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# Do Teenage Novels Fill A Need?

Sylvia Engdahl

An author of novels for adolescents faces a problem not shared by other writers. I am sometimes confronted with the opinion that my profession fills no need—that the writing of fiction for today's teenagers is unessential, or even unwise. Those with some knowledge of the field are most prone to feel that it is a waste of time and talent. By the ignorant, the writer may be viewed with the perennial suspicion that a serious novelist, if good, would soon "graduate" to writing for adults—an assertion requiring no reply. A view less easily dismissed is that of experts on literature for youth who believe that an author who does not choose to write adult fiction should direct his or her books toward preadolescents. According to this view, there is no literate audience in between. Because it is a prevalent view, teenage fiction resides in a sort of limbo.

*Sylvia Engdahl is the author of science fiction novels for young people including *Beyond the Tomorrow Mountains* (Atheneum, 1973) and *This Star Shall Abide* (Atheneum, 1972). She lives in Portland, Oregon.*

The question of whether teenage fiction is needed has received a good deal of attention during the past few years, primarily in journals read by librarians. Yet it seems to me that the controversy has been centered on side issues: issues that often obscure an information gap of which many teachers and librarians are unaware. Discussion about what is wrong with contemporary teenage fiction—and what is right with it—cannot be meaningful apart from clear understanding of *what* it is; and I find that people unfamiliar with publishing procedures have no such understanding. In debating the value of fiction for teens, most fail to define the category to which they are referring.

Just what is a teenage novel? The simplistic answer is obvious: a teenage novel is one intended for adolescent readers. To many people, however, the very words of this statement have connotations that exclude the better teenage novels of today. No truly adequate definition can be given except in terms of factors distinguishing teenage novels from adult ones. And when considering these, it is important to recognize that only one factor has bearing on the designation "teenage" (or "junior" or "young adult") as applied to a novel by the book trade and review

media. That designation is determined solely by the structure of the publishing business. A novel suitable for adolescents is "teenage" if it is issued by the children's book department of a publishing house, and "adult" if it is issued by the adult department. From an organizational standpoint, these departments are wholly separate; and although many criteria may affect the initial decision as to which will handle a given novel, once that decision is made the book is permanently categorized. The book's maturity, as judged by readers after publication, has nothing whatsoever to do with its classification, which is based mainly on marketing considerations.

This separation at the publishing level is more significant than it may seem, for it has far-reaching effects—some good, some bad—on the nature of novels made available to adolescents. Moreover, it is highly pertinent to the debate concerning whether or not a "teenage" category is worthwhile. The *raison d'être* of that category is not literary, but commercial. No one doubts that there is a need for books appropriate for teenagers to read. The real, underlying question is whether we need books to be read *only* by teenagers. And surely we do not. I cannot imagine writing a novel that I felt was of interest only to people within some particular age range; my books are enjoyed by ten- to twelve-year-olds of advanced reading ability, and also by quite a few grownups. But I direct them most specifically to readers of high school age, since they have characteristics which, in the climate of today's publishing field, mean that if they were not issued by children's book departments they would not be published at all.

I cannot deny that I say this with a tinge of regret, not because I see anything preferable about being an "adult" novelist, but because the outlook of modern teenagers seems to me in many respects healthier than that of their elders. Authors often find the children's book field less restrictive than the adult market in that it is less subject to the dictates of current fashion. As C. S. Lewis said, "They label their books 'For Children' because children are the only market now recognized for the books they, anyway, want to write."<sup>1</sup> The statement is perhaps even more applicable to teenagers; teenagers, having little regard for what is fashionable among adults, do not care that an optimistic view of the universe is not now in vogue. Their conception of "realism" is uncolored by the pronouncements of cynical critics—an issue that I have discussed in greater

<sup>1</sup>C. S. Lewis, "On Juvenile Tastes," in *Of Other Worlds* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 41.

detail elsewhere.<sup>2</sup>

However, whether or not one shares my personal reasons for favoring a youthful audience (and many writers do not), it is indisputably true that adolescent readers need novels of a kind not presently being produced by publishers' adult departments. Natalie Babbitt writes, "Teenagers do not need a fiction of their own: They are quite ready to move into the world of adult fiction."<sup>3</sup> This might well be the case if contemporary adult fiction were more representative of the range of literate tastes than it has become; but the fact is that it does not even meet the needs of all older adult readers, let alone the youngest. Though worthwhile novels of past decades retain their value, suitable new ones are rare. Ms. Babbitt, wondering "if there is such a category as a teenage audience,"<sup>4</sup> cites partial reading lists for her sons' high school English classes consisting entirely of adult books—not one of which, I notice, was published within the last ten years.

Publishing trends have undergone drastic upheavals during that period. The present adult market demands fiction of a kind that adolescents lack the experience and emotional maturity to cope with. Critically-acclaimed novels frequently treat themes in which adolescents are not even interested. But the nature of junior books has also been radically altered, a situation of which not all high school teachers are yet aware. Times have changed since publishers labeled insipid mysteries and school romances "ages 13 up"; both the old triviality and the old taboos are disappearing. Some of the books being issued by children's departments would have been published as adult a decade or two ago.

By no means do all such books qualify as literature. As Ms. Babbitt points out, they frequently suffer from deficiencies that would prevent their being considered true literature no matter what audience they were meant for. But hasn't it always been necessary to evaluate novels individually? The lowering of their age designation carries no implication that one should lower one's standards of judgment; nor, despite contentions of people who rate value in terms of "relevance," does increased maturity of adolescent fiction's subject matter necessarily imply sufficient maturity of presentation. Many teenage books that have appeared in the wave of enthusiasm for the "new realism" have been justly criticized for

<sup>2</sup>Sylvia Louise Engdahl, "Why Write for Today's Teenagers?" *The Horn Book Magazine*, XLVIII (June, 1972), pp. 249-254.

<sup>3</sup>Natalie Babbitt, "Between Innocence and Maturity," *The Horn Book Magazine*, XLVIII (February, 1972), p. 36.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*

superficiality. One cannot argue with the reviewer who wrote, "You can't turn a bad novel into a good one by filling it with pregnancy, pot and the pill."<sup>5</sup>

Yet neither can one say that the existence of bad teenage novels tells against the need for good ones. In recognizing that shallow and superficial books are to be found among the newest fiction for adolescents, one must remember that shallow and superficial adult fiction also appears rather frequently. One might remember, too, C. S. Lewis's well-known statement: "No book is really worth reading at the age of ten which is not equally (and often far more) worth reading at the age of fifty. . . . The only imaginative works we ought to grow out of are those which it would have been better not to have read at all."<sup>6</sup>

Though Lewis was referring to books for pre-adolescents, the same principle applies to those directed toward adolescents. And it should be noted, before attempting to define adolescent fiction more fully, that there is no way to determine a particular novel's intended audience except through evaluation of the book itself or its reviews. Seekers of teenage fiction must bear in mind that for their purposes, any age or grade levels stated in the publisher's announcements, on the dust jacket, or at the heads of reviews are meaningless. These estimates apply only at the elementary school level, and even then they are inconsistent, since every publishing house has its own policy and the policies change from year to year according to sales experience. Thus one book's "10 to 14" designation may be the equivalent of another's "12 up," and the former may sometimes be given to a more difficult book by the same author.

This is a reflection of the uncertain status of teenage fiction at present. There was a time when most publishers set age level designations unrealistically high. Unfortunately, some over-corrected at the same time they were introducing books of increased maturity, and the result has been general confusion. Children's librarians are becoming wary of books marked "13 up", which may indeed be filled with pregnancy, pot and the pill; while high school librarians who stopped buying—and reading—the output of children's departments before mature books began to appear retain the no longer reliable habit of automatically subtracting two or three years from the figures

given. It is an ironic fact that some of the best new books for adolescents reach their intended audience mainly in public libraries large enough to have internal reviewing systems through which recommendations can be made to buyers for the adult collection; the more mature teens rarely visit children's rooms.

These novels are unheard of outside the specialized field of children's literature (though the new paperback trend may help the situation if current distribution problems can be solved). The hardcover editions of modern books for young people are sold almost exclusively to libraries. No attempt is made to market them to the general public, and few bookstores stock any but major award winners and the work of local authors. This, in fact, is the basis of the strict separation between fields in the publishing world, and its impact is great. It means that young people's books are advertised and reviewed primarily in publications read by librarians. It affects timing: Books are not published intermittently throughout the year, but are grouped into spring and fall lists for compatibility with school and public library ordering practices; children's editorial departments are organized around this schedule. Moreover, there is no expectation of producing instant best-sellers—the review procedures employed by libraries cause long delays between publications and shelving of teenage novels, which, unlike most adult ones, are kept in print for many years.

In most respects, this library orientation is a good thing for children's literature; it tends to preclude publication of books that will not remain valuable long past the current season. Furthermore, librarians are more discriminating buyers than the public at large, and they need not purchase young people's books merely to meet public demand, since the public does not even hear the titles of such books prior to seeing them—although this consideration is at times overridden by demand for novels of current topical interest. (Too often, these days, mere *topical interest* is confused with *contemporary theme*, as in the case where an author was advised by a librarian that young readers needed a novel about "a black adolescent unwed father on a Honda."<sup>7</sup>) On the whole, because the market is composed of professionals, editorial standards are apt to be higher in children's departments than in the adult departments where the prime aim is large, quick sales.

This is increasingly true now that funding

<sup>5</sup>John Rowe Townsend, "It Takes More Than Pot and the Pill," *New York Times Book Review*, LXXIV (November 9, 1969, Part II), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup>C. S. Lewis, "On Stories," in *Of Other Worlds* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1966), p. 15.

<sup>7</sup>Richard Peck, "In the Country of Teenage Fiction," *American Libraries*, 4 (April, 1973), p. 204.

problems are causing libraries to become more and more selective. And the more selective they are from the literary standpoint, the better off young readers will be—we do not need any more mediocre books. However, there is some danger that selectivity based upon insufficient funds will eliminate not only books of comparatively low quality, but also those of comparatively low readership. No one can afford to purchase—or to publish—novels that will not be widely read. Under present conditions, the best teenage novels will be the first to disappear, since they are not as widely read as those that can be appreciated by children of lesser maturity. Publishers have made an effort to bring out books appropriate for high school age readers of today, yet it is through the large public libraries, not the high schools, that they are being circulated. Though high school librarians often know of them, their funds are limited, too; they must give first priority to books requested by teachers.

It should therefore be asked whether teenage novels are worth teachers' attention, and if so, why. In defining what they have to offer, I can best begin by stating what they do *not* offer, for there are a number of prevalent misconceptions concerning their purpose.

First, few if any of the good ones are easier reading than the average adult novel considered suitable for younger high school students. Writers for teenagers do not limit vocabulary, nor do they use a less complex style than they would in fiction for adults (except in the case of stories specifically produced for "slow readers," which are not really "novels" in the literary sense). Some teenage novels are relatively short, but others—most of my own, for instance—exceed many adult novels in length. A serious novel for adolescents is distinguished from adult material by its conceptual and emotional levels, not by its reading level.

Second, novels of quality for teenagers do not preach. A writer who approaches young people in a condescending way receives short shrift from today's editors and reviewers. One can use a story to reflect one's views, just as an author of adult fiction can—but they must be views about life, not about how young people, as distinguished from other people, ought to look at it.

Third, teenage novels, if good, are not devoid of concepts worth pondering and worth discussing. Although fiction for the young ordinarily stays within the bounds of good taste, its themes are confined neither to traditional ideas nor to fashionable new ones. Thus it can hardly be called uncontroversial. An author cannot present

honest opinions without evoking disagreement from some proportion of readers, and teenagers scorn books that are not honest.

A fourth thing novels for adolescents do not offer is shelter from the world as it is. Because of their honesty, such books cannot ignore the grimmer aspects of life any more than they can ignore aspects some adults consider shocking. The young do not want shelter. They know that people rarely live happily ever after; it is worse than useless for fiction to pretend otherwise. At the same time, however—and again for the sake of honesty—teenage books with true depth do not foster the notion that reality is uniformly grim. Even readers who have found it so are entitled to know that a bright side does exist.

Finally, contemporary teenage novels are not mere vehicles to provide reluctant readers with a fictional reflection of their own lifestyle and their own specific problems. It is true that many deal with settings and incidents familiar to the present teen generation; as Richard Peck says, young people "are liable to choose books as they choose friends, more as mirrors than as windows."<sup>8</sup> But he goes on to say: "Still, the best youth novels portray adolescence as a maturing process. Though the focus may be upon being young, there is a sense of the future—a sense of becoming, as well as being."<sup>9</sup> Relevance—real relevance—lies in this, not in a mirror image.

What, then, does distinguish teenage fiction from adult fiction, if not shallowness of a sort properly considered obsolete? It is largely a matter of two things, I think: complexity and viewpoint. These, at any rate, are the only allowances I make in my own writing for the youth of my intended audience.

Obviously, adolescents cannot absorb ideas of as great complexity as more experienced readers. They cannot follow as many interwoven threads, or perceive such involved interrelationships; nor do they possess the knowledge to make sense of allusions. This is not because they are "too young" for adult material; it is because they have had *too little time* to develop background. If a book is to be meaningful to them, it must be clearly focused. When it is based on complex ideas—as mine, which are set in hypothetical future worlds, usually are—the discussion of those ideas must be to some extent oversimplified. Lack of complexity, however, should not be confused with lack of profundity. In the words of one noted editor, "A book with good unity can have limitless depth. Only the circumference need be

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 205.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

limited."<sup>10</sup> A teenage novel can and should have more than one level, and the deeper ones will be noticed by the most mature readers alone.

The other crucial factor that determines whether a book is meaningful to adolescents is viewpoint. This is more than a question of the age of the protagonist, though normally, the principal viewpoint character should be young. The real issue is the book's outlook. As everyone knows, teenagers neither share nor understand the outlook of adults with whom they are in actual contact; they cannot be expected to fathom the view of those for whom most contemporary adult novelists write. It is not merely that there is much in modern adult fiction the young do not comprehend—the reverse is also true. Fiction for teenagers is more than a watered-down version of adult literature with excess complexity screened out. I do not mean that it portrays the "youth subculture," although some of it may. In essence, outlook is independent of culture. Adolescents, not knowing this, tend to like adult books that reject our culture and dislike those that accept it. They need novels with a fresh outlook on all cultures: ours, theirs, others of this planet, and those of hypothetical worlds. Viewpoint concerns perspective on the universe and on the future, which is what I believe today's young people are seeking.<sup>11</sup> Too many adults have given up the search.

There are, of course, some fine adult novels with viewpoint and level of complexity suitable for today's high school students, novels that English teachers know well. These will be read for many years to come, and their worth will not diminish. But each year they become further removed from our time, and the supply of new material to supplement them is not growing noticeably larger—at least it does not appear to be if one discounts the publishing trend toward issuing books of substance as teenage books. As a result, adolescents are sometimes urged to attempt books beyond their understanding; from a real-life world that is complex and confusing enough, they are plunged hopelessly out of their depth into a fictional world of mature concepts and emotions. This is not a "realistic" world to the young—it is simply an incomprehensible one. It is unlike theirs, and asking them to enter it serves only to increase their alienation.

Lest teachers who agree immediately rush to

<sup>10</sup>Jean Karl, *From Childhood to Childhood: Children's Books and Their Creators* (New York: John Day Company, 1970), p. 67.

<sup>11</sup>See my article "Perspective on the Future: The Quest of Space Age Young People," *School Media*, 1 (Fall, 1972), pp. 27-35.

the library with hope of finding a whole new body of literature appropriate for reading lists, it must again be emphasized that outstanding novels are the exception rather than the rule in the teenage field, just as they are in the adult field. Moreover, books of high quality for young adolescents are more plentiful than comparable ones for older adolescents. There is a good reason for this. Since the major market of children's book departments consists of children's librarians, publishers are understandably reluctant to bring out books that are too mature for sixth and seventh graders. Authors are therefore under pressure to oversimplify somewhat more than would be necessary if there were a large acknowledged high school market. Although many preadolescents have adult reading skills, their viewpoint and the level of complexity that meets their needs, cannot also meet the needs of high school juniors and seniors. Until the status of teenage fiction is established, there must be a certain amount of compromise.

In the case of my own novels, this has not been as serious a problem as with some, since their interplanetary setting interests children who might otherwise find them difficult; furthermore, they can be read on several levels. They have been widely circulated among preadolescents, and I am very happy that this is so. Yet I would like them to reach the readers for whom they were intended, too. The most recent, *Beyond the Tomorrow Mountains*,<sup>12</sup> is centered upon problems of deep concern to introspective older adolescents, but beyond the comprehension of most twelve-year-olds. It thus strikes some people as a bit heavy. Reviewers whose aim is to evaluate usefulness in the upper elementary grades often either ignore aspects of a book perceptible only to more mature readers, or feel that they slow its pace—which for younger boys and girls is indeed true. Where fast action is sought, this is legitimately considered a defect; still it is my belief that today's teenagers want and need fiction that emphasizes the inner events of its characters' lives more than the outward ones.

Increasingly, the adolescents of our time are interested in questions: questions about life and its meaning, about the future of civilization, about man's place in the universe. No author can give them answers. But I feel that books directed toward the young can encourage them to go on looking for answers—which, surely, is one of the major goals of education. And if they can, teenage novels do fill a need.

<sup>12</sup>New York: Atheneum, 1973. A sequel to *This Star Shall Abide* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).