

More than just a Love Story: Investigating the Literary and Social Significance of the Young Adult Novel in South Africa¹

Claudia Mitchell and
Ann Smith

In Dawn Garisch's young adult novel *Not another Love Story* (from which the title of this article is derived) published in 1994 but set some years earlier in apartheid South Africa, the young reader encounters the reality of the impact of the Immorality Act when fifteen year-old Gail goes to stay with her Aunt Stella who is white and who is living illegally with Bert who is coloured, the impact of the appalling working conditions in the mines, and the impact of the colour bar. The reader is also immediately involved in the controversy surrounding the relationship of writing to political change. Gail, the narrator, enters a writing competition for a magazine in which she investigates the relationship between lung cancer and asbestos mining. Her interest is sparked by the condition of her friend Sarel, a miner who is dying of mesothelioma. Bert reads a draft of her essay and is impressed with her work:

'You write well', he said. 'This is a very good standard, and I'm pleased to see you tackle something political'. This was news to me. I considered the issues to be medical, not political. 'If you want my advice, you should bring that out a bit more clearly. The asbestos companies were aware for many years of the link between asbestos and cancer, yet they blamed it on smoking and did nothing to

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protect their workers. Your friend Sarel would be well today if they had cared as much for people as they did for their profits'.

This was damning stuff, and I could see a place for it in my article. It meant some editing, and shifting around of passages, and I worked on it with Bert for the next few hours. The net result was sensational. I couldn't wait for Monday to show Mrs. Bolton

Stella had a look at it too. 'It's very interesting, and well written', she said, 'But isn't it a bit too political for a school piece? It makes some pretty damning accusations, too. If you were writing this for a magazine, you wouldn't want a libel suit from the asbestos companies. You must be sure of your facts'.

Bert and Stella debate what is 'fact' and what is the manipulation of facts as part of a power game, with Bert declaring that journalists must take risks and face the firing line: 'Otherwise you might as well interview cordon bleu chefs for *Fair Lady* or speculate about the sex lives of pop stars in *Scope*'.

Stella in defence observes,

Do you know how many times you've had your belly satisfied by a good recipe from *Fair Lady*? You would be awfully thin if I fed you from the editorial page of the *Cape Times*. Not everything in life is political, thank God (Garisch 1994:100-102).

As it turns out the judges of the writing competition agree with Stella. Even Gail's mother, herself a writer, thinks the essay is too political and advises Gail to 'Leave that to the politicians' (Garisch 1994:126).

This article locates contemporary South African fiction written specifically for the young adult market, notably young readers between the ages of about 11 to about 16, from two equally important perspectives. One focus is on the significance of this relatively recent genre of literature which explores issues of identity-formation and the process of 'becoming'. The other focus is on the literary, social, and political significance of these texts, and the unique role they play in both the South African literary arena, and in terms of social change within the country. Our use of the phrase 'more than just a love story' in the title serves to draw attention to the devaluation of books written for the adolescent as being necessarily limited to plots containing teenage romance, sexual exploration and angst with 'high interest and low vocabulary', written by people who could never write real books for an adult market, and received within a milieu driven solely by didactics, literacy development, entertainment as escapist strategy, the literary study of a novel only in terms of its being a set school text, or by those who see reading as being only for study purposes and not for pleasure.

In exploring young adult literature within a literary critical framework, we seek to render visible a literary genre which, while interrogative by nature, has traditionally been marginalised within academic study. As well-known children's literature critic, Aidan Chambers, observes in relation to taking seriously the literature that is read by children and young adults:

We need a critical method which will take account of the child-reader, which will include him (sic.) rather than exclude him, which will help us to understand a book better and to discover the reader it seeks. We need a critical method which will tell us about the reader in the book (Chambers 1980 quoted in Sarland 1991:xi)

At present there is only one major literary critical study that includes reference to 'the reader in the book' in South African literature for children and young adults—Elwyn Jenkins' *Children of the Sun*. It is an important pioneering study in which the author himself indicates that there is need for much more scholarship in the area of South African children's literature. Reviews of this book also highlight this need (Krynauw 1993; Rosenthal 1993). While there has been some attention to the political context of literature for children (e.g. Shannon's *Becoming Literate/Becoming Political*; Bacon's *How Much Truth Do We Tell the Children?*) this is still a relatively new area of investigation. Moreover, while there are a number of professional books for teachers related to the young adult novel (e.g. Thomson's *Understanding Teenagers Reading*), and several which attend to ideologies expressed within such texts (Evans' *Reading Against Racism*; Sarland's *Young People Reading: Culture and Response*), there has been little literary critical work which specifically attends to the young adult novel as a 'real' novel and a literary genre in and of itself, to the writers of these novels as 'real' writers, or to the particularised 'uses' of literature in effecting or attempting to effect social change.

As Jenkins (1994:136) observes in his consideration of the role of young adult literature and social change:

Children are, or can be, less inhibited than adults. This has resulted in recent novels for teenagers, in depicting a tension between the mores of a conservative white society and child characters who intuitively reject them. The same may be said for children's book on the whole: they have gone where adult fiction has not. Some of their themes, plots, subject matter and even genres have broadened South African English literature beyond what has been recognised by literary critics.

Similarly Flockemann (1992:140) observes of the political significance of recent books within the young adult genre:

Many of these texts deal with a youthful protagonist's entry into, exclusion from, or resistance to dominant hegemonies—the adolescent's 'rites of passage' into adulthood frequently serving as an index of contending South African gender, race and class 'realities' at different stages of its history.

Like Barbie's friend, Skipper who in a recent issues of *Barbie* magazine (No. 3, 23 Nov. 1994), a magazine for much younger readers, is depicted flying into Africa where she gazes out over the airstrip of Niamey, Niger asks '... But where are the elephants, the zebras, the giraffes?' many of the protagonists in the contemporary young adult novel in South Africa are depicted in a state of 'becoming' through initiation, seeking as they are interpretations of a 'political landscape' that they are just entering. Consider for example, the initiation into and interpretation of the events of June 16, 1976 in this political landscape depicted in the South African young adult novel. In some cases, the outsider status of these protagonists, like Skipper's, is highlighted in a literal way so that the events of June 16 are 'interpreted' for the visitor to South Africa, as in Barbara Ludman's *Day of the Kugel* where Michelle, an American teenager is sent to stay with her aunt and uncle (a professor at Wits University), or in Barbara Baumann's *Without a Conscience* where Jayne, a young physiotherapist from a dull Canadian prairie town where the focus of conversation has been the bitterly cold weather arrives in Durban just prior to June 16. Similarly, the impact of racial integration in a secondary school in Pietermaritzburg is viewed through the eyes of Mark who returns to South Africa after a year in England with family which has been in exile in Dennis Bailey's *Khetho*. This outsider status is also used by Janet Smith in *Joe Cassidy and the Red Hot Cha Cha* where we see the changing South Africa through the eyes of Diane who with her mother is returning to South Africa after a period of eight years of exile in England where her father has been killed by a letter bomb.

In other cases, the outsider status has nothing to do with being foreign, but is rather a type of coming of age or rite of passage for young people who have lived all of their lives in the world of apartheid, and where they are entering into a period of development distinctly interrogative, 'resistant' and urgent. Thus, a character such as Candy in Toecky Jones' *Go Well, Stay Well* is outraged to realise that her so-called liberal white parents will not allow Becky, a black girl from the township, whom she has just met to visit her in her northern suburbs home. The strain on their liberalism is expressed in the mother's reservations about Becky coming to teach Candy Zulu:

'You've asked this girl to teach you Zulu?'

'That's right. She's an ideal person, being a Zulu herself. It's tremendous luck to have found someone suitable at least Perhaps Becky could teach you Zulu as well, Mum' she suggested cunningly. Her mother was always saying how much

she wished she could speak an African language 'Don't you think it's good idea, my having Zulu lessons?'
'Of course I do, dear I think it's an excellent idea, if you're really serious about it' Only ' Her mother smiled a little anxiously
'Only?' Candy prompted
'Well, how can you be sure this girl would be able to teach you properly I mean it's not as if you know her at all, do you?' And where would she teach you?'
(Jones 1979 37-38)

As the parents struggle to find reasons why it would be inappropriate and unwise for Becky to come to their home, Candy begins to realise the limitations of their liberalism. The events surrounding June 16 are interpreted for the reader by Candy, insider to a privileged white world, and Becky, insider to the world of the townships

We also see the significance of June 16 in the 1980s as interpreted through the insider world of sixteen year-old Nicholas in Jane Rosenthal's *Wake up Singing*, when he not only refuses to participate in cadets at school, but stays at home on June 16. His father, a military man, confronts Nick in the morning when he fails to appear in his school uniform

'I'm not going to school today,' he (Nick) announced, before they could react to his clothes
'Is that so', said his father sarcastically 'You're going to hole up in Soweto?'
'Hardly Dad Though I might be going to a memorial service there'
'What!'
'It's June 16, remember?'
'Oh god, so it is Turning to Claire (his wife), he went on, 'We're expecting hardly anyone to come in today People can take a day's leave if they want to'
'A day's leave But there's a three day stayaway, Dad'
'Are you bunking school for three days?' His father was getting ratty again
'No Just today I thought it'd be the least I could do'
'Do! Is not going to school doing something?'
'I think it is It's making a statement'
Too late Nick regretted opening his mouth His father had put down his shoe brush
'Statement?' Tell me, what is a statement?'
'About black education ' Nick started but Roy cut in. 'Black education' They should be goddamn grateful for their schools--it's the best bloody black education in Africa' (Rosenthal 1990 78)

When Nick returns to school he is confronted by his ex-cadet master, Bossies, who accuses him of 'bunking' and 'celebrating' June 16. The sympathetic classroom teacher Longley, however, takes Bossies to task

'What do you mean, 'bunked', 'celebrated'? You should be more careful with your language'

'He bunked man', Bossies insisted.

'But he didn't celebrate. Commemorate, observe. One doesn't celebrate the death of hundreds of children' (Rosenthal 1990:88).

In Elana Bregin's *The Red-haired Khumalo* we see this resistance as a conserving force in relation to the changes in the new South Africa, complete with a newly constituted family that contains its own 'rainbow nation'. Chelsea cannot understand how or why her mother could suddenly run off and marry a black man, and offers arguments against this union that sound remarkably like those of the 'liberal' parents of Candy in *Go Well, Stay Well*:

'Mom—he's a black man!' Chelsea said despairingly. He comes from a completely different culture to ours. Don't you see? It doesn't matter how wonderful you think he is—its never going to work .. what happens when we starts wanting to slaughter live goats and chickens in our garden for his Ancestor ceremonies?' she demanded. 'It's no good shaking your head at me Mom—they do that—it's their culture ...' (Jones 1979:17).

In still other novels, it is not the characters but the readers who find themselves interrogating the hegemonic discourses which create the world of the street child. This can be seen in Lesley Beake's *The Strollers* and Serena's *Story*, Jenny Robson's *Mellow Yellow*, or Sandra Braude's *Mpho's Story*. Throughout all of these novels the interrogation and resistance characteristic of adolescence and of the young adult novel in other parts of the world provides a backdrop for a type of interrogation, and an urgency characteristic of much of the resistance literature of South Africa written for adults—from protest poetry and township theatre, to the works of the Gordimers and Coetzee's of this country.

Even many of those stories which have an explicit 'love story' agenda such as those written as part of Heinemann's Heartbeats series where the peritext—i.e. the cover art, the blurbs, and the insignias promise romance, the content is much more interrogative through an explicit form of feminism-in-action. Thus, the backcovers contain the following description:

Heinemann Heartbeats look at love in a thrilling and romantic way. Titles include: African Sunrise, Star of Love, Circles of Gold, The Jasmine Candle and Stolen Kisses.

Meanwhile, the actual storylines often contain a strong 'political' agenda. Consider for example, Christine Botchway's *When the Broken Sing* where the peritext includes this storyline description:

Marabek is beautiful, but she won't let any man get close to her. Osei sees that she hides a secret sorrow. Can he unlock the past, and win her for his own?

Marabek, we learn in the story, is a counsellor in a women's centre where she deals primarily with violence and wife abuse in a small African village. Her own secret sorrow refers to the violence and abuse that her father meted out to her mother, and it is only when Osei, a young doctor comes to the village that Marabek begins to confront her past.

Metaphorically we see the particularised place of literature within social change presented in Barbara Baumann's novel *Without a Conscience*, written as part of an educational series for a young adult audience, and dealing with political events between 1976 and 1990. John Peele and Zuma, two black activists, disagree on how to best effect change. John Peele who has been educated in England suggests that the way to effect real change to Bantu education is to appeal to the consciences of the whites through artists:

In England I learned that novelists, journalists, playwrights and actors are very important to society. Their words act as an inner voice. South African artists, both black and white can change the attitude of the whites (Baumann 1992:28).

His fellow activist disagrees:

'Have you gone mad!' Zuma said ... 'What is all this talk about artists? Unrest is building in Soweto. We need people out there who really do something!' I say that a demonstration is the only way to make the whites listen.

The room filled with whispering voices. Many of the people were at a loss to understand John Peele's words: the things he talked about—artists and the conscience of the whites were unknown to them. They understood their basic needs, like salaries, housing and education. At the same time, Zuma's proposal to hold a demonstration frightened them. Images of Sharpeville—the brutal scenes of police opening fire on anti-pass demonstrators were rekindled in their minds. (Baumann 1992:28).

In focusing on the 'inner voice' to be found in contemporary South African literature written specifically for the young adult market, we draw attention to the need to examine the role of literature as a type of social change-in-action, not only in terms of the politicisation of children and young adults in South Africa following 1976, but also in terms of social change where issues such as HIV and AIDS, the status of girls and women, and domestic violence are part of everyday reality. In situating the urgency and immediacy, general characteristics of the young adult novel in Australia, Great Britain, Canada and the United States, within the literature of protest and resistance in South Africa, we would contend that these novels have played and continue to play

a unique role both in terms of the South African literary arena, and in terms of social change within the country.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in South African young adult novelist Dianne Hofmeyr's winning the MNET literary award for *Boikie, You Better Believe It*. Although no newcomer to literary accolades, having been described by Elwyn Jenkins (1993:101) in his critical perspective on South African children's literature as being 'one of South Africa best children's writers' and having won numerous book awards such as the Sanlam Silver and Sanlam Gold awards for *When Whales Go Free* and *A Red Kite in a Pale Sky* respectively and the Maskew Miller Longman Young Africa series award in 1993 for *Blue Train to the Moon*, her MNET award represents a departure from her being regarded as 'just' a fine children's author and winner of awards designated for books for 'just' children and young adults. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate what counts as 'award-winning writing' irrespective of whether it is the much sought after international Booker prize, the Pulitzer Prize, or a national prize, we use this recent public recognition of Hofmeyr's novel as acknowledgement of the value of a particular group of writers, a literary genre and a readership to political process.

We highlight the significance of 'political process' here. On the one hand, some of the best South African writing has been about politics, social change, protest and resistance. Indeed, the award of the Nobel Prize for literature to Nadine Gordimer is a good example of this, and who could deny the social and political significance of the late Barney Simon's work in South African theatre? On the other hand, the role of serious literature when it involves a non-adult audience brings into question from some—teachers, librarians and parents, the people who do take children's culture seriously—serious ethical issues. These include references to indoctrination, to writers joining bandwagons on AIDS, to the need for the politicisation of children. These also include charges laid against many writers, including writers for children and young adults, that they are not writing from their own experience, so that, as one person who works within the field of children's literature recently asked: 'What does Elana Bregin know of newly constituted 'Rainbow Nation' families?'

But, as Dianne Hofmeyr explains in an interview (with Marion Marchand, August 11, 1994), she sees herself primarily as a novelist and not an educator. She observes that readers are still, after all, in search of a story, so that the 'issue' cannot take over the story.

Stories based on facts like whaling or AIDS have to be researched carefully and often the first draft is read by an expert in the field to ensure accuracy. But the basis of the story needs to be visualised before the research, otherwise the story is

transparently a vehicle for 'education'. Once a main character and storyline emerges, only then can research begin. At that stage the two grow concurrently and often a small research detail can be a pivotal point in the story. Readers might feel cheated if they picked up a book believing it to be a good story, and found it full of didactic facts ... A book should expose teenagers to sensitive issues but I don't believe it's the prerogative of the author to take sides or be intrusive. Blue train to the moon is not a book on AIDS. It's a story about textures of relationships. About a girl questioning society and the rules that are imposed on her and at the same time dealing with changes in her emotional as well as intellectual powers. I don't even explain fully how Mario comes to be HIV positive so that an educator might see me as being neglectful. Yet I think if the book were used in a classroom discussion, the teenagers themselves would come up with some very important and plausible answers.

In making this statement, Hofmeyr reminds us that, like writers of novels for 'grown-ups', she is first and foremost a novelist and story teller, albeit on 'the side of the line' that is less likely to be taken seriously by traditional literary criticism. That attention to genres of literature for children and young adults is frequently non-existent at scholarly conferences on literary criticism, that so few copies of award-winning books for these readers are stocked, even by the leading book-sellers, and that so few interviews are conducted, and even fewer reviews written, and those that are, frequently focus only on the content and not the literary merit of the works, all point to the serious lack of awareness in the critical mind of the value and significance of these 'middle brow' as Virginia Woolf would have it, texts. However, as Antony Easthope (1991) and others who work within Cultural Studies point out, the very interrogation of the divisions between high and low literature, popular and serious literature, formulaic and non-formulaic literature, literature for adults and children is necessarily political. In South Africa where more than half of the population is under the age of 15, where change in a new South Africa is still in many ways 'visionary', and where topics of 'high interest' to young people are necessarily about the creation of this new landscape, social change is necessarily about a literary literacy at all levels. Consistent with remarks made by Mbulelo Mzana (1995) on English departments in transition in South African universities, the literature for children and young adults has particular literary and political significance.

In conclusion, therefore, we return to Dawn Garisch's *Not another Love Story*, when her mother advises her to leave the political to the politicians, Gail consults a dictionary regarding the meaning of the words political and politician.

She finds the definition in the *Concise OED* inadequate in its semantic sterility and observes, 'I couldn't help feeling that it left something unsaid' (Garisch 1994:126). Perhaps we should take care to ensure that literary

criticism in South Africa cannot be similarly charged in leaving some very important things unsaid.

Faculty of Education
McGill University

Department of English
University of the Witwatersrand

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