



# Who Reads Teenage Fiction?

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**Adele Geras** reflects...

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Here is the first sentence of Franz Kafka's **Metamorphosis**: 'As Gregor Samsa awoke from uneasy dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect.'

If his mother had brought him a cup of tea instead of calling to him through the bedroom door, she would have been mesmerised' with horror. Just so do some people regard teenagers: as creatures who have undergone a ghastly transformation and are no longer quite of the human species.

I am not an expert on teenagers. I'm not going to discuss their clothes, habits, hairstyles, sexual mores, personal relationships or prospects. I'm going to talk about teenagers and books, and furthermore I'm going to confine myself to those young people who do still read. I know many children fall over a metaphorical cliff in adolescence into a reading-less abyss, and all I can say to parents of such children is: take them to as many good movies and plays as you can, and do not scoff at talking books on a cassette player. There's nothing immoral about being read to.

It's not enough, though, for a person to readjust *anything*. Teachers, librarians, parents and publishers are quite rightly concerned to put good books in front of children, and an awful lot of good books do reach a huge number of people. If, however, your child is engrossed in what you consider to be dross, you should relax and read an article by Peter Dickinson (**Children's Literature in Education No. 3**, November 1970) called 'A Defence of Rubbish' which is brilliant, and probably the last word on the subject. Still, I shall add a few observations:

## **1. A TREMENDOUS AMOUNT OF WHAT' PEOPLE CALL 'RUBBISH' IS ACTUALLY GENRE-FICTION.**

There are loud voices raised in anger that say, 'Romance - rubbish', 'Horror - rubbish', 'Thriller - rubbish', 'Middle-brow women writers - rubbish', and (most Philistine of all) 'American - rubbish'. They are, quite simply, wrong. I speak as someone who read Stephen King, Ruth Rendell and Elmore Leonard before they became big names, and who loved Elizabeth Taylor (the novelist) in tatty library hardback before Virago decked her in their beautiful dark-green covers. These same voices probably also said, 'Humour - rubbish', but this kind of muttering faded to a whisper after the success of *Adrian Mole* and the Douglas Adams books. If, however, a teenager persists in reading real trash and *nothing but* real trash all the days of her life, she will eventually become a trash-reading adult and then everyone will wash their hands of her, and let her get on with it: strange double standards! You don't hear **Kaleidoscope** on BBC Radio 4 bemoaning the fact that Mills and Boon and Barbara Cartland sell in the millions, but a recent special on Teen Romance had a very tsk! tsk! attitude to **Sweet Valley High** books (which is o.k.) and failed to mention (which is definitely *not* o.k.) writers of good romantic books, let alone recommend any actual titles.

## **2. THE READERS OF THE BOOKS PUBLISHERS PUT ON YOUNG ADULT LISTS ARE BARELY INTO THEIR TEENS.**

I practically live in libraries. In my local branch, all the primary schools come and choose books once a week. 3rd and 4th year Juniors STAMPEDE towards the Y. A. shelves, which are stripped of their juiciest books in seconds. 12/13-year-olds who are readers are already mixing in a lot of books from the adult shelves. (Notice I don't say `adult books'. See point 4.) 15-year-olds who are still readers would blush to be seen near a shelf called `Teenage', `Young Adult' or any other euphemism the librarians can think up.

## **3. GIRLS AND WOMEN READ MORE FICTION THAN BOYS AND MEN.**

And whereas girls enjoy fantasy, horror, thrillers, etc., many boys wouldn't be seen dead holding any book which has a girl on the cover. Later on in their lives, alas, it is precisely girls on the cover that lure certain men into reading certain kinds of books.

## **4. MANY BOOKS FOR TEENAGERS ARE BOOKS FOR EVERYONE.**

K M Peyton's **Flambards** was a hugely successful TV serial. Michelle Magorian's **Back Home** recently became a lovely TV film. Michael Morpurgo's **Why the Whales Came** is now a film starring Helen Mirren.

**The Railway Children, The Secret Garden, Little Women:** one can multiply examples. Hey presto, the magic of the movies ... a book that was only a children's book has become fit for the grown-ups too! Amazing, but untrue. The truth is: the book was a fine read for adults all along, but hardly any of them bothered to pick it up and open it. When I first started to write children's books, I began to read: Gardam, Paton Walsh, Peyton, Lingard, Bawden, etc. and I loved them all. I didn't find them to read to my daughter (who was only two at the time) nor for any research purposes. I simply took them from the library and wallowed in them. Now, I am filled with a kind of missionary zeal. I go up to perfect strangers in bookshops and recommend things. I've even been known to take a book from the Y.A. shelf of a library (sorry, librarians!) and put it in the adult section in the hope that it might reach the wide audience it deserves. It's all a question of marketing, I know, but many potential adult readers of teenage books are put off by the labelling. A word of warning here, though, for uninitiated grown-ups: some of these books may be a lot harder and more demanding than the Jeffrey Archer, Ian Fleming or Agatha Christie you've been used to. Beware particularly novels by Alan Garner or Robert Cormier. You will not be able to skip through them on your journey to work.

## **5. GOOD WRITERS DO NOT WRITE `FOR' TEENAGERS.**

They simply happen to write books that teenagers enjoy. Some of them (J D Salinger, John Steinbeck, George Orwell) wrote their books for adults. Perhaps writers of books published on Y. A. lists write for the teenager they used to be, or perhaps (and this is more likely) *they still are* (give or take a few decades of experience) the same person they were when they were seventeen. The less-than-good teenage books happen, I think, when a writer sits down and says to herself: `I'm going to write a book that'll go down a bomb with all the groovy dudes at the disco. I'd better go and chat to some real live kids.' That's writing a book *de haut en bas*, and it shows. Always. Good books, as Peter Dickinson said recently on the radio, `come and knock and knock on the door and demand to be written'. I don't know what other writers feel, but when I write anything other than a book for *very young* children, I forget altogether about my audience and write entirely to please myself. The ghostly presences of my English teachers hover over me when I'm correcting, revising, going over things, but the story, the feelings, the emotions: I'm the one that needs to be moved, enthralled, amused, involved first of all, or how can I possibly expect that anyone else will be? I have one word of warning for writers of stories for teenagers: *beware of being too trendy and up-to-date*. Nothing has less street-cred than yesterday's slang, and you may find yourself hoist with your own petard if you try and be up-to-the-minute in the matter of pop-groups and so on. I was. I described the hero of one story as looking like the lead singer of Curiosity Killed the Cat. Do you remember them? Do your children? Sic transit gloria, etc. The best bet is to do your own thing and hope someone other than you likes it. It's better than putting on a fancy-dress of grooviness which any teenager will see through instantly.

I'd love to start a correspondence. Perhaps **BfK** should allow a page for readers to send in their favourite 'rubbishy' reads. I'll start by nominating the **Whiteoak** books by Mazo de la Roche. There are volumes of them, and they are a saga and a soap opera and, in my memory, wonderful. I haven't dared to re-read these books in case the magic has faded, but I was spellbound at fourteen. Finally, here are twenty English-writing novelists in alphabetical order (leaving out the ones I've already mentioned) to tempt adults, both young and old, and anyone who doubts the existence of the good book for teenagers: Vivien Alcock, Judy Blume (yes), Betsy Byars, Anne Fine, Paula Fox, S E Hinton, Janni Howker, Mollie Hunter, Diana Wynne Jones, Robert Leeson, Penelope Lively, Margaret Mahy, Jan Mark, Zibby O'Neal, Katherine Paterson, Alison Prince, Jean Ure, Cynthia Voight, Robert Westall, Jacqueline Wilson.

Lists are great fun to compile. They are also hell. Look at who I've had to leave out: Berlie Doherty, Dennis Hamley, Deborah Hautzig, Jan Needle, Paul Zindel ... stop, stop!

But do you see *how many* there are?

**Adele Geras** is herself a much-acclaimed author of ... well, amongst other stories, fiction for teenagers (of all ages). Her latest publication is a collection of love stories called *Daydreams on Video* published under the Lightning imprint by Hodder & Stoughton (0 340 51255 5, £2.50 pbk).

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