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**A WHITE DUDE THAT SPARKLES:
AWKWARD DESIRE IN THE COMING OF AGE NOVEL**

Often when we think about desire in literature, particularly Western literature, we think about sex, and about acquiring sex in all sorts of ways: through romantic love (Jane Austen), adulterously (Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*), or through illicit encounters (Nabokov, *Lolita*).

My talk focuses on something more awkward. Not getting it.

Not getting sex is often depicted as the worst torment in literature, and authors love to make us feel their agony (Roth, *Portnoy's Complaint*). There is even a character in the Chinese classic, *Dream of the Red Chamber*, who seems to die because of frustrated desire. Of course, this is what many teenage boys claim will happen to them too.

People who write about adolescence as a kind of protracted innocence in the Western world are fooling themselves. Romeo and Juliet were fourteen years old. Young adulthood is the period in a person's life when they will experience the most number of firsts - burgeoning love, first loss, first desire. So it is often the books we read when we are coming of age that leave the most impact on us - lacking in extensive life or sexual experience; we turn to books to learn about what will happen next.

In adult literature, desire is fully formed, but the remarkable and beautiful thing about young adult fiction is that often its characters make no prior assumptions about how or even what sex is meant to be. So it can be funny. Young adult books show us that desire and humour are not mutually exclusive.

For young adults, desire is usually embarrassing. Australian writers like to tell it as it is, without embellishments: in Michael Gow's play, *Away*, Tom the main character is dying of leukemia. He doesn't let that get in the way of a good lay. "Lie down," he asks his best friend Meg one day. "No," she replies, and so he resorts to begging like a puppy, for her to 'do it to [him]'. She doesn't, but they remain friends to the end.

In John Marsden's book about war, *In the Darkness of the Night*, Ellie describes her boyfriend's nipples lying like flat fried eggs on his chest. American writers do it too. Judy Blume's *Forever* is the consummate coming-of-age novel, but it is not salacious or saccharine. When Katherine sees her

boyfriend Michael's organ for the first time, she writes that it looks like the neck of a dead turkey. Michael even gives his willy a name: Ralph.

In Paul Zindel's *I Never Loved Your Mind*, his main character is more subtle, commenting that his love interest has amazing 'insulation of the frontal respiratory cage.' But in a footnote, he explains, 'she had a nice pair of peaches'. All these writers do not use clichés for sex, because to write in earnest appreciation about these firsts in your life naturally results in new imagery that is endearingly sweet and awkward at the same time. This is consummately expressed in Irish writer Frank McCourt's passages on desire in his books *Angela's Ashes* and *Tis*. McCourt also has a great phrase that expresses sublime happiness: "Sometimes you don't know whether to shit or die."

Unfulfilled desire doesn't necessarily need to kill a teenager, like it seems to do with tormented adults. The irony is that when Young Adult literature tries to replicate the grandiose narratives of adult desire, it becomes truly awkward. The most popular current teenage fiction series of today, *Twilight*, are essentially four books that lead up to one short sex scene that a young woman shares with a vampire. The vampire says things like: "I've told you, on the one hand, the hunger — the thirst — that, deplorable creature that I am, I feel for you ... Though as you are not addicted to any illegal substances, you probably can't empathize completely" (Meyer, *Twilight*, 278). No seventeen-year-old boy talks to a girl like this! More often than not, you will find young men batting for Junot Diaz's Oscar Wao, than Stephenie Meyer's Edward Cullen. The first time is often embarrassing and uncomfortable for all concerned parties, and authors who make it out to be some ineffable fireworks affair are setting young adults up for serious disappointment!

Today, popular culture shows emerging adults what perfect sex looks like in all its lurid detail — you get it on television, with MTV, the Hilton sisters, the American Pie series and Gossip Girl. What literature today can do is show it in its endearing, awful awkwardness. In these forms of literature — and in Australia, we do classify it as young adult *literature* — inchoate forms of desire really do move beyond the usual platitudes.