

The Developmental Characteristics of Early Adolescence and the Adolescent Novel

by Joan Lipsitz

Program Associate for Adolescence
Learning Institute of North Carolina

I would like to try to answer three questions: who are young adolescents? why endorse the junior novel? and what more can librarians do to help language arts teachers?

I ask question number one, who are young adolescents, because most people who work with 12-15 or 10-15

year olds don't know very much about them. I ask why we should endorse the junior novel because of the prejudice which is still pervasive in the English classroom against such literature. And I ask what librarians can do to help language arts teachers because my sister is a librarian in

Nassau County, N.Y., I was a junior high language arts teacher in N.C., and she gave me invaluable help which was not readily available to me here.

Who are young adolescents? What are the developmental characteristics of this age group?

Biologically, preceding the onset of puberty there occurs a phenomenon, the adolescent growth spurt, which is second only to infancy in its velocity. These two events, the growth spurt and the onset of puberty, occur with such variability that even though we know the average ages for these marker events, averages mean very little. There can be a six year biological age gap between two young adolescents of the same chronological age. To simplify matters in the extreme, we can say that biologically, young adolescents are, like toddlers, unable to sit still while going through the growth spurt; they are fertile for the first time in their lives; they may be sexually active since the gap between sexual capacity and sexual behavior is closing rather rapidly; and they are extremely concerned with their bodies' images as they change so precipitously.

Socially and emotionally, early adolescence is a time for trying on many roles, a time of growing commitment to self, to friends and to community, a time of trying out a new sense of social responsibility, a time for adventure, and a time — the first time in one's life — that one says, "I am a part of a generation," "I have a destiny." It is also a time of remarkable egocentrism. This egocentrism is marked by what has been called the "personal fable" (I am

the only one feeling this way in this entire vast universe; I am unique.) It is also marked by what has been called "the imaginary audience" (everyone is looking at me; I am lonely but never alone; I am always on stage). It is easy for us as adults to notice only this amazing self-absorption and to overlook the budding sense of social commitment and destiny. And since this is also a time for the beginning of a separation from parents and other authority figures, it is easy for us to experience a painful sense of loss during this developmental stage. We might instead be pleased, as are parents and teachers of toddlers, to see that we have made risk-taking and a new sense of self possible.

Intellectually, early adolescence is an exhilarating time in human development. If ever a human being will develop the capacity for abstract thought, for thinking about thinking, for being engaged by ideas, this development will occur during early adolescence. There is no way that I can overemphasize the critical nature of this intellectual changeover. It has implications for the quality of one's entire future life, for the ability to form generalizations, to be intrigued by a theorem, to contemplate beauty, to be enticed by a turn of phrase, to reconsider one's value system. Our adult obligation to nurture the development of this intellectual capacity in young adolescents is one of the most sadly overlooked of all our responsibilities. It is a cruelty to students and teachers alike that not only is the exhilaration of this changeover lost in most schools; even the opportunity is lost.

What I have really been saying is that early adolescence is a critical time of change in human develop-

ment, but one about which we know little and which we want to ignore. I believe that underlying all the possible hypotheses I could suggest for our continual shunting off of this age group is one hard, cold fact; we do not like these young people. What is the problem? Again, I could give many examples of behavioral characteristics which would appear to be explanatory, but I think that just describing young adolescents is inadequate. The problem lies in an interaction between us and them. You know that famous cartoon which ends with the line, "We have met the enemy, and they are us"? Even with its mangled grammar, it is a perfect line. We are all of us walking around with unresolved adolescent conflicts. None of us accomplishes the resolution of all those tasks of development which I have described. And none of us likes to see before us images of inner conflicts. These kids are acting out before our eyes those images of inner conflicts we need to be defended against. Some go beyond acting out, and challenge us with what appears to be gratuitous cruelty. And so we do not like them because of what they represent in ourselves.

In order to rationalize our dislike, we create certain widely-held myths about early adolescents; they are all alike, they are all pathological, they are still children, they will all grow out of it and we'll get to them then. These are dangerous myths. "They" are not all alike; in fact they are widely variable, not a homogeneous group. When we treat them as if they were all alike, we are denying their individuality just at their point of self-definition. They are not all pathological. To say that adolescence

is by its very nature a pathological time in life is to run two risks, first that our expectation of pathology will be self-fulfilling, and second, that we will overlook the truly troubled young person. They are not children. With the earlier and earlier onset of puberty and the earlier engagement in sexual behavior, to consider young adolescents as children is to put our heads in the sand. Some of them are children and some are not; all engage in childish behavior. Many of their interests are childish, and many very mature.

In fact, *the* one central characteristic of this age group is its great variability. Chronological age means very little. What do you know when you know that a boy is 13? Very little. There can be a six year biological age span between that thirteen-year-old

BROADFOOT'S

BOOKMARK

NORTH CAROLINA

BOOKS

WITH

FREE CATALOG

CARDS

Prompt service, no backorders.

Catalog listing 600 titles
on request.

BROADFOOT'S BOOKMARK

Rt. 2, Box 28A

Wendell, N. C. 27591

boy, if he is maturing slowly, and an early maturing thirteen-year-old girl. We don't have ways of measuring social and emotional maturity as well, but one can imagine all the various ages that each individual is juggling — social, emotional, intellectual, biological, academic, chronological — and then try to imagine trying all the possible juggling acts going on while one is facing a *group* of young adolescents. Change and variability are the two key characteristics we must always keep in mind if we want to have any perspective on early adolescent development.

There are very few signs in this society that anyone wants to have an adequate perspective on this age group. Most signs indicate that we are putting these youngsters on hold and waiting for them to grow up. One major exception to this holding pattern has been the emergence of the junior novel. Someone out there knows and likes these kids, and sees them as being more than just post-elementary or pre-senior high school. And some authors are doing an excellent job of addressing the needs of this polyglot group I've described.

When I was a good bit younger, my parents took me to see the movie, "On the Beach." They told me a little bit about its plot to entice me. I can remember standing in line at the Paramount Theatre in New York, giving myself an assignment. Okay, I said, it is almost the end of the world. Atomic bombs have destroyed everything except the one small continent you live on. Now the radiation from those bombs is drifting towards you. You and your fellow inhabitants, friends, family, and strangers are the last human beings, and the end is in sight. Now write the script for those

last days. It was quite an assignment, and no matter what the failings of "On the Beach" were, I appreciated that movie for all that it had encompassed which I had failed to consider, standing on that line.

Consider a parallel assignment. You have before you a market of voracious readers — and young adolescents *are* voracious readers — about whom the safest generalizations you can make deal with change and variability. They are many, many ages, with diverse interests, capacities for insight, and levels of growth. They want one thing from you: books. Given everything you know about the developmental characteristics of young adolescents, write those books.

Given the difficulty of the assignment and of course the marketing mentality of many publishers, it is little wonder that there are few really fine junior novels. But some, remarkably, manage not only to address the needs and interests of young adolescents but also to be good literature. I will want to mention two of these to you. But first, returning to our assignment, what are some necessary characteristics of the junior novel, given early adolescent development?

The personal interest level must be high, affording opportunities for that egocentrism to flourish. Various levels of meaning must be available to speak to such a variable group. The subject matter must appeal to at least one of the developmental tasks and concerns I have already discussed, for instance biological maturity. (Incidentally, I believe that the popularity of *My Darling, My Hamburger* is based in part on an inside joke against adults: that young adolescents know they are not children any

more, but adults hold onto the myth to protect not the adolescents but themselves.) The novel must stretch the reader's cognitive abilities somewhat, just enough to stimulate that phenomenon of intellectual change, but not so much as to ban pleasure. For most of all, the novel must be fun, must afford an opportunity for that pleasure which is a prerequisite for future critical reading. What you don't need are more "mountain top experiences," something one ought to read despite its overwhelming difficulty.

Librarians are freer than teachers are to act on what we know: first, that young adolescents are broadly variable in development, and second, that interest, readiness, and engagement are preconditions for learning at more and more complex cognitive levels. In fact, librarians often know that young adolescents read on two distinct planes: what is read in English classes and what the student reads and reacts to personally.

Sometimes teachers learn this through observation, if their classrooms are open enough for some informality. My students waited for their Scholastic Book Club orders to arrive with irritatingly persistent anticipation. On the day the books came, all "learning" (I say this word with ironic quotation marks around it, of course) stopped. Otherwise lethargic teenagers volunteered with undeniable aggressiveness to unpack the books. In other words, they tore into the boxes. Sometimes I felt that distributing the books to the students who had actually ordered them required the calling out of the National Guard. The excitement level was high. So was the theft level. Now, if we are to take theft as a sign of reading, and I

do as do the authors of *Hooked on Books*, then many of my so-called non-readers were certainly reading. For some, of course, a paperback in the hip pocket of a pair of jeans was merely bravado. But most of these students really read. The books were traded, found in lockers far away from those of the original owners, thrown out only when totally demolished, and recommended to me for my own personal reading. In fact, a good deal of sneak reading went on — the paperback tucked between the pages of the unwieldy required text, which I soon enough learned to relegate to lockers.

Why must pleasurable reading be contraband material in the English classroom? Why must teachers choose between the potential for interest and the potential for literary analysis, when both are available in some fine junior novels? Why are many teachers not aware that junior novels, when carefully chosen, meet their curricular criteria? Why are we still so strongly influenced by curricula which start with the learned instead of the learner, thereby creating obstacles of our own making in the classroom? If education is the extension of highly diverse, idiosyncratic students from where they are to where they can be, if it is, as Dewey said, a transaction between the learner and the learned, then English teachers must begin to care about what their students are reading. How many know? How many care?

So here we are at my third question: what more can librarians do for language arts teachers? Most teachers haven't the time to scout out and become familiar with these junior novels. Many don't want to have the time. You have two tasks, first to make an argument in favor of the junior

novel and second to become real resources for the beleaguered teacher who really cares.

My rationale for the junior novel with language arts teachers would go something like this: First, many of our students enjoy these novels and keep up with them faithfully. Second, the intra-variability within our students is an indication that even among the most intellectually advanced, their emotional maturity is often no more advanced than other students of their age, and not nearly advanced enough for an intuitive, sensory response to the characters and issues in the "classics." Third, admitting the real world of our students' emotional lives into the classroom will make reading in the classroom a part of their lives. The dichotomy between "class reading" and "pleasure reading" will be broken down. Fourth, starting with books which students appreciate will afford the leverage for extending that appreciation to other literary experiences. And fifth, there are junior novels which have considerable literary merit. They can stand on their own as fine accomplishments within their genre, and we can, along with students, examine in them not only our immediate responses to characters and issues, but all the concepts of form and structure which we attempt to teach through "mountaintop" literature.

One popular junior novel in recent years has been *Dave's Song*, by Robert McKay. It offers enough controversial issues to keep adolescents exploring their values for weeks on end: prison reform, women's lib, the pervasiveness of corruption, euthenasia, the nature of love, the role of the social outcast. The switches in point of view, interesting as a

narrative device, also point to a central theme in the book: the aloneness and yet interconnectedness of all life. That theme, in and of itself, is stated and restated through various characters and through the central interest in ethology, which relates men as different as Robert Ardry and Konrad Lorenz and characters in the book. They are men with something in common, "men who recognize the similarities in all life forms, rather than concentrating on the differences." The interlacing of the song, "Suzanne," throughout the novel serves as a leitmotif for this connectedness. At the same time, the image of the emperor penguin from Ardry's *The Territorial Imperative* focuses our attention on the terrible isolation of one living creature from another: "Brooks too broad for leaping divide us from animal agony. Walls too wide for weeping contain our sympathies. We cannot, with prescience human or divine, apprehend the living moment in a mass of male emperor penguins revolving each with an egg on his foot in a dark, frozen, endless Antarctic night beneath the frigid, withdrawn, uncaring stars. You do not know, nor will you ever. I do not know, nor shall I ever."

It is Dave's Song, "Suzanne" (words by Leonard Cohen, and known by many adolescents today) which is the central metaphor for this book, a song "like a poem. It just means what it is," and is filled with the mystery of growing and touching another person's life. This growing and touching is what ethology is for Dave, what Kate becomes for him. ("Kate was so great. A poem . . . not a good poem . . . not even good verse. But Kate was a poem. Perfect in herself, without knowing or caring how or why.") In the

end, the connectedness of human beings, based on a tentative trust, conquers the solitude as epitomized by the emperor penguin: "And you think maybe you'll trust her,/ For you've touched her perfect body/ With your mind."

Students reading this novel will not be able to articulate this type of analysis of its thematic structure. They just like the book. Always keeping in touch with students' feelings about loneliness, alienation, sameness and touching, the teacher can extend students' appreciation of this book by exploring with them the role that the contrasting metaphors play in the novel's structure. Even the changing point of view in narration serves as a metaphor, and this interrelatedness of form and content is a rich area for discussion. Students will be able to explore the highly metaphoric lyrics in many of the popular albums they listen to — and speculate forever about the meaning of "Suzanne." If metaphor is a gateway to the richness of the literary experience, then the exploration of *Dave's Song* is well worth our time and effort in the classroom. The novel stands on its own, but if it leads to other works dealing with similar themes, so much the better.

What is being stressed here is an inductive learning process, where the goals of the teacher and the student are the same — an exploration of novels which students of varying cognitive abilities respond to at their given levels of emotional maturity, and yet which yield rich rewards as literary works. It is impossible to respond to *Dave's Song* without being affected, consciously or subconsciously, by the power of the metaphor as a leitmotif. The teacher need only help bring this inner

responsiveness to consciousness.

Likewise, it is impossible to respond to *Viva Chicano*, by Frank Bonham, and ignore the central role of a metaphoric yet real character, Zapata. Rosenblatt says that literature is not "a structure of intellectual concepts to be assimilated," but "a body of potential literary experiences to be participated in." The problem for the teacher is how to achieve that participation. The argument being made here is that, instead of wasting time "motivating" students externally to be interested in what we prescribe as being interesting, we start with books they are already reading, already participating in, and explore issues and techniques we usually try to impose on them artificially, lacking their interest.

Viva Chicano is a superb example of a book which allows us to start where our students are (and many are reading this book) and extend their inquiries in areas as diverse as the sociology of gangs, the barrio, criminology, Mexican history, Spanish-American dialect, psychological insights in literature such as the role of the alter-ego, the concept of heroism, irony, and once again, the central metaphor.

In this novel, Keeny Duran lives in the depersonalized world of the barrio, where "drifts of junk . . . told you what the houses really were: factories where children were produced, truckloads of them." Castor beans are planted, even though everyone knows that they are poisonous, "as though the army of kids that ran roughshod over the neighborhood needed some sort of pesticide to knock off a few of them now and then." The police cannot see the boys as people: "Of course, a boy was his record. He was

not what he conned you into thinking he was; he was what he *did*." In this uncaring environment, Keeny fights for his identity, ironically by hiding in an abandoned jail (where he finds the freedom to get in touch with his feelings) with a cardboard figure of Zapata. Zapata talks to Keeny — Keeny's conscience, or "the dark side of his mind," speaks through the cardboard dummy — and reawakens in him the sense of pride he has lost in his Mexican manhood. A cardboard figure, seemingly depersonalized, breaks through the pattern of depersonalization for Keeny. The novel is given thematic structure through the interweaving of ironies: jail as freedom, a cardboard revolutionary as a critical source of sensitive contact, the outlaw as hero.

These books can be analyzed for the internal structure of the work and its relationship to other literary themes and forms, as Bruner would have us do. We can pursue this analysis, however, having guaranteed our students' involvement in the learning transaction because such books are of immediate concern to them. There is no need to scramble for materials which interest students and also lend themselves to literary analysis. These books do. They can be approached at varying levels of abstraction, and extended from there to varying levels, according to the maturity of our students. These books do not defeat the less mature, and they can be rich resources as well as pleasurable reading experiences for the most mature.

As Rosenblatt says, we cannot impose the esthetic experience from above. For adolescents, literature provides an emotional outlet, a "living

through," not simply "knowledge about." No sequential curriculum is going to do us any good if the students remain outside the sequence, outside the "living through." Curriculum development must be an organic process, starting with the cognitive and emotional maturity of the students as they are, not where an artificial sequence of grades and subject matter tells us they should be.

Junior novels can be rich sources of pleasure and growth for the highly divergent groups of students in our junior high schools because, by their very inclusion, they do what we so often fail to do in our classes: affirm the personal integrity of the individual reader.

So, what is my message? I might have talked about libraries. They are great educational institutions, part of a matrix of many, of which the schools are just one part. But you know libraries. I am asking you to know schools better, and to develop your potential role as educators of educators. I am asking you not to see yourselves as subordinate to the curricula of schools, if you are librarians within schools, and not to see yourself as totally independent of schools if you function outside of them. You are an important resource. You know these books. You can also make yourselves sensitive to this age group. If you know these young people and the books that engage them, you are an invaluable resource to teachers, who usually don't know the books, and often know neither the books nor the students. In other words, I hope I am leaving you with a new or renewed sense of importance about your role in facilitating a critical stage of development, early adolescence.