’s drug-addicted mother, which has revealed some details about Taylor’s own physical and sexual abuse. After searching for information all day, they check into a hostel and get into bed together:

He shakes his head and, although it’s dark, I can tell he’s crying.

“What are you thinking?” I whisper after a while.

“That you deserve romance,” he says.

I trace his face with my fingers. “Let me see. A guy tells me that he would have thrown himself in front of a train if it wasn’t for me and then drives seven hours straight, without whinging once, on a wild-goose chase in search of my mother with absolutely no clue where to start. He is, in all probability, going to get court-martialed because of me, has put up with

my moodiness all day long, and knows exactly what to order me for breakfast. It doesn't get any more romantic than that, Jonah."

"I'm in year eleven, Taylor. I'm not going to get court-martialed."

"Just say you get expelled."

"Then so be it. I still would have driven for seven hours and ordered you hot chocolate and white toast and marmalade."

"And you don't call that romantic? God, you've got a lot to learn."

I sit up in the dark and after a moment I take off my singlet and I hear him taking off his shirt and we sit there, holding each other, kissing until our mouths are aching, and then we're pulling off the rest of our clothes and I'm under him and I feel as if I'm imprinted onto his body. Everything hurts, every single thing including the weight of him and I'm crying because it hurts and he's telling me he's sorry over and over again, and I figure that somewhere down the track we'll work out the right way of doing this but I don't want to let go, because tonight I'm not looking for anything more than being part of him. Because being part of him isn't just anything. It's kind of everything. (342–343)

The beauty of this passage isn't in the graphic details, of which there aren't many. In fact, we are given a mere summary of all the action happening between the characters. But the key issue is that sex isn't the most intimate thing they are sharing, clearly. Taylor and Jonah don't connect on a merely physical level; they know each other's shameful secrets, so sex, while a meaningful exchange, is just icing.

One reason for this passage's beautiful honesty comes from Taylor's admission that sex hurts. This isn't something readily discussed in a lot of YA books, though it's a common-enough fear for young girls. Jonah's apologies, of course, just underscore his own sympathetic nature and his ability to now be emotionally truthful with Taylor, which hasn't always been the case in the story. Further honesty, paradoxically, lies in the very fade-to-black nature of the scene. Neither is prepared, it appears, for sex, as there's no negotiation of birth control or protection. Whether any is used seems not to be a detail Taylor is interested in discussing. Yet they have sex, regardless, which is reckless, considering that Taylor herself was born to a teenaged mother.

This kind of recklessness has the potential to engender a firestorm of criticism for a YA author. Often sex is shown in a Vaseline-lensed way, the way adults hope it will go: clear consent, appropriate birth control, a private setting, both characters caring for and knowing each other well. But having sex is like any choice a person makes, no matter their age: it can be done without much pretense, at a moment's notice. People make decisions around many other risky behaviors—driving a car, playing football, snowboarding—but, again, the taboo around sex causes some authors to step into the fiction and dictate a scene that offers a “model citizen” demonstration for the edification of youth.

This is precisely the kind of thing that turns off young people. Modeling behavior is an important aspect of teaching adolescents, but fiction remains fiction—an art. Art that is preachy fails on many levels, because it limits interaction and the scope of available choices. The fact of no birth control is something a young reader could discuss

in light of Taylor's other decision-making, an entrance into empathy for Taylor and understanding another human being's mind.

Another reason Marchetta did not write this scene in graphic details may have to do with Taylor's characterization itself. Taylor has had no sexual experience with boys her age other than Jonah. Additionally, in the previous scene, we learn that Taylor and several other children were photographed naked by a pedophile while Taylor's drug-addicted mother was out. Taylor is experiencing a cascade of memories from her time with her mother (who abandoned Taylor at age 11 in a convenience store after on-and-off periods of homelessness), so perhaps Marchetta is sensitive to the issues that would predictably reactivate Taylor's early traumas.

## **Conclusion**

Amid the roar of porn, the discredited silence of educational authorities, and the mixed messages used in advertisements (selling products using sexual innuendo), there exist few honest depictions of sex as it truly is: a messy, often awkward, usually heavily sanctioned, always emotionally fraught, and often weirdly negotiated physical act. The small population of young adults who actually read—for pleasure and/or information—deserves even this trickle of effort from authors, despite the flood of counter-information from other media sources.

Sex educator and advice columnist Dan Savage says that his own advice to his teenaged son regarding porn was to think of it as being as close to real life as kabuki theater is to real life (Savage). Perhaps fictional sex suffers from the same staged, wishful, and escapist fate, but in capable hands, a reader can take the textual cues on the

page directly into his or her imagination, uninterrupted by stock or supplied imagery. A close first-person perspective (or even the interior third-person perspective) makes the depiction exponentially powerful, a multidimensional imaginative experience.

Not all books will have sex in them. But if the characters are of the age where sexual experimentation and questioning is happening, a writer does a disservice—to the reader, to the characters, to fiction as art, and to him- or herself—by not exploring the topic, at least in an early draft. Putting a character into a sexual situation instantly provides a wealth of information about that character. What he or she wants and doesn't want. What he or she considers beautiful. How he or she behaves in the face of negotiation. How he or she handles others' emotions and unspoken body language. Where he or she feels comfortable or vulnerable. This is rich imaginative territory in the early drafting stages, and it brings the writing to a place where porn doesn't typically go.

I am not against pornography in text or image. I don't find the Internet worrisome as a source of sexual information. In fact, I find it reassuring that kids who aren't given information about sex and their bodies from their parents or schools can turn to Google for a modicum of medical and biological guidance (however outdated or out of context it may be). At the same time, I don't think that porn should not be the sole clearinghouse of sexual information.

For me, writing about sex is a public service. Writing about sex is I owe readers, especially adolescent readers. I think I owe them sexual truths, however small and low-decibel they seem next to the roar of context-free porn and commercial titillation in our culture. If we as writers are going to bother to write about sex at all, I believe young readers deserve reality and imagination, something they create in their own heads.

Something more vivid and complex than porn: awkwardness and grace and practicality and discomfort and humor and confusion and emotion—all the juiciness that sex evokes, whether real or fictional.

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