

InfoLink

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Up Front

Amy Pattee —

Teen Fiction — Erotica or Information?

Amy Pattee, assistant professor of young adult literature at GSLIS, is a former youth services librarian and recent graduate of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In her most recent article, "The Secret Source: Sexually Explicit Young Adult Literature as an Information Source" (*Young Adult Library Services*, March 2006), she argues that sexually explicit fiction for teens is a much-needed source of information about sex and "a private, safe space to try on new feelings of sexual desire." She is an avid reader of young adult literature and continues to draw inspiration from explicit YA novels. The following text is taken from an interview by Victoria Thatcher.

I see my position — as a feminist and a professor in a professional school dominated by women — as being informed by politics. Not the Democrat/Republican type, but the politics of power and authority in public spaces. Anyone teaching young adult literature or serving young adults [as a librarian] is certainly aware of the political nature of the job. Any time there are decisions being made by one group of people for another — in this case, librarians making decisions for adolescents about what books should or shouldn't be in young adult collections — that's a power relationship.

Teen erotica as information

Sexually explicit teen fiction fills a big gap left by high school curricula that teach abstinence-only. There's very little description of sex beyond the mechanics in high school classes, and certainly few descriptions of sex practices beyond "normal" heterosexual intercourse.

Not all teens need erotica, but the ones who want it or are interested in it deserve to have it. Teen erotica can legitimate or at least recognize what teens might really be feeling — physiologically and emotionally — around sex. As erotica is also intended to arouse, it can provide a safe, private place for teens to experiment solo with feelings of desire.

If we librarians stand for freedom of access [to information], how can we argue for restricting or labeling, or even rating, sexually explicit materials written for young adults, when that goes against their fundamental rights?

Blissfully innocent or hyper-sexed?

The Oklahoma State Legislature just passed a bill that requires any fiction with gay themes or "mature" content to be taken out of children's reading rooms and placed in special or "sensitive" collections. The fear is that if children know too much about

sexuality, they'll think they have a license to practice it, to be sexual. One of the legislators said that children should be allowed a period of "blissful innocence," which to her apparently means freedom from information about sex.

Many people believe that childhood is a period of blissful innocence, and that as adults we should ensure that. Youth represents our hope for the future, and the rationale is that in order to preserve that hope, we have to protect young people somehow — even if we ourselves were promiscuous when we were young. On the other hand, the agenda-setting press would like us to believe that teenagers are hyper-sexual. If we only look at these two extremes, we don't acknowledge the continuum that exists between them. Most teens are on that continuum, but by refusing to acknowledge that fact, people don't acknowledge the true feelings and true practices of real-life teens.



Sex and drugs in relation to young people [are subjects that] really get adults worked up. Everyone agrees we do not want young people becoming drug addicts, getting pregnant out of wedlock — if that's not what they want — or getting into sexual situations that harm them physically or emotionally. But how can they avoid harmful situations if they don't know the parameters of those situations or the conditions under which they might arise?

Teenagers and the right to read

The Freedom to Read Statement of the ALA states that we may not censor or mark material that is deemed by the greater population to be dangerous or controversial. And the Library Bill of Rights says we may not deny access to materials based on a person's race, social status, handicap, or age. But those statements often have little impact on local librarians and their collection policies.

As an instructor at this college, I can address the issue of sexually explicit teen literature, but it would be hard for me to do this at the local level as a librarian. Librarians sometimes act as individuals and not as professionals and do things based on their personal beliefs and perceptions. Local librarians also generally feel it would be a disservice to their constituencies to do this. I can imagine that if I were such a librarian, I might be so embedded in my community that the values of the ALA would be contradictory to my own way of thinking. And what if you're up against the whole community? You choose your battles. *Continued on Page 3*

Snapshot Jen Doyle

"I think being a producer is who I am."

Jen Doyle [’98LS], the former manager of special projects, publications, and the GSLIS website, was appointed in April to a new position as director of curriculum and communications. Since coming to work at GSLIS in 2001, she has overseen the development of the school’s ground-breaking accreditation report, five new program brochures, and a book of faculty profiles. During the 2004-2005 academic year, she also worked with the faculty on a major curriculum revision while simultaneously managing the overhaul of the GSLIS website into two separate sites geared toward internal and external audiences. Outside work, she is the president of the Presentation School Foundation in Brighton, a grassroots organization of parents and community members negotiating to purchase the Presentation School building in Oak Square and turn it into a community center serving the families of Allston and Brighton. She lives with her husband, Kelley, and children, Lucy (six) and Will (three).

Q: You were born and raised in Quaker Hill, next to Connecticut College. Could you tell us how growing up there influenced you?

My dad is a professor of physics, and my mom is a dean. Until I was five, we lived in a townhouse that was part of a row of faculty houses with a dorm at the end. I had a whole group of 18-year-old students from the college taking care of me as a child. Our side yard was their backyard. It really was a community and that [memory] has never left me.

What person has influenced you the most?

People tell me I do too much, and I guess I get that from both my parents. They had work they cared about, and at the same time they both had time to be really engaged in our family life. My mother had a career but was always there for me. Throughout that time, my dad was completely supportive of her and me and my sisters. It wasn’t until I was older that I realized how unusual that was. So, when I got married and had kids, I knew I didn’t have to put myself aside. I come from a line of very strong women. My grandmothers were both Italian immigrants. I feel like they’re up in heaven, looking down, and cheering me on.

What did you want to be as a kid?

Nancy Drew. Or a hotel manager. I liked to organize things, so I played hotel manager, and I’d have this supply closet with the sheets and towels and toilet paper all organized.

What was your first job?

Shelving books at the Waterford Public Library. It was the only place you could be 14, work, and get paid. In college, I worked at the switchboard. When people didn’t know the answer to something, we operators were the go-to people. I like knowing the answers, creating order out of chaos.

What did you do after college?

I worked for seven years planning big conferences and special events at Connecticut College.

So, how did you get into LIS work?

It was a result of meeting my future mother-in-law. I was nervous and wasn’t sure what to say, so I just started asking questions. But as she talked about her job as a corporate librarian, I stopped being nervous and began thinking how interesting her

work was. She did a lot of research, and it sounded like, hey, I really could be Nancy Drew! I realized I had actually been involved with libraries my whole life, but had never thought of myself as anything but a patron. So, what started out as an awkward conversation became an open door to the rest of my life.

My first semester [at GSLIS], I took Allen Smith’s reference class, and I called my dad and said, “You wouldn’t believe what I got to do today! Sit on the floor, read reference books, and look up answers!” I felt like my whole life had been building to this, but I didn’t know it until then.

What’s the best thing about your work?

I have this amazing job where I get to do fascinating, challenging things every single day. I have a lot of responsibility and authority, and I work with great people. But it also lets me live my life the way I want and need to support my family.

Did you ever actually intend to work as a librarian?

Not really, although my first job was as a reference librarian. But I didn’t do so well at being constrained to a schedule. I need to have freedom.

How did you come to be hired at GSLIS?

One day I was walking along through Post Office Square and thinking about how I really wasn’t very happy in my job at the time, when I ran into Dean Matarazzo. He asked me if I wanted to come work for him at GSLIS – literally five minutes after I had decided it was time for me to get a new job. It was like the hand of God reaching down and saying, *this* is the job.

What’s the connection between who you are as a person and your work?

I’m an extrovert and an introvert at the same time. I have this desperate need to organize my chaotic life, but then there’s another part of me that isn’t orderly at all. I like being independent, but I also like working with people. Part of me likes quiet and solitude, but another part can’t be without the 100 people who are always in my life. I’m able to keep all the balls in the air and at the same time see the big picture. I honed that skill from years of running big events and conferences.

You head a grassroots organization in Brighton that’s received a lot of media attention over the past year or so. Could you tell us about that?

In 2004, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston announced the closing of Our Lady of the Presentation School, where my daughter was enrolled. The school has been an anchor of Oak Square for nearly 100 years, so when it closed, it had a drastic impact.

Of the nearly 200 kids enrolled before the closing was announced, only 37 remained in Allston-Brighton schools by September 2005. I personally knew of 11 families that moved out of Boston during that summer. So, we formed The Presentation School Foundation to try to buy the building and help create the Oak Square Community Campus, which would include the Faneuil branch of the Boston Public Library, the Oak Square YMCA, and a community center within the building. We’re now in negotiations with the Archdiocese.

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Teen Fiction

Continued from Page 1

Euphemisms and silence

In a recent discussion on the *Young Adult Library Services* listserv, I spoke against rating or labeling books for “mature” content. A lot of people disagreed with me. They were concerned that while ratings would act in place of censorship, they would in fact serve the same censoring function. Or they thought young people weren’t ready for this kind of content. I guess I’m on the fringe [on this issue].

But the whole discussion is mired in euphemisms. What *is* “mature content”? People define it as anything from French kissing to intercourse. The labeling discussion requires us to be specific about what we deem “mature,” but we can’t confront that unless we start speaking in real terms. We fall back on euphemisms and silence. But silence is the problem.

Straight Talk

It’s a fine line between what’s appropriate in the classroom and what’s going to offend people. My students are uncomfortable even when using clinical terms for sex acts. Instead, they talk about “mature” content. If we do get to the nuts and bolts of what is considered “mature” or not – in terms of explicit acts or articulations of sexuality – it’s there that people’s politics – their beliefs and prejudices – start coming out. And we see that the issue is not really sex, but people’s discomfort with talking about it.

People often say sex is private business and shouldn’t be described in books. But if we’re making young people’s business – their sexuality – *our* business, then it’s not private, and we have to be ready to talk about it frankly.

I have strong opinions, so it’s hard for me sometimes to tone it down [in the classroom]. One of my students expressed her dissatisfaction vehemently on her evaluation form. She felt that my default liberal stance assumed a lot about the class as an audience – which it does – especially with regard to what material or subjects they feel comfortable discussing or not. But I equate my liberal views with equity, so I think I’m right!

One book I teach is *Weetzie Bat* [by Francesca Lia Block]. My students exclaim, “It’s about a threesome!” But that doesn’t come close to describing the *aboutness* of this book. There are no racy descriptions of sex, and scenes that refer to sex are infused with fantasy and magic realism.

Another is *When Jeff Comes Home* [by Catherine Atkins]. I had a paper published about it and use it in class. It’s about a teenage boy who is sexually assaulted by a man and later starts to worry if this means he is gay. The book opens an interesting space to have a class discussion about rape. But the last time I taught this book, the students got into a discussion about whether the boy’s memories are appropriate for young audiences, and many of them thought it would have been better if it weren’t so “graphic,” so “mature.” I don’t think it’s graphic at all.

Full disclosure

You’d expect a person who’s such an advocate for this kind of young adult literature to have been something of a wild child herself. But I didn’t have sexual intercourse until I was 30 years old. This admission might come back to haunt me, I know. But if I’m going to address teen sexuality and sexually explicit fiction

in the classroom, I have to model the kind of honesty and vulnerability this conversation requires. That’s part of creating a safe space for my students.

More dirty books

If the world was my oyster, I’d decriminalize popular fiction for teens. I want to encourage people to speak more honestly about sex and this kind of fiction. I want to encourage students to think outside what they’re told. I want them to recognize that they have power to change things. And I want them to realize that it’s okay to think “dirty” fiction is okay. My advice for my LIS students and librarians is, read more “dirty” books!

Interview by Victoria Thatcher

Snapshot

Continued from Page 2

What have you learned from piloting this group?

That the little people do have a voice. We are ordinary, local people trying to be heard by the big Catholic church. Then we end up on the cover of *The Boston Globe* and on CNN and NPR. My parents heard Lucy’s pre-K graduation on the radio while driving down to Virginia. We got messages from people in Chicago and Ireland and Australia who had heard about us. The lesson is, you *can* have an impact when you speak up.

What’s something you’re passionate about?

My writing. And *Buffy* [*Buffy the Vampire Slayer* TV series], and my sister’s bluegrass band. Also the movie my other sister is directing. I produced it, so I went to where they were shooting for one weekend and yelled at people a little bit. According to my sisters, I’m good at that, so they said I was a good producer.

You mentioned your writing. What are you working on now?

Hmmm — did I say that? Let’s just say I’ve set my sights on the Best-Seller List. I’ve got a rough draft of one book and am working on its sequel. It’s not great literature, but it’s engaging.

How do you find time to write with a full-time job and two small kids?

I write at stoplights. It’s like [I feel] an urgency at the stoplight to get something written down, but I don’t quite get it written down, so I finish it at the next light, and then I think of the next sentence. I’m probably the only person in Boston that gets annoyed if I hit all the green lights. If I actually had a dedicated time to write, I don’t think I could do it.

How long is your first novel?

410 pages.

So how many stoplights is that?

A lot. Now that [I don’t have to drive] my son to daycare in Waretown anymore, I don’t know what I’m going to do.

If you could have a totally different career, what would it be?

To be a novelist [and write] the trashy beach read you can’t wait to get your hands on. Or, I’d love to produce my sister’s movies or be my musician sister’s promoter. I think being a producer is who I am.

What do you do to relax?

Could you explain the concept?

Interview by Victoria Thatcher

June/July Events

Friday, June 9, Transitions: Paying the Bills. Budgeting, financial strategies, and temporary income solutions. Come get some advice from Simmons staff and alumnae experts. This seminar will also feature a peer support discussion facilitated by one of our Career Education Center counselors and a networking/refreshment period. Register online at <http://my.simmons.edu/library/collections/career/register.shtml>. Transitions: Classroom to Career is presented by the Miller/Knopf Career Resource Library, with assistance from the Career Education Center. This program is funded by a Centennial Grant from the Alumnae Association of Simmons College. For more information, visit the Transitions website at <http://my.simmons.edu/transitions>, or contact Kelly Jo Woodside at woodside@simmons.edu or 617-521-2510. Career Resource Library, One Palace Road, P-304E. 1:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m.

Monday, June 19, Classes begin

Thursday, June 22, Transitions: Related Experience. Building your resume, your network and your community with volunteer and internship opportunities. Come get some advice from Simmons staff and alumnae experts. This seminar will also feature a peer support discussion facilitated by one of our Career Education Center counselors and a networking/refreshment period. Register online at <http://my.simmons.edu/library/collections/career/register.shtml>. Transitions: Classroom to Career is presented by the Miller/Knopf Career Resource Library, with assistance from the Career Education Center. This program is funded by a Centennial Grant from the Alumnae Association of Simmons College. For more information, visit the Transitions website at <http://my.simmons.edu/transitions>, or contact Kelly Jo Woodside at woodside@simmons.edu or 617-521-2510. Career Resource Library, One Palace Road, P-304E. 1:00 p.m.–3:00 p.m.

Monday, July 3 & Tuesday, July 4, College closed for Independence Day holiday

Friday, July 21, Lecture by Professor Candy Schwartz. GSLIS at Mount Holyoke Campus, Time TBA.

Tuesday, August 1, Summer session classes end

More information about these and other events can be found at <http://my.simmons.edu/gslis/resources/calendars/events.shtml>.

Volunteer in Nicaragua

GSLIS students will embark on a second summer trip to Nicaragua the first two or three weeks of August 2006. A bilingual staff member will travel with the group offering opportunities for non-Spanish speaking students to make the most of the experience. This is a volunteer trip; it is a non-credit program and all expenses are the responsibility of the student. While in San Juan del Sur, students will have opportunities to explore the region, travel to other parts of the country, and to Costa Rica, located just a few miles south of town. If you are interested in attending a meeting about the trip (time and date TBA) please contact Norah Connolly (norah.connolly@simmons.edu). At the meeting we will discuss what it's like to volunteer at the library and review the estimated expenses and health requirements for travel to Central America. Check out the San Juan de Sur Bookmobile website at <http://www.sjdsbiblioteca.com/>.

Commencement Award Recipients

Congratulations to the 2006 Commencement Award Recipients:

Linda Carroll
Kenneth R. Shaffer Outstanding Student Award Recipient

Kjersten Elias
ASIST Outstanding Student Award Recipient

Jane Babcock
Mount Holyoke Campus Outstanding Student

Jennifer Matz
Estelle Jussim Outstanding Student

Congratulations LISSA Officers

Congratulations to the new LISSA officers:

Michael Spelman, LISSA president
Heather Soyka, Student-Faculty Representative
Lana Thelan, Treasurer

Writers Wanted!

The GSLIS Publications team is looking for people interested in writing for our publications and website. Assignments range from *InfoLink* articles to profiles to coverage of events such as Alumni and Professional Development Day. Although we can't pay you, you get the benefit of working with a *great* team as well as another item for your portfolio.

Those interested should submit three writing samples to Jennifer Doyle at jennifer.doyle@simmons.edu.

We look forward to hearing from you!

InfoLink

InfoLink is the monthly newsletter of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at Simmons College. Its purpose is to provide school- and career-related information and to foster community among the many diverse people who make up the school.

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The *InfoLink* welcomes your suggestions, comments, and contributions; please send to alisa.libby@simmons.edu. Submissions are limited to 100 words or under; longer items will only be accepted if space is available. The editors reserve the right to edit all material. Please note, submission of items does not guarantee publication.

Views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily the view of GSLIS or Simmons College. For archived issues, visit <http://my.simmons.edu/gslis/>.

Note that views expressed by contributors to the newsletter are not necessarily the views of the newsletter, GSLIS, or Simmons College. The editors reserve the right to edit material submitted for publication.

Copy deadline for the September issue is Tuesday, August 15, 2006.