

The Treatment of Sexuality in Children's Literature

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Abstract

This dissertation seeks to explore the different attitudes to sexuality in literature for children through history, by examining the attitudes to children and childhood as well as the treatment of the theme within fiction for a child audience. The treatment of folk tales and their transformation into fairy tales is taken as a case study of the process of expurgation. It then seeks to establish two traditions in the treatment of sexuality in children's literature: the tradition of innocence, which sees childhood as a distinct and separate phase of life from adulthood; and the tradition of experience, which sees childhood as part of a continuum in which children gradually become adults. A series of texts are examined and explored to see how they fit into these two traditions. In particular, an analysis of contemporary texts is undertaken to ascertain where children's literature stands on the treatment of sexuality today.

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Introduction

In March 2003, Anne Fine published an article in the Guardian newspaper condemning Melvin Burgess's new book, *Doing It* (Burgess, 2003), as "Filth, whichever way you look at it." (Fine, 2003). She argued passionately that the book, dealing as it does with the sexual behaviour of three teenage boys, should "be published by an adult imprint - if at all" (ibid). This followed the moral outrage surrounding Burgess's earlier book, *Lady – My Life as a Bitch* (Burgess, 2001) which told the story of a "hormonal adolescent girl who magically turns into a dog and rather enjoys the sexual and personal freedoms her transformation brings" (Brooks, 2001). Clearly the treatment of sexuality in books for children is an area which creates great controversy, a battleground between those who believe that children should be protected from adult concerns and those who, with Burgess, believe that "most of all, they need to be protected from being overprotected" (ibid).

The awakening of sexuality marks the beginning of the end of childhood, and becoming sexually mature is one of the key signifiers of adulthood. In many ways, sexuality is the dominant topic in the world view of readers variously termed teenage or young adult. Yet the treatment of this theme in literature for children varies widely. Writers ignore the fact that it exists at all, or cloak it in layers of symbolism, allusion or euphemism; they condemn or lament the loss of innocence that sexuality entails; a few even tackle it openly, frankly and explicitly and some even celebrate it. In this study I intend to explore the

issues surrounding the treatment of sexuality in literature for children. This is not an exhaustive survey; I will examine the changing attitudes to childhood, childness (Hollindale, 1997) and sexuality over time, and the traditions that have been established, in order to see how contemporary literature for children tackles this theme.

The History of Childhood – Construction and Reconstruction

“One of the unwritten laws of contemporary morality, the strictest and most respected of all, requires adults to avoid any reference...to sexual matters in the presence of children”. So Philippe Ariès begins his chapter *From Immodesty to Innocence* (Ariès 1998: 41), in which he charts the shift in European culture from the beginning of the seventeenth century towards a more contemporary view. He cites Heroard’s *Journal sur l’enfance et la jeunesse de Louis XIII* and declares “no other document can give us a better idea of the non-existence of the modern idea of childhood at the beginning of the seventeenth century” (ibid. p.41) with its numerous references to sexual openness, games, humour and physical contact between the boy king of France and his household: “he laughed uproariously when his nanny waggled his cock with her fingers”. He argues convincingly that the conception of childhood current at the time was that “the idea did not yet exist that references to sexual matters...could soil childish innocence, either in fact or in the opinion that people had of it: nobody thought that this innocence really existed” (ibid: 46). The notion, then, of the innocent child who should be protected from corruption was one that developed over time. Ariès cites the

treatise of Gerson, *De confessione molleice* (Gerson, 1706) as the beginning of this process. “Gerson studies the sexual behaviour of children for the benefit of confessors, to help the latter arouse a feeling of guilt in the hearts of their little penitents (between ten and twelve years of age)” (Ariès 1998: 46). Gerson saw sexual behaviours in children as a consequence of original sin, and sought to make these a subject of shame. This, Ariès argues, is the beginning of the road to the conception of child-as-innocent, which was to result in the provision of expurgated versions of the classics and the refusal to allow children access to “indecent books” (ibid. p.48) at the end of the sixteenth century – a tradition which Anne Fine continues to this day. John Rowe Townsend supports this view when explaining that stories were conceived as “bad for children”, citing Hugh Rhodes’ *Book of Nurture* from 1554 and its warning against “wanton stories and songs of love, which bring much mischief to youth” (quoted in Townsend, 1997a: 11).

The influence of John Locke’s *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1692) can be seen spreading through the seventeenth century, cemented by Rousseau in *Emile*: “Nature wants children to be children before they are men” (Rousseau, 1762: 258) and finding poetic voice in Blake’s *Songs of Innocence* (1789). Locke conceived the child as *tabula rasa*, empty and susceptible to influence, though not without inherent talents, abilities and predispositions. Thus moral instruction was essential if children were to conform to contemporary codes of behaviour and decorum, and the avoidance of bad influences equally important. Ariès acknowledges this trend in France where he writes of the “warning not to leave children in the

company of servants” (Jenkins, 1998: 54). The result of the acceptance of the child-as-innocent conception was the moral tales and books of instruction of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, including *The History of Little Goody Two-Shoes* (1766) with its author’s complaint that “people stuff children’s heads with Stories of Ghosts, Fairies, Witches and such Nonsense when they are young, and so they continue Fools all their Days” (quoted in Townsend, 1997b: 10). The same attitude is demonstrated by Sarah Fielding in her Preface to *The Governess or Little Female Academy* in 1749:

Before you begin the following sheets, I beg you will stop a Moment at this Preface, to consider with me, what is the true Use of reading: and if you can once fix this Truth in your Minds, namely that the true Use of Books is to make you wiser and better, you will then have both Profit and Pleasure from what you read.

Fielding 1749/1968: 91, quoted in Hunt (ed.) 1998: 40

What is interesting in surveying the histories of children’s literature in this period is the frequency of the asides about the popularity of stories that were deemed inappropriate. Townsend acknowledges the chapbook market and the circulation of “material that might be sensational or scandalous...most of which was not actually aimed at children but reached them just the same” (Townsend, 1997b: 10). Elizabeth Rigby acknowledges in *The Quarterly Review* in 1844 that children should not be deliberately exposed to “offensive” books, but:

should they fall in their way, we firmly believe no risk to exist – if they will read them at one time or another, the earlier, perhaps, the better. Such works are like the viper – they have a wholesome flesh as well as a poisonous sting; and children are perhaps the only class of readers who can partake of one without suffering from the other.

Hunt 1990: 21

Children, it seems, are intent on seeking out and enjoying literature that is deemed to be forbidden; the damage that this does was a source of debate from the eighteenth century and is still today. Kit Spring encapsulates this in his response to Anne Fine's condemnation of *Doing It*:

The children's laureate, Anne Fine, leapt into print in *The Guardian* with a polemic that used adjectives such as 'vile', 'disgusting', 'foul and deluded' and 'filth'. None of which is likely to drive teen readers away as would, say, 'worthy', or 'improving'.

Spring 2003

The issue here hinges on the conception of what children's literature is for. Harvey Darton conceived its purpose in 1932 as "to give children spontaneous pleasure, and not primarily to teach them, not solely to make them good, nor to keep them *profitably* quiet" (Darton, 1932/1982: 1, his emphasis). Darton's definition embodies a problem: children's literature is not "solely" to make them good, but it is expected to improve them. What if children derive "spontaneous pleasure" from a book which does not conform to a morally acceptable code?

These debates about the literature of children reflect the shifting definitions of what childhood is, what children can cope with, and what they should be protected from. Harry Hendrick in *Constructions and Reconstructions of British Childhood* provides a fluent and skilful account of these shifting sands (Hendrick, 1997). Hendrick's interpretative survey of legislation, thinking and research from 1800 to 1990 leads to some telling conclusions about the changing construction of the nature of childhood in British society. He

acknowledges the impact of Rousseau and Locke in the eighteenth century, creating the conception of “The Natural Child” as discussed above, reaching its finest voice with Blake. Blake’s conception that childhood was “the *source* of innocence, a quality that had to be kept alive in adulthood” (Hendrick, 1997: 37, his emphasis) was his own, and became conflated with Wordsworth’s slightly different view of the “Romantic Child” that saw innocence as something which was lost at the moment that childhood was completed. This idea of the loss of innocence is one that is especially pertinent for the examination of sexuality in relation to children, since it is the awakening of sexuality that signals the end of innocence. Wordsworth conception of childhood as an idealised time, from which adulthood was a descent, is one which still holds a great deal of sway to this day, as argued by Myers (Myers 1992).

Hendrick goes on to chart the Evangelical Revival, characterised as “pessimism and alarmism” (ibid.: 39), seeing children as in need of correction and improvement, through the child-labour years, to the important step of the Youthful Offenders Act of 1854 which, for the first time, defined “childhood” as extending to sixteen years of age (prior to this childhood only extended as far as seven). From this, the introduction of widespread, compulsory schooling altered and secured in state machinery the construction of the child as ignorant, having to conform to a code of behaviour, not being wage earners, being separate from the rest of society, and being investments in the future well-being of the social and economic order (Hendrick, 1997: 45).

Hendrick's survey is most relevant when he examines what he calls "The Psychological Child" (ibid: 51). He notes the acceptance that "childhood...had an inner world, one that reached into the unconscious and was of great significance" (Hendrick, 1997: 53) following the work of Burt and Isaacs in the 1930s. This was followed post-war, and partly in response to mass wartime evacuations, by the foundation of the Welfare State, in which childhood became an area for societal protection, notably with the Children Act in 1948 (ibid: 54). This sense of *protecting* children from the harmful outside world, through appealing to their inner world, would tie in with Darton. Hendrick notes, however, that "the golden age of welfare was already beginning to tremor with self-doubt by the end of the 1960s" and that significant reconstructions of childhood have occurred since then. He cites Parton (1990) and Ennew (1986) as key figures in recognising "the existence of children as people" and the growing need in the early 1990s to gain "a deeper and more subtle understanding of the child's social world". He also notes the influence of the James Bulger murder in 1993 as a cause in the hardening of "public and legal attitudes towards children" – no longer, perhaps, should childhood be protected from the "sometimes sordid" real world. Perhaps exposure and understanding would be preferable? One need only look at Anne Fine's *The Tulip Touch* (Fine, 1996) or more recently Ann Cassidy's *Looking for JJ* (Cassidy, 2004) to see the influence of child violence on children's literature.

Most notably, however, Hendrick observes "the belief that childhood has been eroded, lost, or has suffered a 'strange death' (Jenks, 1996)". He quotes from Seabrook (1982) who notes an "increase in violence and disturbance among

the young [who feel] cheated, purposeless and confused”; and Humphries (1988) who characterises the end of innocence (or the ‘fall’ of childhood) as the “sexualisation of childhood from the innocence – and ignorance – of the past to the more worldly wise child of today”. Neil Postman, an American media sociologist, argues that childhood is “disappearing” (Postman, 1983). Perhaps the most telling observation is quoted from Cunningham: “children have become alien creatures, a threat to civilisation rather than its hope and potential salvation” (Cunningham, 1995: 179). What is clear from this raft of studies and essays, expertly synthesised by Hendrick, is that our construction of childhood *has* significantly changed; it should not surprise us, then, that the literature written for and read by children has changed with it. If “traditional” childhood is disappearing, and there is an “end of innocence”, then surely it should not surprise us that the literature written for children is changing alongside it: “notions of the ‘child’, ‘childhood’ and ‘children’s literature’ are contingent, not essentialist; embodying the social construction of a particular historical context” (Myers 1989: 52); or in the words of Peter Hunt: “what a culture thinks of as childhood is reflected very closely in the books produced for its citizens” (Hunt 1994: 5).

Ideology and Children’s Literature

The very notion that Myers and Hunt address is central to the work of Peter Hollindale (1997), who proposes the concept of “childness” as a term for the way childhood is constructed, both by children themselves, adults, societies, the media and by literature. He says: “childness is a changing, culturally

determined concept, not a static one, and this is very important to our understanding of its influence. The childness prevalent in our age will permeate the images of it which we transmit to our children, in children's literature and in other ways" (Hollindale, 1997: 48). This concept informs every aspect of the treatment of the concept of sexuality in the literature written for children. If we construct childhood as innocent in the way that the Natural Child of Rousseau and Locke, or the Romantic Child of Blake and Wordsworth were conceived, then the childness in the literature for children will reflect that construction. Similarly, if we no longer construct children as something separate to adults, as has been the case for many centuries, but as part of a continuum of change in which, at different paces and in different stages, they are trying out and experimenting with aspects of adulthood, then the childness in their literature must reflect this aspect of their development.

Hollindale is highlighting the artificiality of the process of constructing childhood in his coining (or borrowing from Shakespeare) of the term "childness" (Hollindale, 1997: 45) and does so consciously and insightfully. His search for a term to encapsulate the nature of the child in literature arises from his discussion of the nature of children's literature itself. This question must be addressed in order fully to understand how sexuality is treated within it. Hollindale outlines the complex issues surrounding the concept of children's literature, beginning with the contrast between reader and writer: "the writer for children and the child reader are differently placed" (ibid: 11). This uneasy relationship has often been categorised as the difference between experience and innocence – the wise grown-up writing down to the naïve child. Peter

Hunt characterises it like this: “the writers and manipulators of children’s books are adults; books are the makers of meaning for their readers, and the readers are children” (Hunt, 1994: 2). This is absolutely apparent in moral tales such as *Goody Two-Shoes* and the texts of instruction, but as Hunt goes on to observe:

it is...impossible for a children’s book...not to be educational or influential in some way; it cannot help but reflect an ideology...Children’s writers, therefore, are in a position of singular responsibility in transmitting cultural values, rather than ‘simply’ telling a story.

Hunt, 1994: 3

In this case, then, the values that the adult adheres to and holds to be dear will be the ones transmitted. We must not, however, assume that what is transmitted will necessarily be accepted, or even necessarily understood. Melvin Burgess himself is aware of this problem. In an interview with Libby Brooks he argues:

Maturity is not a straight line...and childhood doesn’t end on a given date. His own children - Pearl, 10, Oliver, 13, and his 15-year-old stepson, Sam - are bored by, rather than corrupted by, that which they can’t contextualise. “The thing that worries me about them reading the books too early is that they don’t get enough out of it.”...Books, more than visual material, are self-censoring, he points out, given that you have to make the substantial effort of sitting down and reading the things.

(Brooks, 2001)

Even here, Burgess is constructing childhood as a continuum, as “essentially preparatory and developmental, a long and gradual rehearsal for maturity” (Hollindale, 1997: 12). The opposite view sees it as “an autonomous part of life, and its passage...entail[s] some losses as well as many gains... a phase

of experience which cannot be curtailed or repressed without lasting harm to the adult” (ibid: 13). The conflicting views are problematic and this goes some way to explaining the problems with the exploration of sexuality in children’s literature: if it isn’t even clear what a child is, how can there be agreement about what is appropriate?

In 1971 John Rowe Townsend declared that the only definition of a children’s book was that “its name appears on a publisher’s list of children’s books” (Townsend, 1971, in McDowell, 1973: 140). Myles McDowell clarifies this position by stating that “while...the line between children’s and adult fiction is blurred and broad, equally clearly there are vast numbers of books that fall very definitely on one side or the other” (ibid.: 140-1). Yet at this time there was still a golden rule: “Keep off sex’...is rather like ‘Keep off the Grass’. Not so much a restriction as a licence to walk anywhere else you choose” (McDowell, 1973: 145). Peter Hunt’s attempts at definition twenty years later shows a slight softening in attitude: “pictures and large print are more common in children’s books, explicit sex, violence and soul searching are more common in adults” (Hunt, 1994: 12). However, he admits that “this will not do”; it is not possible to say what is and is not a children’s book, or what should or should not be in a children’s book: “there is little guide as to what is appropriate, attractive, or even comprehensible – and there is considerable tension between adults’ and children’s expectations” (ibid.: 16).

This tension is also apparent in the criticism of children’s literature. Nick Tucker, publishing *The Child and The Book* in 1981, observed that children’s

literature “is not expected to reflect all the varied, sometimes sordid preoccupations of a society” (Tucker, 1981: 192) and that “most children’s authors...stick to current, non-controversial standards and ideas in their fiction” (ibid.: 193). This supports Tucker’s well argued psychological point that “children may simply want confirmation...of certain common, set ways of thinking” (p.2) in their books, and that “what may seem like realism in books for younger readers amounts only to a reflection...of their own typical, personal idealism”. What children want, Tucker argues, is escapism, a happy ending, stimulation for the imagination. Fred Inglis, in his introduction to *The Promise of Happiness* in 1981, sets out his stall in agreement with Tucker, but with considerably more aggression: “The best children’s books reawaken our innocence. That is the pleasure they give. The richness of the grown-up world is partly paid for by a loss of that quality...which is quite unlike the forced earnestness of the bibliotheraputicians (‘Here’s a book which I think will help you with your problem’) and their favoured authors, who would serve up the diet of the devout *New Society*-and-*Guardian*-reading PTA, and make children’s stories from a recipe of divorce, urban poverty, young sex, car thefts, all roundly beaten up with a couple of muggings” (Inglis, 1981: 8-9). Philippa Pearce also laments this state of affairs: “the adult specialism in children’s books has gone so far that certain books are sometimes prescribed, as one might prescribe a medicine or a tonic. They are prescribed not because they are good books, but because they are supposed to be good for the reader, dealing helpfully (it is thought) with one or more of the problems that beset children” (Pearce, 1992: 28). The world of the imagination, it

seems, is preferable to the “sometimes sordid” real world that the reader actually inhabits.

However, Pearce also goes on to state that, although “children’s writers so often have their responsibilities pointed out to them – responsibilities such as anti-sexism, anti-racism and so on”, these writers also have rights: “the right to be left alone...to write the book he or she wants to write... [and] to aspire to be literature, and to be taken seriously as such” (ibid: 30). This is moving away from the prohibitions of Inglis and Tucker and into a more liberated view of childhood and children’s literature, although in acknowledging the responsibilities of children’s writer’s Pearce too is adhering to the “Keep off sex” sign that McDowell placed twenty years earlier.

Perhaps the most significant deconstruction of the ideologies present in children’s literature is Jacqueline Rose’s powerful book *The Case of Peter Pan, or the Impossibility of Children’s Fiction* (Rose, 1994). Rose’s central argument is nothing less than the assertion that children’s literature is founded on a fallacy. Returning to the uneasy relationship between adult writer and child reader highlighted above (Hunt, 1994; Hollindale, 1988 and 1997), Rose argues that “children’s fiction rests on the idea that there is a child who is simply there to be addressed” (Rose, 1994: 1). She goes on to explode this notion: “to which child are we speaking?...if we are speaking to one group of children, then the chances are that we are not speaking to another” (ibid.: 7). Above all, she highlights the issue of sexuality present at the core of *Peter Pan* and, by extension, children’s literature as a whole. She construes the act

of writing literature for children as an act of desire, “to describe children’s fiction, quite deliberately, as something of a soliciting, a chase, or even a seduction” (ibid.: 2). The boy who never grew up is fixed and held by J.M. Barrie in childhood in “an act in which the child is used (and abused) to represent the whole problem of what sexuality is, or can be, and to hold that problem at bay” (ibid.: 4). In other words, the act of writing literature for children in which the child is constructed as an innocent is an adult act in response to the fear of sexuality. In fact, far from constructing the child as innocent, Rose uses Freud to show that childhood innocence does not exist: “the child is sexual, but its sexuality (bisexual, polymorphous, perverse) threatens our own at its very roots. Setting up the child as innocent is not, therefore, repressing its sexuality – it is above all holding off any possible challenge to our own” (ibid: 4). Again, the conflict between the two conceptions of childhood is entrenched into the debate. Barrie, and writers whose “glorification of the child” (ibid: 8) allude to childhood as a separate state, seek to restore a world of lost innocence to adulthood; Freud, and Rose herself, see childhood as a continuum of development into adulthood, and therefore this quest after lost innocence is not only hopeless but grounded in an impossibility, since the innocence never existed in the first place. Burgess argues almost exactly the same line: “Adults do have uneasy feelings about children...I don’t know how much is to do with their uneasy feelings about themselves. As soon as you touch on drugs and sex, everything goes into overdrive...There’s this great fetish about youth, particularly a sexual fetish. I suppose we must fancy them. Young people - not very young, but when they

first develop - are very attractive. People get scared about it" (quoted in Brooks, 2001).

If one thing is clear from these conflicts and debates, it is that there are no easy answers. There is a clear opposition between those who see childhood as a separate domain and those who see it as a stage in a process. There is opposition between those who see children's literature as escapism and those who see it as a way of exploring reality. There is opposition between those who feel that children should be sheltered and those who think that children should be exposed. There is even opposition between definitions of what children's literature actually is. In exploring a range of texts which seem to be part of children's literature, I intend to illustrate these conflicts and debates. I will examine fairy tales, and the processes through which their messages and content have been changed and reassessed over time to reflect constructions of childhood, appropriateness, purpose and audience. Next, I will explore classics from the so-called "Golden Ages" of children's literature (Leeson, 1985) and their conceptions of childness to illustrate the prevalence of the "innocent child" view through this period. Finally, I will survey contemporary children's literature and seek to establish the traditions in which their portrayals of sexuality follow.

Fairy Tales and the Process of Sanitisation

Examination of the fairy tale illustrates the processes of sanitisation, expurgation, and assimilation suggested above as a result of changing constructions of childhood. Of the many critics who have analysed the fairy

tale genre, almost all write about their origins in the oral folk tale tradition, and how their adoption into children's literature altered the content, style, messages, and even the very nature of the tales. As Maria Tatar puts it: "when folk tales retreated from workrooms and parlours to take up residence in the nursery, something was lost in the move" (Tatar, 1992: 3). One of the major elements that was excised was the sexual element, as Tatar continues in her description of *Little Red Riding Hood*, which:

started out as a ribald story with a heroine who spends a good part of the narrative undressing while provocatively asking the wolf what to do with her bodice, her petticoat, and her stockings...but in the hands of those who turned traditional tales into literary texts, the story of Red Riding Hood came to be oriented toward a new audience and transformed into a solemn cautionary tale warning children about the perils of disobeying mother's instructions.

Tatar, 1992: 3

Where one may disagree with the solemnity of modern *Red Riding Hood* versions, one cannot question the cautionary message and the innocence of the heroine.

Jack Zipes charts the process of folk to fairy tale transformation in his historical study *Fairy Tales and the Art of Subversion* (Zipes, 1983), examining in turn the key names in the lineage of fairy tale adaptation: Charles Perrault, the Brothers Grimm, and Hans Christian Andersen. The first stage of this is in the seven tales of Perrault's 1697 *Histoires ou contes du temps passé*. It is interesting to note the date, which coincides with the acceptance of Rousseau's Natural Child and the inception of the Romantic Child as detailed above. Whilst Zipes is at pains to credit Perrault with his

literary achievement, he also stresses that the purpose of the collection was to spread the notion of *civilité* and help civilise children – “instincts were to be trained and controlled for their socio-political use value” (Zipes, 1983: 23). He goes on to examine the seven tales, concurring with Tatar in his assessment of the changes made to *Little Red Riding Hood*:

Instead of warning girls against the dangers of predators in forests, the tale warns girls against their own natural desires which they must tame...In the folk tale the little girl displays a natural, relaxed attitude towards her body and sex...In Perrault's literary fairy tale Little Red Riding Hood is chastised because she is innocently disposed toward nature in the form of the wolf and woods, and she is *raped* or punished because she is guilty of not controlling her natural inclinations.

Zipes, 1983: 29

Zipes sets this transformation against the historical background of changing attitudes to sex as explored above: “there was an important shift in European attitudes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries so that the open display of sex and bodily functions gradually became curtailed. Restriction and revulsion toward frank sexual behaviour replaced open acceptance” (ibid: 33). The notion of using literature for children to reinforce these new and changing attitudes, and to develop in them the notion of *civilité*, connects absolutely with Hollindale's notion of childness, since the Red Riding Hood of Perrault's tale reflected contemporary notions childhood, and the character in the folk tale did not.

The process continued with the Brothers Grimm in 1812 and their revised edition of fairy tales in 1857. Zipes examines the alterations made by the brothers from their manuscript copy of 1810 through the two editions of their tale (citing Rölleke, 1975), focusing on *The Frog Prince* in his examination of

the ways in which the brothers re-worked their original sources, helping them “contribute to the creation of a false consciousness and reinforce an authoritarian socialisation process” (ibid.: 45). The revisions add embroidery and detail, and “this did not occur merely for stylistic reasons” Zipes asserts (ibid: 50). The frog in the original has a purely sexual motivation, to sleep with the girl who drops her ball into his well. “It is explicitly sexual and alludes to a universal initiation and marital ritual”, and in versions where the girl kisses the frog rather than dashing him against the wall to precipitate his transformation into a husband, “mutual sexual recognition and acceptance bring about the prince’s salvation” (ibid). In the Grimms’ published revisions, the girl (now a princess) is motivated by money, not sex; the frog wishes to become a playmate, rather than a sexually motivated bedfellow; and it is her rejection of the frog’s advances that gains her reward, not her acceptance of them. Tatar agrees that an original story “rich in opportunities for risqué humour, was...recast to produce a tale designed to issue stern lessons about the importance of keeping promises – even when it means sharing your bed with an amorous frog” (Tatar, 1992: 4).

This process of recasting fairy tales, then, illustrates the sanitisation process through which sexuality was excised from literature intended for children. What has been missed in many of the discussions of this process, however, is that the original folk tales were *not* necessarily for a child audience, and certainly not exclusively so. Due to the transient nature of the oral medium, we cannot know how the folk tale tellers mediated their content in respect of the audience that was present at the time; perhaps the tellers played down

Red Riding Hood's striptease and the amorous nature of the Frog Prince for younger listeners, as they may have played them up for a more mature audience. What is certain is that the literary process deemed sexuality inappropriate for children, until the tales of Hans Christian Andersen "were deemed useful and worthy enough for rearing children of all classes and became a literary staple of Western culture" (Zipes, 1983: 71), garnering praise from Charles Dickens who celebrated their "simplicity...purity... [and] innocent extravagance":

It would be hard to estimate the amount of gentleness and mercy that has made its way among us through these slight channels. Forbearance, courtesy, consideration for the poor and aged, kind treatment of animals, the love of nature, abhorrence of tyranny and brute force – many such good things have been first nourished in the child's heart by this powerful aid.

cited in Tatar, 1992: 17

Tatar notes that Dickens was motivated into making this outpouring of enthusiasm by his illustrator and friend George Cruikshank, who had rewritten several tales since, still, "there was much in fairy tales that was not suitable for children" (ibid.).

However, despite being simplified, purified, and rendered more and more extravagant by successive generations of literary revisers, fairy tales still had a sting, which came to light with the advent of modern psychology in the twentieth century. In searching for an explanation which could go "anywhere near accounting for the world-wide popularity of fairy tales" (Tucker, 1981: 91), educational psychologist Nick Tucker acknowledges the power of "psychoanalytic interpretations." For, the psychoanalytic critic argues, no

matter how expurgated and sanitised the tales have become on the surface, their sexual content is threaded into the very fabric of the narrative. The work of Bruno Bettelheim is of particular relevance here. In *The Uses of Enchantment: the Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales* (1975/1991), Bettelheim examines the canon of fairy tales and explores their relevance and symbolism from a Freudian psychoanalytic perspective. If we examine *Sleeping Beauty*, we can see an example of this kind of deconstruction. Tatar struggles to find the moral in her tale: “Sleeping Beauty never wilfully defies an order – in fact, she does nothing at all to merit the punishment visited on her. There is no moral dimension whatever to her action” (Tatar, 1992: 10). The reason for this, Bettelheim argues, is that the tale is not about morality at all, despite revisionist attempts to imbue the tale with moral codes. Instead, the tale represents female adolescence and the journey to sexual maturity: “despite all attempts on the part of parents to prevent their child’s sexual awakening, it will take place nonetheless” (Bettelheim, 1991: 230). The protagonist is forbidden by her father from entering a secret chamber in the castle to prevent the onset of a curse. However, in adolescence she discovers the previously concealed chamber, which represents her dormant sexuality, and pricks her finger on the distaff concealed there. The blood of the curse represents menstruation, and she falls into a long sleep “protected against all suitors – i.e., premature sexual encounters – by an impenetrable wall of thorns” (ibid: 233). Only when the time is right and Sleeping Beauty is ready can a man penetrate the wall – representative simultaneously of the hymen and pubic hair – and awaken the dormant woman within. Thus the innocent tale, which features in Perrault’s *Histoires ou contes du temps passé* and the

Grimms' collection, is in fact a tale which is all about sex, and sexual awakening. The same goes for many other tales: Erich Fromm's analysis of *Little Red Riding Hood* sees her as "a girl on the verge of puberty – her red hood symbolising the onset of menstruation – and so presented with the problems of her budding sexuality" (Tucker, 1981: 88). *The Frog Prince* symbolises "a young girl's mixture of fascination and horror over the sexual act" (ibid: 87). *Snow White* and *Cinderella* play out Oedipal conflicts: "the child can become himself only as the parent is defeated" (Bettelheim, 1975/1991: 310). As Zipes would contend, fairy tales are subversive indeed: generations of writers sought to excise that which they deemed "not suitable for children", putting up their own seemingly impenetrable barrier of thorns, only to discover that, at the core of the tales themselves, they were stories that not only contained sexual material, they were about the very issues of sex and sexuality themselves.

From *Wonderland* to *Narnia*: The Age of Innocence

The age of innocence in children's literature coincides with the concept of a "Golden Age" of children's literature. Robert Leeson dates the first "Golden Age" from 1870 to 1914, and suggests a second one from 1950 to 1970 (Leeson 1985), the query in his chapter heading "Another age of gold?" being replaced by the certainty of "the Second Golden Age" in John Rowe Townsend's episodic history (Townsend, 1998; see also Carpenter, 1985; Green, R.L., 1962/1990). I would argue that what I term the age of innocence stems from the first through to the end of the second. The notion of quality

attached to the epithet “golden” has the marks of a canon about it, just as Leavis and Robertson set about enshrining in mainstream English literature (Leavis and Robertson, 1933). This notion can be seen in the work of Fred Inglis, as he states categorically that “the great children’s novelists are Lewis Carroll, Rudyard Kipling, Frances Hodgson Burnett, Arthur Ransome, William Mayne, and Philippa Pearce...” and sets out to establish, through the “riot of opinion” which are “the best books” (Inglis, 1981: 3). Inglis contends that “the best children’s books reawaken our innocence. That is the pleasure they give. The richness of the grown-up world is partly paid for by a loss of that quality” (ibid: 8). It is his contention, then, that quality in children’s literature equated to innocence; there is no doubt that the literature of the golden ages reflects this conception. *Alice, The Jungle Book, The Secret Garden, Swallows and Amazons, Earthfasts* or *Tom’s Midnight Garden* are all innocent, without a trace of sexuality within them as narratives. However, Inglis’s idea that “the more the writer is a good man, the more we take the stories as truthful and the judgments excellent” (Inglis, 1981: 22) already undermine his own selection of William Mayne, who admitted eleven indecent assaults on young girl fans and was jailed for two and a half years after being convicted on six counts. The judge declared that his “undoubted enrichment of many young people’s lives had carried a hidden price” (Wainwright, 2004). This “hidden price” is evident in the work of Lewis Carroll, whose fascination with the young Liddell girls is widely documented, and “whose underworld journey was long ago traced to its author’s fantasised seduction of a little girl” (Rose, 1994: 3). Just as the innocence of the bowdlerised fairy tales concealed a sexual truth, so the innocence of the work of Carroll and Mayne. I am not arguing that

authors of children's books creating an innocent world are all sexually motivated; far from it. However, the absence of sex and sexuality from these worlds and these authors' conceptions of childness is worthy of exploration. I will do so by examining the pre-war work of Arthur Ransome, and the post-war work of C.S. Lewis, as representative of the innocent world that Inglis and others value so highly.

Although Ransome's works fall between the two Golden Ages as defined by Leeson, Carpenter and Green (Leeson, 1985; Carpenter, 1985; Green, 1962/1990), they capture the qualities of the age of innocence completely: groups of children separated from their parents, entering a mysterious and wonderful other world, and having adventures there. This is the basis not only of *Alice and Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass* and *Peter Pan*, but also *The Secret Garden*, *Five Children and It* and many others of the first Golden Age, but also of the *Adventure*, *Famous Five* and *Secret Seven* books of Enid Blyton so derided by Inglis but so beloved by children. This innocent world, in fact, is often intruded upon by adult concerns, usually in the form of crime or criminals – the Blyton series, for example, often involving the foiling or disruption of adult plots by the plucky children, a narrative device already established in *Swallows and Amazons* – but these adult concerns never involve sexuality or relationships. The conception of childhood which was current at the time, and hence the concept of childness which is created by the narratives, is an innocent one, and very much reads as one from a bygone age.

In *Swallows and Amazons*, the four Walker children, John, Susan, Titty and Roger, enjoy a holiday in the Lake District sailing their dinghy, the *Swallow*, on a fictionalised Windermere, and camping on an island. Whilst there, they encounter the wild sisters, Nancy and Peggy Blackett, who are local to the area and form an alliance with the Walker children. They play at pirates, explorers, and adventurers, before foiling a plot to steal a chest from the Blackett's Uncle Jim, who lives on a houseboat on the lake. The Blackett girls do exert a fascination for the Walkers, but John's attraction to them is more to do with their sailing ability and knowledge of the lake and its surrounding area than any physical attraction. In fact, when they are first seen, they are mistaken for boys:

'There are two boys in her,' said Titty.

'Girls,' said John, who had the telescope.

...In the little boat were two girls, one steering, the other sitting on the middle thwart. The two were almost exactly alike. Both had red knitted caps, brown shirts, blue knickerbockers, and no stockings.

Ransome, 1930/1962: 87-88

If anything, the girls are tomboys to the point of being anti-feminine. The gender roles in the Walker camp are clear and traditional: whilst Susan is forever sewing lost buttons back onto her younger brother Roger's shirt (ibid: 87), and Titty is a gifted seamstress herself, running up the flag for the *Swallow* (ibid: 19), John is the boat's "Master" and obviously in charge. Meanwhile, the Blackett girls are archers, knife-carriers, and sailors, with hierarchy only through age; John is, if anything, intimidated by Nancy's ability to do the things that he prizes above all – sailing, swimming, camping – better

than he does. There is no hint of sexual tension between them. The innocent world is absolutely secure.

Post-war, twenty years later, C.S. Lewis published *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (Lewis, 1950/1998). This novel has many similarities with *Swallows and Amazons*, not least in the composition of its main character family, the Pevensies – four children, two boys and two girls, one of whom even has the same name: Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy. Again, theirs is an innocent world, and though they grow up in the novel to be adult Kings and Queens of Narnia, this is not accompanied by any real character development.

Peter became a tall and deep-chested man and a great warrior...Susan grew into a tall and gracious woman with black hair that fell almost to her feet and the kings of countries across the sea began to send ambassadors asking for her hand in marriage...Edmund was a graver and quieter man than Peter, and great in council and judgment...as for Lucy, she was always gay and golden-haired, and all princes in those parts desired her to be their Queen

Lewis 1950/1998: 132

Lewis here acknowledges that sexuality exists, but is careful to avoid the notion of there actually being any sexual contact between his protagonists and other characters. The implication is that Susan rebuffed the proposals of marriage, and whilst Lucy is desirable she is also unattainable. As for the boys (now men), there is no mention of them having any interest in taking a wife themselves. In fact, in order to preserve his characters against any further intrusion of sexuality, in the next paragraph Lewis sends his four Kings

and Queens on a stag hunt which returns them, through the magical wardrobe, to their childhoods, merely seconds after they left it.

Lewis clearly values the innocence of childhood dearly, and goes on to make this idea absolutely clear. The world of Narnia is only accessible to innocent children. Although all four Pevensy children returned to Narnia in *Prince Caspian* (1951), adult concerns prevent the older two from doing so in *The Voyage of the Dawn-Treader*: “Peter was working very hard for an exam” and Susan has gone with her father to America: “Grown-ups thought her the pretty one of the family and she was no good at school work (though otherwise very old for her age) and Mother said she ‘would get far more out of a trip to America than the youngsters’” (Lewis, 1952/1998: 293). There is the slightest implied hint here that Susan’s mother is sending her away to keep her away from “bad influences” or from growing up too fast – she is “pretty”, she is “no good at school work”, she is “old for her age” – all hints that her sexuality is awake, and that this is a bad thing. Thus it is only Edmund and Lucy (and their unpleasant cousin Eustace Clarence Scrubb) who return to Narnia for the third time.

It is famously in *The Last Battle* (1956), the most allegorical of all the Narnia chronicles, that Lewis lays all his cards on the table regarding the onset of adolescence. In this novel, the Pevensy children are killed in a fatal railway accident in our world, but granted admittance into a walled Paradise garden – all except Susan. Susan is not permitted to join her family because she is, “no longer a friend of Narnia...she’s interested in nothing nowadays except nylons

and lipstick and invitations. She always was a jolly sight too keen on being grown-up” (Lewis, 1956/1998: 506). In Lewis’s allegorical world, Susan’s interest in nylons, lipstick and invitations damns her, and her family disown her – the opening section of the quotation above is spoken by her elder brother, Peter. The inclusion of this pointed condemnation struck me, even as a child, as an awkward moment in the narrative, disrupting the symmetry of the four kings and the system of boy girl pairs of visitors from our world to Narnia that Lewis had established – Peter and Susan, Edmund and Lucy, Eustace and Jill, Diggory and Polly – so it must have been important to him to make this point. And his point is that childhood innocence, free from the sexuality inherent in “nylons and lipstick and invitations”, is the most highly valued commodity of all. He places himself in the position of J.M. Barrie, aiming at a literature which “fixes the child and then holds it in place” (Rose, 1994: 4) where he or she never grows up, adhering stringently to “the idea...of a primitive or lost state to which the child has special access” (ibid: 9).

By 1956 the concept of the innocent child which was so categorically defended by Lewis had been a staple for over ninety years (since *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865). These are the texts to which Inglis and others paid homage, either through the establishment of “golden” ages or through advocacy of quality. There is no doubt that these books are delightful, and great works of literature in many cases, but clearly by the time of *The Last Battle* Lewis felt, as Inglis did in 1981, that the concept needed defending, which begs the question, against what? What was changing about

the literature and the concepts of childhood and childness that required defence against the rise of sexuality?

The Rise of the Teenager: the Age of Experience

What was arising was in issue of audience. Tucker (1981) spends some time discussing the age for which fairy tales were suitable, concluding that most of the research points to “the age of seven” although the genre is now so wide that it have become an “impossibility [to suggest] any ideal age-range” (Tucker, 1981: 69-70). The Alice that Lewis Carroll was writing about was seven also (Haughton, in Carroll, 1998: xx). Children’s literature during this period was, primarily, aimed at the younger (pre-teenage) child audience; teenagers were seen, in terms of literary audiences at least, as adults and therefore consumed adult literature. It could not reasonably be expected that literature for this younger audience, and about these younger characters, would deal with the vicissitudes of emergent sexuality, although this was not the case with the older Blackett, Walker and Pevensey children. However, after the Second World War a social and cultural revolution saw the rise of the teenager in popular culture, and children’s literature expanded to meet this new market, both in terms of quantity of publication, range and breadth. This period coincided with a period of economic recession in the 1970s, and a greater focus on social realism in books for children (Townsend, 1998b). It is perhaps this wider cultural shift that pushed Lewis into his conservative condemnation of Susan Pevensy in 1956, rather than any out-and-out rejection of sexuality in itself.

Joseph Appleyard, in his study *Becoming a Reader* (Appleyard, 1991), distinguishes five stages on the route to becoming an adult reader, beginning with early childhood (the reader as player), moving into later childhood (the reader as hero and heroine), then adolescence (the reader as thinker), before moving onto maturity (the reader as interpreter) and adulthood (the pragmatic reader) (ibid: 14-15). I am mostly concerned here with stages two and three, and in particular the movement between them. It is my contention that the increase in the treatment of sexuality in children's literature coincides with the increase in publication of literature specifically aimed at readers in Appleyard's third stage, the adolescent "reader as thinker" stage. Prior to this, in the "innocent" literature from *Alice* to *Narnia*, children's novels primarily focused on Appleyard's second stage, the later childhood "reader as hero or heroine" – hence the adventures, the peril, the fantasy lands and the escapism.

Appleyard is perceptive and insightful in his depictions of both these stages, and on the drives which move readers from one to the other. In the second, later childhood stage, he cites the example of Stephen, who, at fifteen, is "a bit old for this chapter chronologically, but poised between two different ways of enjoying books":

In one sense Stephen seems to be looking backward, at the magical world of childhood, at heroes and villains involved in struggles between good and evil, where power settles everything. There's not much ambiguity in this world and no overt sex: "The biggest things I stay away from are romantic stuff"

Appleyard, 1991: 89

“The magical world of childhood” could be a phrase plucked from *The Child and the Book* (Tucker, 1981) or *The Promise of Happiness* (Inglis, 1981), summing up as it does the innocence, the special quality, which Jacqueline Rose sees as such a fallacy and an impossibility (Rose, 1994: 9). Appleyard is also insistent that children “outgrow” this stage and, consequently, this innocence of these books: “they begin to find them unrealistic” (Appleyard, 1991: 86). He describes the romance of the magical world of heroes and heroines, and states that:

the more he or she learns about the world, the more a child realises that the vision of romance is an inadequate picture of it. People are more complicated than the heroes and villains of adventure stories...there is more to becoming an adult than solving crimes or slaying dragons...the child’s view of the world enlarges, and what was an adequate way of making sense of the world no longer is.

Appleyard, 1991: 87

This transition marks the exact point at which a child moves out of the innocent, golden age of childhood and the literature of experience which portrays the world more as it really is. In Appleyard’s third stage, adolescence, he surveys the territory and observes that children in this stage “read more stories about adolescents and their problems and they increasingly read adult fiction as well” (Appleyard, 1991: 99). In characterising the difference between stages two and three, he sums up my argument perfectly:

The difference is that the juvenile books all deal with an innocent world, where evil is externalised and finally powerless, where endings are happy. The adolescents’ books deal with sex, death, sin, and prejudice, and good and evil are not neatly separated but mixed up in the

confused and often turbulent emotions of the central characters themselves.

Appleyard, 1991: 100

Appleyard was writing from an American perspective, but this same trend can be observed within reading surveys in this country. In 1971, Frank Whitehead conducted a survey of children's reading called *Children and their Books* (Whitehead, 1977) which was updated in 1999 by Chris Hall and Martin Coles in *Children's Reading Choices* (Hall and Coles, 1999). In 1971, the top ten most popular books for ten plus and twelve plus included *The Secret Seven*, *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, and *Treasure Island* - all featuring the innocence of childhood as discussed above. By fourteen plus all of those titles have vanished, outgrown, replaced with *Love Story*, *Skinhead*, *Lord of the Flies*, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Only *Little Women* remains constant (Whitehead, 1977). The same study was repeated by Hall and Coles, this time with a gender breakdown. For twelve-year-old boys and girls Roald Dahl and Point Horror reign supreme, to be replaced for boys by science fiction, horror and fantasy at fourteen (*Jurassic Park*, *Red Dwarf*, *Lord of the Rings*) and for girls by *Flowers in the Attic*, *Jane Eyre* and, crucially, Judy Blume's *Forever* (Hall and Coles, 1999: Lists 5-9). Appleyard also mentions *Forever* in his adolescence section as an example of "the young adult novels that have been raising parents' eyebrows" (Appleyard, 1991: 100). It is this "young adult" market which did not exist at the time of the Narnia books, but began to grow in the 1970s, perhaps prompting Inglis's tirade against the "children's stories [made] from a recipe of divorce, urban poverty, young sex, car thefts, all roundly beaten up with a couple of muggings" (Inglis, 1981: 8-9) and Tucker's defence that children's books were "not expected to reflect all the varied,

sometimes sordid preoccupations of a society” (Tucker, 1981: 192). And it is in this market that the treatment of sexuality becomes more widespread. So perhaps it is not the case that children’s literature is encompassing more adult themes, but rather the age for which children’s literature is written is rising.

Sexuality in Young Adult Fiction: from *Forever* to *Doing It*

It seems, then, that the concept of childhood, at least as regards children’s literature, was extending upwards in age. Whilst Tucker conceives of fairy tales as suitable for seven-year-olds (Tucker, op. cit.), Alice and Peter Pan seem to cater for or feature a similar age group. In the twentieth century we can see that *Swallows and Amazons* and the *Narnia* books might cater for a slightly older audience if we take the ages of the central characters as a guide, even though the conception of the innocent child, as already discussed, is still sacrosanct. By 1975, when Judy Blume published *Forever*, the idea of a “young adult” audience for children’s fiction was established – the heroine, Katherine, is seventeen, a considerable advance on any of the child protagonists discussed so far. Yet there is no doubt that *Forever* is children’s literature, in that it definitely is not an adult book. If we look at Anne Fine’s reaction to *Doing It* for a definition, *Forever* is published by a children’s imprint – most recently, Young Picador, an imprint of Pan Macmillan, who bill it as: “the first book aimed at young readers to explicitly depict a teenage sexual relationship, *Forever* caused huge controversy and attracted fierce criticism. Nevertheless, *Forever* has become a teenage classic and, with millions of readers around the world, its popularity endures today” (*Forever*

Reading Guide, 2005). This sums up the issue of sexuality in books for “young readers” – controversial, criticised, but popular.

The controversy over *Forever* continues today. Some adults aren't comfortable talking with teens about sexuality. They're afraid that if you know about it, you'll do it. I'm more afraid that you'll do it without knowing – that you'll do it without considering the consequences...
(Blume, 2005: *ibid.*)

Lynda Lee Potter reviewed *Forever* in the *Daily Mail* in 1991. She wrote, “What are young girls reading today? Sadly too many of them read trashy books, like *Forever* by Judy Blume, which teaches girls how to be Lolitas... is it any wonder that teenage pregnancies are at an all-time high?” (cited in *Forever Reading Guide*, 2005). Besides the fact that Potter obviously misreads the novel in terms of its teaching and message, her reaction sums up the worries that Blume expresses in terms of reaction – “if you know about it, you'll do it”. This is not the place to explore the intricacies of that argument, but it is the place to examine the step that Blume took in confronting this attitude and exploring the idea of sexuality in young people, for young people, where the consequences were positive and neither of the couple involved had to die.

The novel deals with Katherine's decision to have sex with her boyfriend, Michael, and the feelings and emotions associated with the process and its consequences. It reads as an honest book and, at thirty years' distance, a “worthy” book. Take Blume's author's note to the new edition: “If you are going to become sexually active, then you MUST take responsibility for your own actions and your own life” (Blume, 1975/2005: i). This sums up the tenor

of the novel – it is actually written as a manual for girls (and, possibly, boys) about to take the step of becoming sexually active. Katherine is not confused or uncertain about her sexuality; she has already has a relationship with a boy called Tommy Aronson which ended because “sex was all he was ever interested in” (ibid, 13). Every decision she takes is sensible and mature; she ensures that she has adequate contraceptive protection, organising a visit to a New York sexual health clinic, and takes the decision to have sex seriously in the context of a committed and secure relationship at the age of seventeen. Blume is not so naïve as to assume her readership is all at that age, however, noting: “My daughter was fourteen in 1975 when she asked if I could write a story about two nice kids who have sex without either of them having to die... Young people are always asking me, How old do I have to be before I can read *Forever*? An impossible question to answer. Some are ready at twelve, some not until later” (Reading Guide, 2005). Presumably Susan Pevensey would have relished the chance to read it. Above all Blume writes about a girl who has a fulfilling sexual relationship, countering the attitude that “girls were divided into two groups – those who did and those who didn’t. My mother told me that. Nice girls didn’t, naturally. They were the ones boys wanted to marry” (Blume, 1975/2005: 32).

Blume’s other major achievement is her frankness. She avoids euphemism; her characters swear; there is a physical honesty about her writing. This frankness renders the prose of the lovemaking scenes in *Forever* quite unerotic, although Katherine’s passion and fulfilment are clear:

I got so carried away I grabbed his backside with both hands, trying to push him deeper and deeper into me – and I spread my legs as far apart as I could – and I raised my hips off the bed – and I moved with him, again and again and again – and at last, I came. I came right before Michael and as I did I made noises, just like my mother. Michael did too.

(Blume, 1975/2005: 119)

Katherine's sexual fulfilment feels like just reward for having made all the right decisions, taken all the right precautions, and waited until the time was right.

There is always something of the guidance leaflet about *Forever*; it is resolutely a book by an adult for children to teach them the right way to go about things. The writer is in a position of complete superiority, almost lecturing in places; Katherine herself is so responsible that she doesn't really seem like a teenager at all. This is a tradition that has been inherited by other writers of so-called "issue books", including Berlie Doherty who won the 1991 Carnegie Medal for *Dear Nobody*, a novel dealing with teenage pregnancy.

Fast forward, then, to 2003, and the source of Anne Fine's outrage, Melvin Burgess's *Doing It*. No stranger to controversy, he won the Carnegie Medal in 1996 with *Junk*, his uncompromising portrait of heroin addiction through the eyes of a fourteen-year-old runaway and her boyfriend. Interestingly, the character of Gemma illustrates the process of time with regards to the presentation of teenage sexuality in the young adult market. She begins the novel rather like Katherine in *Forever*, refusing to have sex with Tar until she is ready: "Gemma didn't stop him when his hand glided under her top, but when she felt his hand sliding down her tummy she slapped his fingers lightly...there was no sex, we never did that. It was just...being close" (Burgess, 1996: 4-5). She runs away to join Tar and, on their first night

together, they have sex. But Burgess has none of the frankness of Blume in his description, leaving the sex itself suggested and implied rather than described: “We cuddled and it got very warm and then a bit steamy and pretty soon my jumper found its way up around my neck...Later on Tar said in a little voice, ‘I love you.’” (ibid: 67). There is an innocence about the fourteen-year-old Gemma that the wise Katherine lacked; perhaps this explains Burgess’s circumlocution. However, her innocence is short-lived; by the age of fifteen she has turned to prostitution to finance her heroin addiction, although there is still a semblance of responsibility in her attitude:

I take care of myself...Always make sure the punters use a condom. I don’t work the streets; I do it through the massage parlour...I don’t have Aids. I don’t even have non-specific urethritis.

ibid: 162

The clipped, short sentences here demonstrate the barriers that Gemma’s character is putting up to protect herself from her situation, lying to herself through the precautions that she is taking that what she is doing is alright, when really she, the reader, and the writer know that it is not. Yet *Junk* is not a preaching, teaching book in the way that *Forever* is; the message about heroin is clear, but honest. Sex in *Junk* is a way of illustrating the downward spiral of Gemma’s life – from responsible and non-sexual fourteen-year-old through first loving sexual experience to using her sexuality to finance her habit – it is not the point of the novel itself.

The same is true of the flimsier novel *Lady* (Burgess, 2001) in which the heroine, Sandra Francy, experiences a Kafkaesque transformation into a dog,

leading to the ironic subtitle *My Life as a Bitch*. Although there sexual content, again it is used to illustrate a different point about responsibility and the nature of being a teenager. Sandra is promiscuous and doesn't care about anything except having fun. She has no interest in exams, responsibility, looking to the future. She describes losing her virginity:

It was my fault for waiting until everything was right. That's one thing I've learned – don't wait for it to be perfect or you'll wait forever... We got the cushions off the settee and laid them on the floor and did it there and then, without even turning the telly off. It was 'Stars in their Eyes'. It hurt both of us, I was lying underneath going 'Ow, ow,' and he was on top of me going 'Ow, ow.' It was dead quick. He came, and then it was all over and there we were lying on the floor holding one another. I thought, 'There.' Like, that's that, then.

(Burgess, 2001: 127-8)

Perhaps Burgess is attempting honesty, here, but the entire novel is laden with irony and Sandra is not a likeable heroine in the way that Gemma is in *Junk* – the reader feels little or no sympathy for her. His use of the word “forever” seems to be a direct response to Judy Blume, rejecting the mature responsibility of Katherine – Sandra is an anti-Katherine. Her transformation into a dog allows her to live a completely irresponsible life, which she relishes. Although she does have regrets and seeks out her family, attempting to return to human form, in the end she flees, choosing to run with the pack:

I thought about being a dog...her life isn't worry and work, it's loyalty and blood, fear and love – the brief passion of another dog on your back, yet another batch of puppies to love and to throw away...And I thought, I don't want to be a human being...I want to be quick and fast and happy and then dead. I don't want to go to work. I don't want to be responsible. I want to be a dog!

(ibid: 197)

The strapline on the front cover reads “Burgess captures teenage life brilliantly – *Sunday Times*”. I am not sure that this is true – perhaps elements of teenage rebellion and the rejection of responsibility, in the last throes of childhood before maturity, are captured in Sandra Francy, but ultimately the novel is too arch and its protagonist too caricatured to be even as credible as Katherine in *Forever*, much less the rounded light and shade of Gemma in *Junk*. Burgess says “in writing about the relative importance of being irresponsible, and presenting a character who gets it wrong despite thinking a great deal about it, the book ends up, rather to my regret, being about what's important and what's not; what kind of space you want to make in your life for both things” (Burgess, 2003b). Although he says that Sandra Francy “gets it wrong”, this kind of moral judgment is far from explicit in the text, and the tone of the novel is inconsistent in its jumps from valuing human and canine ideologies.

It is with *Doing It* that Burgess finally makes the idea of sexuality the subject of a novel, rather than a corollary to a novel about something else. It bookends the treatment of sexuality in books for young readers with *Forever*, and is its opposite in many aspects. Whereas *Forever* is from a mature, responsible, single seventeen-year-old feminine perspective, and for a female audience, *Doing It* is primarily from three immature, largely irresponsible seventeen-year-old male perspectives, with occasional sections from the girls and women involved in their sexual liaisons, for what seems to be a male audience. The three main characters pick up where Sandra Francy left off, with her declaration that “To be a virgin at sixteen – that was the pits as far as

we were concerned” (Burgess, 2001: 125). Dino is desperate to have sex, but his girlfriend won’t co-operate; Jonathan is being pursued by a girl he likes, but she is fat so he is not sure he wants to have sex with her; and Ben is having a highly sexual relationship with his drama teacher, who uses her position as his teacher to manipulate him to her will. It is a self-consciously controversial novel; its narrators use crude language and the opening “choice” game which so offends Anne Fine demonstrates crude attitudes too. Yet Burgess is careful to flesh out these boys with more character than he did with Sandra Francy; although what they say is crude, offensive and demeaning, it is, in each case, all a defence against a lack of confidence, experience or both. Talking about sex in the most graphic and lewd terms gives these boys the air of knowing more than they do, of being sure about more than they are:

‘I’ve had anything, I have. I’ve had Carol Vorderman, Geri and Posh, Zoe Ball. I’ve had all your sisters and your mums, everyone man!’ Fasil whirled round on his heels, poking and pushing in all directions like a demon, shagging half the kingdom. It was hilarious.

(Burgess, 2003a: 190)

Although Burgess’s boys are more brazen about sex than Blume’s Katherine, they are far less confident, and Burgess’s purpose is less clearly defined here than Blume’s was in 1975. This book is not designed to teach its readers the right way to go about things. Burgess is not preaching or teaching here. But what he is doing is demonstrating the misguided and often awful mistakes that hormone driven boys make in their pursuit of sex. In some way, each of the sexual relationships is unstable, ill-advised and certainly not the model of security and mutual understanding demonstrated in *Forever* - Dino and Jackie

are dysfunctional, Zoe/Siobhan misleads Dino at every step, Jonathan can't commit to Deborah, and Ali Young manipulates her pupil, Ben, not only into sex but also into a dependency relationship which borders on abusive. However, in an interview with Libby Brooks, Burgess reveals that his reasons for writing *Lady* and working on *Doing It* are not dissimilar to Blume's when she approached *Forever*: "Why is it that, when you become a sexually active person, it can't be, 'You've got your first boyfriend, you've lost your virginity, the whole world's opening up for you, isn't that wonderful?', as opposed to, 'Oh God, you're going to get pregnant, get Aids, shag around and get your heart broken.' Sexual activity in people who've just discovered it is great, isn't it?" (quoted in Brooks, 2001). It is not always a celebration, but the novel does show that sex is a subject that teenagers, and perhaps especially teenage boys, obsess about and are completely preoccupied with, and that it need not have guilt and stigma attached to it in and of itself – although some of the mistakes that the characters make bring this with them, such as the occasion when Jackie undresses and gets into bed ready to have sex with Dino for the first time at his house party to discover that somebody has already been sick in it. As Kit Spring wrote in response to Anne Fine: "This boldly comic book has a serious core and a great deal of heart. I wouldn't give it to my 13-year-old daughter to read now. But I'll hand it over happily in a couple of years. It'll make her feel better. Everyone knows teenage boys are gross. Now we know they're human too" (Spring, 2003).

Innocence and Experience: the two traditions in modern children's literature

So *Forever* and *Doing It* neatly bookend the treatment of sexuality in children's literature, markedly different but also sharing similarities in their desire to show that sex need not be a taboo subject, and in the controversy that they caused in doing so. Yet the ground broken by *Forever*, and by Burgess in *Junk*, has caused a spread of the inclusion of sexual content in children's literature in the intervening period, without the associated controversy of those texts. The conclusion of Malorie Blackman's highly acclaimed and FCGB award winning *Noughts and Crosses* (2001), a futuristic *Romeo and Juliet* story, hinges on the consummation of Callum and Sephy's relationship as she is held captive by the terrorist gang that Callum has been compelled to join. Jennifer Donnelly's *A Gathering Light* won the Carnegie Medal in 2003 (awarded 2004), eight years after *Junk*, and one of the central events sees the heroine, Mattie Gokey, discovering and witnessing the sexual relationship between two of her neighbours. Meg Rosoff's highly acclaimed *How I Live Now* (2004) was shortlisted for the Orange Award for New Writers in 2005 and deals with the sexual relationship between anorexic New Yorker Daisy and her English cousin Edmond. In 2004 Julie Burchill published her debut novel for teenagers, *Sugar Rush*, which focuses on the lesbian love affair between safe, reliable, middle-class Kim and wild, dangerous Maria Sweet – the Sugar of the title. Melvin Burgess praised Burchill's work as "a fabulous story of sexual fascination – guilt-free, intoxicating and delicious" (Burchill, 2004: i). Meanwhile, Celia Rees, shortlisted for the Guardian Children's Fiction Prize for *Witch Child* (2001), switched from Bloomsbury to

Young Picador, publishers of both *Sugar Rush* and the new edition of *Forever*, to bring out *The Wish House* (Rees, 2005), a tale of sexual awakening for sheltered boy Richard whose virginity, innocence and indeed self-control is taken by artistic muse and free-spirit Clio in a series of woodland trysts and liaisons. As Dina Rabinovitch noted in the Guardian: “It is another cliché of teenage writing these days that stories are liberally dosed with sexual activity” (Rabinovitch, 2005). Even Jacqueline Wilson, the doyenne of the issue book for girls, sensed the zeitgeist and penned *Love Lessons* (2005), in which fourteen-year-old, sheltered, home-educated Prudence falls for her married art teacher who, rather unbelievably, reciprocates.

However, writing in the Observer a year earlier about *How I Live Now*, Geraldine Bedell noted that, although “the novel is full of shocking events - underage sex, with a whiff of incest ... younger readers, with their relative lack of experience and greater insouciance, may well be less troubled by these things than the many adults who will also read the book” (Bedell, 2004). So many children’s books have been published over the past five years dealing frankly and openly with sexual content, certainly not in the safe and responsible relationships of Judy Blume – a lesbian affair, an extra-marital relationship, a tryst between a kidnap victim and her captor, an affair with a teacher, sex between cousins, a manipulative girl seducing a boy so her artist father can paint him – yet they have garnered praise, prestige, and awards, not condemnation and bile from the critics. And even in the case of *Doing It*,

Anne Fine's voice seems isolated in condemnation, considering the responses of Kit Spring (2003), Sandra Smith (2003), and Libby Brooks (2001) to Burgess's treatment of sexuality.

These works, it seems to me, fit largely into the *Forever* tradition of the treatment of sexuality in children's literature. In varying degrees they are explicit; they certainly do not shy away from sex as a topic within, or indeed a subject for, novels for young people. Notions of how this should be achieved vary, from Burgess's battering-ram crudity, through the insouciance of Meg Rossoff's narrator, Daisy: "Now let's try to understand that falling into sexual and emotional thrall with an under-age blood relative hadn't exactly been on my list of Things To Do while visiting England" (Rossoff, 2004: 52). However, what makes Rossoff's work affecting and effective is the way in which raw emotion bubbles up through the hard façade and veneer of Daisy's New Yorker persona: "Things were so intense I was sure that other people could hear the hum coming off us...my brain and my body and every single inch of me that was alive was flooded with the feeling that I was starving, starving, starving for Edmond" (ibid.). This bears some similarity to Burchill's *Sugar Rush*, though Kim, as a narrator, is not as brittle as Daisy, and is much more self-aware, though no less overcome with the eponymous rush than Rossoff's heroine, despite her street-savvy teen-speak:

this was PROPER sex, in a way that a boy and a girl our ages could never have had. It was sex without the rubbish, without the fear, without the you-made-your-bed-young-lady-now-you're-going-to-have-to-lie-in-it punchline; the pregnancy, abortion, disease, boy-boasting, bad rep, whatever...it was like coming home, letting your breath out in a slow, luxurious glide after finally finding out that you'd been holding it in all your life.

Burchill, 2004: 113

Malorie Blackman switches between the narrative perspectives of Callum and Sephy throughout *Noughts and Crosses* but, when the consummation comes, it is from the feminine perspective, as all these novels bar *Doing It* are. Rather than the long, flowing sentences of Blume, Rosoff and Burchill as Daisy and Kim get carried away by the passion of their sexual experiences, however, Blackman has Sephy almost gasping for breath in short, physically descriptive bursts:

He sat me up, pulling me with him. He raised my hands to pull off my jumper. I unbuttoned his shirt. He unfastened my bra. I unzipped his trousers. We stripped each other until we were both naked. And I was shaking. But not from the cold. I was melting inside. Never had I felt so scared and exhilarated and *alive* all at once.

Blackman, 2001: 385

This seems matter-of-fact, but Sephy is trying to stay focused on what is happening to her, trying not to let herself get carried away, and the clipped sentences show her struggling for this self-control as part of her abandons herself to the passion of her encounter, despite the tension of the situation. And, once they have had sex, Sephy becomes more of a woman as a character, demonstrating her independence and keeping the mixed-race baby conceived in her prison cell.

Jacqueline Wilson does not dare push the illicit relationship of *Love Lessons* further than kisses, but renders the character of Mr Raxberry so sketchily that it is hard to see what he is gaining from the relationship with Prudence in any way which makes him seem anything more than a predatory pervert – apparently devoted to his wife, a proud and attentive father, a popular and

friendly teacher, suddenly kissing a fourteen-year-old misfit. His motives could be pity, but Prudence is such an isolated girl that his motives seem far more about abuse of his position than any deeper rooted need or problem, as is the case with Ali Young in *Doing It*; yet even there Burgess shows how abusive the relationship with Ben is, whilst Wilson gives no perspective on Rax's side at all. Although the least explicit of all the contemporary texts about sexuality I have studied, *Love Lessons* was the one that I found most uncomfortable to read.

Celia Rees is much more lyrical, romantic almost, in *The Wish House*, as noted in Rabinovitch's review:

Sex is notoriously difficult to write well, of course, but even harder, perhaps for those penning sexual scenes for the teens. "I censor myself quite heavily - extremely heavily really," Rees tells me. "I think it's partly [that I leave out] a sort of explicitness about sex, but also the negativity. That sort of vicious cynicism, that's a totally adult view of sex - that if I chose to, I could write about. But I wouldn't write like that for teenagers. You have to be an adult to experience the things that make you like that."

Rabinovitch, 2005

There is so much in what Rees says here that tells us about the treatment of sexuality in children's fiction. Firstly, there is the adult perspective, discussed already in relation to Judy Blume – the adult knows best and chooses a perspective that makes things seem better for the children. Although writing about sex, the concept of the innocent child still exists and is still resonant for Rees. Yet the idealism that she is describing here is also true of *Sugar Rush*, is also true of *How I Live Now*, and, oddly, is true of *Doing It*, because although the boys do not achieve the idealised sexual relationships that the

girls in the other novels do, they still want them, still dream of them, still aspire towards them. Maybe there is something about gender perspective in this difference; Rabinovitch argues that “nobody does it [writing about sex for teenagers] well, as it happens, but on the whole it's better executed by the thirtysomething male writers in this field, than by the older, probably too responsible, women” (ibid). The issue of responsibility seems apposite, and applicable obviously to Judy Blume but also to Celia Rees’s self-censorship; less to Julie Burchill and Meg Rosoff, perhaps, but their works are still tempered by an idealism that the rush of first love can bring: “Sexual activity in people who've just discovered it is great, isn't it?” (Melvin Burgess, quoted in Brooks, 2001).

Sexuality in *Harry Potter* and *His Dark Materials*

It is not just in novels of teenage fiction that sexuality is featured. The theme is also tackled in two of the biggest “event” series of contemporary children’s literature, the *Harry Potter* series and Pullman’s *His Dark Materials*. I believe that these two works effectively demonstrate the two traditions at work today – the “innocent child” conception from the Golden Age through C.S. Lewis which conceives of childhood as a separate and distinct stage in life, and the openness of experience linked through *Forever* which conceives childhood as part of a developmental continuum towards adulthood.

J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series features almost no indication of sexuality in the opening three books, *The Philosopher’s Stone* (1997), *The Chamber of*

Secrets (1998) and *The Prisoner of Azkaban* (1999). Harry, Hermione and Ron occupy a world in the tradition of *Swallows and Amazons*, the *Narnia* books, Enid Blyton and others, an innocent world where eleven to fourteen-year-old boys and girls live and work together and in which sexuality hardly features. They are still only children, it seems. However, Rowling seems to realise, as Harry enters his fourth year at Hogwarts, that he is fifteen. In almost any construction of childhood, this age is one of sexual awakening, and Rowling acknowledges this in *The Goblet of Fire* (2000). Yet she is coy about it, perhaps with an eye on her child reader, sensing in her construction of childness that sex, and attraction to the opposite sex, is a source of embarrassment, awkwardness, and clumsy mishandling. Ginny Weasley has had a childish (in the diminutive sense: “to be ‘childish’ is to be ‘un-serious’” Hollindale, 1997, p.50) crush on Harry since *The Chamber of Secrets*, but this is evaded in the narrative by its childishness. When Harry and Ron see the Veela cheerleaders at the Quidditch World Cup, their reaction is stupefaction: “Veela were women...the most beautiful women Harry had ever seen...The Veela had started to dance, and Harry’s mind had gone completely and blissfully blank...” (Rowling, 2000, p. 94). This reaction is caused by magic. The Veela enchant those who see them with their beauty (“what could make their skin shine moon-bright like that, or their white-gold hair fan out behind them...” (Rowling, 2000, p.94)). The representation of beautiful women as objects, deceitful and (in the case of part-Veela Fleur Delacour) conceited, constructs gender relations in a particularly biased, and worryingly old-fashioned light.

Above all, however, Harry and Ron's reactions to the Veela are comic, as indeed are all their dealings with the opposite sex. When Cho Chang ("a very pretty girl who played Seeker on the Ravenclaw team" p.78) waves and smiles at Harry, he "slopped quite a lot of water down his front". When Fleur Delacour ("a long sheet of silvery blonde hair fell almost to her waist. She had large, deep blue eyes, and very white, even teeth" p.222) asks Ron for a dish at dinner, he "went purple. He stared up at her, opened his mouth to reply, but nothing came out except a faint gurgling noise". Rowling even objectifies Hermione, who reduces the size of her buck-teeth by magic to make herself more attractive, and goes to the Yule Ball with Quidditch heartthrob Viktor Krum: "But she didn't look like Hermione at all. She had done something with her hair; it was no longer bushy, but sleek and shiny, and twisted up into an elegant knot at the back of her head...and she was holding herself differently somehow" (p.360). For Rowling, sexual awakening is skin-deep. Harry is embarrassed to be turned down by Cho Chang, but she is a cardboard cut-out character, someone for Harry to go doe-eyed over, her ethnic name a tokenistic nod to multiculturalism along with Parvati and Padma Patil, Harry and Ron's last ditch dates for the Ball. Rowling understands that, to construct a convincing childness for her fifteen-year-old protagonists, she must include a love interest (or at least a lust interest), but her treatment of it is a distraction from her larger purpose of driving forward the ongoing conflict between Potter and the forces of darkness coalescing around the resurgent Voldemort. Sex is discarded and ignored outside these set-piece incidences; Rowling's attention is elsewhere.

The same is also true as the relationships and characters develop in *The Order of the Phoenix* (2003), *The Half-Blood Prince* (2005), and *The Deathly Hallows* (2007). There are ever-stronger hints of a relationship between Ron and Hermione, which mainly consists of them getting repeatedly cross with one another and not speaking for long periods of time. Harry, having witnessed the death of Cho Chang's boyfriend Cedric Diggory at the end of *The Goblet of Fire*, abandons this crush and forms a "proper" relationship with Ginny Weasley, who has herself been "snogging" Dean Thomas (Rowling, 2005: 268-9):

Without thinking, without planning it, without worrying about the fact that fifty people were watching, Harry kissed her...After several long moments – or it might have been half an hour – or possibly several sunlit days – they broke apart. The room had gone very quiet. Then several people wolf-whistled and there was an outbreak of nervous giggling.

ibid: 499

The "nervous giggling" seems as though it may be Rowling's own, so caught up is she in cliché and awkwardness as she tries to work sexuality into a world that she has created in an innocent tradition. This sixteen and fifteen-year-old are cut from a very different cloth to Burgess, Burchill, Rees, et al. Indeed, Rowling is unable to sustain this relationship beyond this "snogging" and holding hands stage: Harry breaks up with Ginny in order to devote more time to Voldemort and so that she won't be as upset if he is killed. They kiss again in *The Deathly Hallows*, but only in the epilogue do we learn that the relationship develops and produces children.

Pullman too leaves sex out of the earlier parts of his trilogy. Lyra is a young girl, resourceful and fierce, but her relationship with Roger is truly childlike, innocent, and untouched by adolescence. Yet Pullman *is* interested in sexual awakening, and not as a corollary to a more important story. For Pullman, Will and Lyra's sexual awakening *is* the most important story. For his protagonists, becoming sexual beings is the critical goal of both their stories – it literally saves the world. And he does not conceal this fact, or evade it; it is threaded into their relationship from their first meeting in chapter one of *The Subtle Knife*. They begin in a fight, and Will sees Lyra as “a girl about his own age, ferocious, snarling, with ragged dirty clothes and thin bare limbs. // She realised what he was at the same moment, and snatched herself away from his bare chest...” (Pullman, 1997: 21). The repetition of “bare” emphasises their partial nakedness, and their youthful sexuality brings an extra charge to their fight. They size each other up throughout the chapter: “She watched him, too, looked at his face and his working hands and his bare shoulders and his feet” (p.24). This chain of “ands” indicates Lyra's intoxication, unashamed and unembarrassed. And Lyra too is the centre of Will's attention: “the stars in the dark sky above, all hung in the huge silence as if nothing else existed at all...and all the time he was intensely aware of the girl...her expression was a mixture of the very young...and a kind of deep sad wariness. Her eyes were pale blue and her hair would be a darkish blonde once it was washed; because she was filthy” (ibid: 25). There is none of the page-three style Veela in Lyra; she is unconventional, Will's equal, and it is her *expression* that transfixes him, not her blonde hair and blue eyes.

It gradually becomes apparent that Will and Lyra's developing relationship is more important to the narrative than any other concern. It is on this relationship that everything else turns. Their skills are gendered and focused: Lyra brings an unmatched skill in reading the alethiometer, a circular truth-telling device with ladders of meaning that she must climb down into; Will becomes the master of the subtle knife, penetrating and cutting holes between worlds. Rife with symbolism, these devices are their unique areas of expertise: Lyra's is feminine, intuitive, and reactive; Will's is masculine, aggressive and proactive. And it is Lyra who gives Will the ability to use his (phallic?) knife, through her dæmon Pantalaimon. When he is struggling to learn how to use it, Pantalaimon "gently licked Will's wounded hand again and again...Will had no idea of the taboo in Lyra's world preventing one person from touching another's dæmon...Lyra, in fact, was breathtaken" (Pullman, 1997: 191). This is sexual contact, sensitively and carefully handled, the device of the dæmon a deflection to keep our own cultural taboos sacrosanct. And Pullman continues to develop the relationship, gently shifting Will and Lyra closer and closer together. At the end of *The Subtle Knife*, Lyra, who has already told Pantalaimon "I'm changing" (ibid: 270), has "where Will was concerned [developed] a new kind of sense, as if he were simply more in focus than anyone she'd ever known before. Everything about him was clear and close and immediate" (ibid: 322). Will too is changing. When he confronts Mrs Coulter in the cave in *The Amber Spyglass*, he "smelt the fragrance of some scent she was wearing combined with the fresh smell of her body, and felt disturbed" (Pullman, 2000: 147). Adult sexuality disturbs Will, and Mrs Coulter is using it as a weapon here. Will is still innocent, and it is Mrs

Coulter's distraction, in causing him to remember his mother, that causes him to break the subtle knife, snapping his potency as his concentration fails. In contrast, as Will picks Lyra up shortly afterwards, Pullman again uses the sense of smell to emphasise their youthful and joyful sexuality: "Will breathed in the scent of Lyra's sleepy body with a happy satisfaction: she was here, she was real." (ibid: 165).

The trilogy's climax hinges on Will and Lyra's kiss. Pullman builds up to the moment sensitively, carefully, and lyrically. In the Land of the Dead, separated from their dæmons, the relationship accelerates. Will smiles at Lyra and "she felt something stumble and falter inside her...it might have been a new way for her heart to beat." (ibid: 319) And as they leave death behind, Will saves Lyra from a plunge into the abyss: "he held her tight, pressing her to his chest, feeling the wild beat of her heart against his ribs..." (ibid: 379) As Will tries to cut through into the battle-world, he thinks of his mother and "the knife stuck", almost breaking again – turning back to childhood and parental concern threatens his ability to use his phallic knife. Yet turning to Lyra, he is able to cut through: "he saw her bright hair, her firm-set mouth, her candid eyes: he felt the warmth of her breath; he caught the friendly scent of her flesh. // The knife came loose." (ibid: 406)

The kiss itself, when it comes, *is* clumsy, and perhaps tips into cliché:

"Then Lyra took one of those little red fruits. With a fast-beating heart, she turned to him and said, 'Will...'
And she lifted the fruit gently to his mouth.

She could see from his eyes that he knew at once what she meant, and that he was too joyful to speak...Like two moths clumsily bumping together, with no more weight than that, their lips touched...
 Around them there was nothing but silence, as if all the world were holding its breath.”

ibid: 491-2

Pullman, then, constructs childness in his readers as being capable of appreciating the sensitive, delicate development of young sexuality into a perfect moment of love. But, I would argue, Pullman’s writing has far more to offer an adult reader than a child in this. Hollindale goes to some lengths to argue that adult writers reconstruct and re-imagine childness from their own subjective standpoints (Hollindale, 1997, p.57-9) and Pullman presents an idealised sexual awakening for us. Beautifully written, passionate, romantic; Pullman is creating a first-kiss moment with none of the fumbling embarrassment that Rowling is right to observe (the word “clumsily” hardly covers this). And the resonance of the moment, the way Lyra tempts Will to eat of the fruit, with all the Biblical significance that has been woven in throughout, points up Pullman’s deeper purpose. And his purpose is theological, to argue that we *should* be unashamed of sexual knowledge, that the Fall was fortunate, that Eve, in giving humanity knowledge, did the right thing. Pullman is putting himself up with Milton, with Blake, celebrating sexuality for the fact that it is the end of innocence, the end of childhood, and the end of childness. Will and Lyra are twelve years old (Pullman, 1997: 74) as the events of the story unfold. At this age, they move from childhood to proto-adulthood, and with them the world stabilises in secure and adult knowledge. For as long as Will and Lyra remain innocent children, dust, which is consciousness itself, flows out of the world. Pullman is unequivocal about

this: childhood is a means to an end, and that end is a sexualised adulthood. Children lose out in this transition: they become vulnerable to the Spectres of Indifference, their dæmons become fixed. This lack of flexibility is a necessary price, however, for the ultimate end. The Master of Jordan College sees this in Lyra at the end of the trilogy: “he saw how the child’s unconscious grace had gone, and how she was awkward in her growing body...and he felt half proud and half in awe of the beautiful adult she would be, so soon” (Pullman, 2000: 544).

Rowling’s conception of childness is far safer than Pullman’s. Her created world deals mainly with absolutes, binary oppositions of good and evil, trust and deceit. As the series goes on, she introduces shades of grey, killing Sirius Black and demonstrating James Potter’s arrogance in *The Order of the Phoenix*, but she sees this as something later in childhood, that Harry can only cope with at the age of sixteen. Even then, the adult characters are the only ones in full possession of the facts, and her child readers and child characters live in a world of half-knowledge. Pullman’s world is never absolute, except that it is absolutely serious. His characters, adult and child, are shaded throughout, developing and moving forward, and his child protagonists (and, by implication, his child readers) can cope with the full knowledge of sexuality, undiluted and unveiled, at the age of twelve. Pullman sees childhood as a transitional stage, a move towards the more desirable and fulfilled stage of adulthood, for all the losses that it entails. His trilogy’s purpose is to show the necessity of the move away from childhood – the whole world depends on it. Rowling is not interested in leaving childhood

behind. Harry Potter does not really grow up at all. He embarrasses himself in front of girls, he feels the injustice of the teenager, powerless against adult authority, and he feels fiercely defensive of himself and his friends. But really, he stays the same. And this is childness for J.K. Rowling: honour, pride, coping with setbacks, celebrating success, and laughter. Her purpose is not to show Harry Potter growing up; it is to show a series of adventures, some comical, some deadly serious, against the backdrop of a traditional conflict of good against evil. Harry growing older is incidental, a narrative framework on which to hang the adventures. Her conception of childness is essentially that of the innocent, of childhood as separate to adulthood, taking her place in that tradition of children's literature; Pullman's is that of experience which allows the child to become the adult.

Conclusions

What seems clear from this study is that the conception of the child as innocent and somehow sexless or asexual has been significantly eroded in recent years, and certainly in the years since the publication of *Forever* in 1975, and that a significant number of popular, critically acclaimed and even award-winning children's books have foregrounded the issue of sexuality in teenagers since *Junk* in 1996. However, the issue of sexuality and children is still controversial and sensitive, and capable of provoking outrage and moral panic as well as acclaim. The conception of childhood sexuality by the adult author is also riddled with complexity. Writers have, over time, ignored sexuality completely, viewing children as asexual and separate to the

sexualised world (E. Nesbit, Enid Blyton, Arthur Ransome); they have acknowledged but condemned it as a loss of innocence and a source of shame and guilt (C.S. Lewis); and they have chosen to write about sex in various ways – celebration (Melvin Burgess, Julie Burchill); social realist depiction, self-help manual or handbook (Judy Blume, Berlie Doherty); aspects of the wider experience of maturity and growing up (Malorie Blackman, Meg Rosoff, Celia Rees, Phillip Pullman) . They have been coy, euphemistic and evasive, and they have been blunt, crude and explicit. However, children's literature as a whole is no longer ignoring sexuality, to the point that it finds its way awkwardly into the works of J.K. Rowling and Jacqueline Wilson, who seem uneasy with it and happier in the innocent world of the past. I believe Phillip Pullman's grand trilogy best acknowledges what seems to be the governing preconception of modern children's literature: rather than naïve fun, adventure, and the preservation of innocence, it is concerned with sexual awakening, or the end of innocence. Children's literature has moved from being about childhood, to being about the end of childhood.

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