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Stories of Teen Mothers:
Fiction and Nonfiction

I n my 2002 *The ALAN Review* article, "Strong Portraits and Stereotypes: Pregnant and Mothering Teens in YA Fiction," I analyzed six out of twenty young adult novels about pregnant teens and teen mothers; I described the "discourses of desire" (Fine, 1988) that could be found in the novels, and laid out ways in which teachers might help their students read and critique them. Since that time I've set up a book club for a small group of teen mothers trying to finish high school; with these young women I've been reading and writing and talking about three young adult novels about teen mothers. I hoped, in this recent research (part of a larger investigation into the school and literacy lives of teen mothers) to see if what I had speculated about in my 2002 *ALAN Review* article was true. I asked about the ways in which it might be helpful for teen mothers to read about pregnant teens and teen mothers in young adult literature. Might they be more motivated to read if the subject was young women like themselves? Would reading such stories help them critique and thus live more easily with the pernicious discourses through which society views them? Could reading and talking about this literature with me help the young mothers think through their relationships to men, to parents, and to their own sexuality? How close to their own lives would the young women find the stories we read? Finally, would the readers identify with the teen mothers in these stories at all?

In this article I want to present some of the findings from my recent investigations. The novels I consider here are *Imani All Mine* by Connie Porter (1999), *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolf

(1993), and *A Dance for Three* by Louise Plummer (2000). In this article I plan to use Wendy Luttrell's *Pregnant Bodies, Fertile Minds: Gender, Race, and the Schooling of Pregnant Teens* (2003), and Deirdre Kelly's *Pregnant with Meaning: Teen Mothers and the Politics of Inclusive Schooling* (2000) to point out some of the common discourses about the causes of teen pregnancy I discovered in these three novels. I plan also to analyze the stories based on Roberta Seelinger Trites' book of literary criticism *Disturbing the Universe: Power and Repression in Young Adult Literature* (2000). I plan mostly, however, to describe the reactions of three teenaged mothers—Angel, Casey, and Brenda—(all pseudonyms chosen by the young women themselves) to the three novels, thereby placing the writers' imagined lives of teen mothers up against the real lives of the young mothers with whom I worked. Finally, I plan to suggest some ways in which teachers might use novels like these in conversations and classes with teen mothers and other students.

But first, some background.

The Discourses

In her 2007 *ALAN Review* article, "Facts and Fictions: Teen Pregnancy in Young Adult Literature," Kristin Nichols writes that though my 2002 article and others she considers—by writers like Davis and McGillivray, and Cockett and Knetzer—"do examine stereotypes related to teen pregnancy and/or parenthood presented in selected literature, and while they do mention information missing in the literature they

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have analyzed, the authors do not provide a comprehensive look at the portrayal of teen pregnancy and/or parenting compared to this reality in the United States today" (2007). Nichols read over forty young adult novels about teen pregnancy and, in her article, reviews ones that were published after 1990, that are told from the teen mothers' perspective, and that she believes will engage the reader. Nichols writes that a majority of the novels she has read do not discuss teen parents' difficult financial lives or the difficulty of raising a baby as a single parent. She writes:

> Overall, then, the picture of teen parenting presented in the novels is more positive than the reality of being a teen parent. The authors of the novels do illustrate some of the difficulties teen parents face, but they focus on changes in social life and sleep patterns more than anything else. While, in reality, parenting teens are in danger of abusing their children, Tasha (*Imani All Mine*) is the only teen protagonist in this study who takes her frustrations out on her child. Since many of the teen protagonists in these novels are from middle class families, and since many of the families agree to help support the teens and their children, most of the teen protagonists do not have the financial concerns that many teen parents actually face.

I agree with Nichols: most of the YA novels I have read, for this article and for "Strong Portraits and Stereotypes," seem to me to be overly positive about the lives teen mothers lead. I think these novels tend to be overly simplistic about the causes of teen pregnancy as well. In their recent research about teen mothers, Professors Deirdre Kelly and Wendy Luttrell describe four different discourses commonly used to explain the reasons for teen pregnancy. These discourses are associated with different groups concerned with the issue; each group sees different reasons for, and different solutions to the "problem" of teenage mothering. Each of these overly simple discourses can be found in the YA novels that I read with Angel,

Casey, and Gabriel.

Some people concerned with the lives of teenaged mothers speak through what Kelly (2000) calls a "wrong-girl" frame (74). This discourse suggests that there is something wrong with the girl, that she is rebellious or confused, without goals, overly sexual or irresponsible in the way she thinks about relationships, parenting, boys, or her body. This is the dominant discourse around teenage pregnancy and motherhood; it holds the most power of the four listed here. This is a difficult discourse to unravel not only because it holds some truth, as all of these discourses do, but because it includes a discourse of "people who make bad choices" (Kelly 47) that attempts to separate the deed from the doer in a way that seems to be well-motivated. This discourse is damaging because, as Luttrell states, it tends to "distort our understanding of how social conditions and cultural forces converge to create isolation, troubled relationships, and little support for many teenage girls (but especially girls born into poverty) at a pivotal point in their lives" (27). This distortion is an example of the insidiousness of the ideology—the discourse, if you will—of individualism and of the lack of complexity of our understanding of how poverty affects psychology. In addition, this discourse does not take into account the many and conflicting messages young women receive about sexuality today; it does not take into account the ways young women and girls are "eroticized" in every day life (Luttrell 33).

The "wrong society frame" (Kelly 79, Luttrell 27) is one first expressed by feminists; this discourse speaks not only to young women's lack of access to birth control methods and delivery systems but also expresses a cultural struggle over "proper family-government relationships" (Luttrell 35). This discourse takes issue with the notion of individual choices, arguing that choices are highly dependent on a girl's material resources and the cultural meanings she makes of sex, pregnancy, and early motherhood. Rather than identifying the flaw as being in the girl, this discourse focuses on unequal power relationships across class and gender as a framework through which teenage motherhood can be seen.

Those who speak through a "wrong-family frame" (Kelly 76, Lutrell 27) say that the family is at fault: the family of the pregnant teen has raised their daughter badly. This construction dates back to the 1960s and

the Moynihan Report which spoke of the problems of the black family; this construction also connects to the culture of poverty discourse that describes undeserving mothers who are on welfare and criminal, absent fathers. As Columbia University education professor Nancy Lesko (1995), quoted in Luttrell (2003), put it, this discourse has been used as "part of a broad social engineering toward reprivatization and dismantlement of the welfare state support of women and children" (Luttrell 34).

Finally, there are some teenage mothers who claim that any stigma about having children out of wedlock is wrong. Kelly (2000) and others (Luttrell, 2003; Schultz, 2001) have described teen mothers' self interpretations as emphasizing the positive and empowering aspects of their situations. University of Pennsylvania education professor Kathy Schultz describes the ways three girls she got to know turn "failure into success" as they struggle with the discourses about teenage mothering, discourses that affect the ways they see themselves as well as the way society sees them. Schultz sees that—as with the young women I spoke to—"a consequence of having children at a young age can lead to new forms of participation in school" (Schultz 595).

The Study

I worked with Angel, Casey, and Brenda for about five hours every other week during the spring and summer semesters of 2003. During that time we met at the Midwestern alternative school or "learning center" with which they were or had been associated: all three young women were trying to finish high school. During our meetings we read and talked about young adult novels together, shared stories, photos of our children, and news of our days. Over the two semesters I worked with these young women I accumulated 75 pages of field notes; I tape recorded all of our meetings. During this time I also interviewed teachers and administrators about their perspectives on these teen mothers and others with whom they worked; I received documents including information about the teen mothers' school attendance and academic progress as well. In addition, I conducted and tape recorded over 15 hours of individual interviews with each of the young women I worked with. In order to complicate my findings, I conducted multiple hour-long interviews with two older women who were pregnant as teenagers in the 1960s and '70s. I learned about these women's experiences with school, with their families, and with reading as well.

Of the young women with whom I worked, Angel, a seventeen-year-old white girl from Georgia, was the youngest. Living in a trailer with her bartender mother, she was unmarried, taking two classes, and caring for her ten-month-old son Ben. She was not very far along toward graduation: administrators said she was doing seventh-grade math; in English she was about at the tenth-grade level. Angel liked to write poetry, though not in school; she was eager to read almost anything, she told me.

Nineteen years old and newly married when I met her, Casey, a white girl who had been in and out of foster homes as a child, had a three-month-old son named Russell. Casey had supported herself as a maid at a local hotel before she married. Not enrolled in the school when I knew her, she planned on re-enrolling at the alternative school the next semester and working toward entering college. Administrative records suggested it would take her years to accomplish that goal.

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I met Brenda four weeks before she graduated from high school. A white woman who worked full time at a local factory, she was twenty-three years old and had three children, a four-year-old and two-year-old twins. At the time that I met her, she was six months pregnant and still married to the father of her children, though she had not lived with him for many years. Older than many of the students at the alternative school, she was often critical of the ways in which she felt they were wasting their time.

The Books

Each of the young adult novels I chose to read with the young women for this study is, unlike most of the novels Nichols critiqued, about a girl who is poor. In two of the novels the teen mother keeps her child, and some of the difficulties of raising that child

are shown. I chose the novels because I wanted ones that described a life fairly close to the ones the young women I was working with were leading; I also chose them because I suspected they would be easy for the young women to read—important, as the young women with whom I worked had busy lives.

Imani All Mine

At our first meeting I read part of Connie Porter's novel *Imani All Mine* (1999) outloud to the young women. This is not a novel written expressly for young adults (although Porter has written novels for young people, most specifically the *Addy* books in the American Girl series); its implied reader is not necessarily a young person, though its heroine is fourteen. In this novel Tasha is shown trying to raise her daughter Imani in a housing project. She struggles with school, with her mother and her mother's white boyfriend, and with the difficult circumstances under which she must live.

This novel—with its description of an urban environment where Tasha and her mother sit on their stoop watching "June Bug" train little boys to become drug runners for him, with its description of the bravery and moral courage of Tasha, who tries to care for Imani well even though she is the product of a rape, and especially with its description of Imani's death through random gunfire—participates in the "society is wrong" discourse (Kelly 79, Luttrell 27). It also participates in the "stigma is wrong" discourse (Luttrell 29): when, at the end of *Imani All Mine*, Tasha decides to have a second child out of wedlock, this decision is presented as a hopeful one, not as the choice of a confused or bad girl, or a girl who is a product of a bad home, but as an expression of the

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triumph of youth over sorrow. This novel is the only one of all of those that I have read that participates in the "stigma is wrong" discourse.

After I finished reading the first two chapters of the book to Casey and Angel, the girls talked about it with excitement and vibrancy to their voices. Casey said, "Fourteen. So, yeah, I was scared when I found out too, like she was too," and, later,

> It was smart of her not to get rid of the baby, not having an abortion. And then I thought it was smart of her to start going to those classes. I wish I would have done that. And I—just like Imani thought her baby had a routine before he was born I thought Russ did, too. Oh and she mentioned how her stomach didn't stick out all that much, mine did. It was way out to there.

The girls were familiar with aspects of the story in *Imani All Mine*; having recently entered the world of teen motherhood, they were predisposed to be interested in and positive about this story. Eager to talk about their experiences—the bottles, late night feedings, diapers, doctor visits, and the strange experiences of pregnancy and labor—they had background knowledge that may have made listening to and reading this novel easier than listening to and reading texts on other subjects; the girls seemed as if they could, to some extent, find themselves in Porter's description of Tasha (Vinz 77).

I read a short section in which Tasha's mother takes her to a female doctor, who chastises her for being pregnant: "too many of our girls throwing they lives away, giving up on they futures," the doctor says (22). I wondered if the teen mothers had experienced any prejudice from the doctors they saw when they were pregnant. Casey defended her doctor, but Angel said: "Some people, yeah, especially, like—middling people, not real young people and not real old people but, like-middle-ish people—they look at me, like if I'm in the grocery store with Ben, like that doctor was to Tasha, like they think I'm a slut or something. Yeah."

The girls were excited about *Imani All Mine*; Angel copied down its name. Later she asked me its title again: "What book was that you read us last week?" And, when I told her I thought she could get it out of the library, she said, "You didn't make us copies?"

Make Lemonade

The Personal Reader

Next, I asked Casey, Angel, and Brenda to read *Make Lemonade*. Following Aidan Chambers as discussed in Nodelman's *Pleasures of Children's Literature* (2003), I asked them to take notes on anything in the novel they liked, disliked, were puzzled by and noticed as a pattern (48). I asked the young women to take these notes in part because I wanted them to talk back to the text as they read, which might help them be more engaged, and might aid in comprehension (Schoenbach, 1999, 33); I asked them to answer these questions in part because I wanted them to have as pleasurable an experience as possible.

In *Make Lemonade*, the main character Verna LaVaughn decides to babysit for Jolly, a teenage mother, because she wants to earn money so she can go to college and get out of her building in which "in 64 apartments nobody ever went to college" (10). Through working for Jolly, Verna learns a bit about what life is like for a teenage mother, as she watches Jolly struggle with toilet training, with a job loss, with sexual harassment on the job, with a dirty house, and with bills.

The character Verna LaVaughn is a first-person narrator whose knowledge is limited; though she has power in that she is the teller and shaper of the story, unlike an omniscient narrator, she can only describe the limited knowledge that one person can have (Seelinger Trites, 2000, 71). Though Verna has a direct relationship with the implied adolescent readers of the novel (72), many of the values she relays are learned by both the reader and by Verna from her mother, a character who can be seen as an "interior narrator" (72), because she sees some parts of the story that the main teller cannot. Verna's mother "voices the didactic ideology" (74) of the novel, through her conversations with and warnings to her daughter. Jolly, the teen mother, is one of those characters that Seelinger Trites finds odd (61) because, though they have no parents in the novel, which one might imagine would be an adolescent's dream, they look for

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and find a parent to rebel against. In this case Jolly initially rebels against the advice of Verna's mother, who seems to use her adult authority to repress and undercut the little power that Jolly has. Although I voiced some criticisms of the mother character, all of the young women liked and defended her. Angel in particular saw her as being "very caring." "She's going to help pay for the college a little bit," said Angel, "that's very caring."

Verna's mother wields a power that undercuts the authority of her daughter's narrative voice which, Seelinger Trites suggests, also undercuts the power of the adolescent reader, implying as it does that only adults can have wisdom (79). Jolly brings herself out of powerlessness (79) in part by following some of Verna's mother's suggestions. Jolly gains power also by aligning herself fully with the institution of school. In this novel succumbing to the power of the institution of school (33) is presented as the beginning of adult wisdom, and, unlike most schools outside of fiction, the school Jolly finally attends presents both girls with many kinds of help: not just a daycare center but a financial aid seminar (Wolf 118), a self-esteem class (86), an Apprentice Program (126), encouragement to go to college (118) as well as teachers (118) and counselors (124) who have plenty of time to help their students think through and solve their personal problems.

All three of the young women who read this novel with me said that Jolly seemed to them to be true to life. "I know people just like that," said Casey. "This young guy Rich I knew, the boys' mom was in prison, I mean they had dishes stacked up to here and Rich didn't even give those boys a bath. I mean, it was just gross. There were times I'd come over and give them a bath. I mean, just like this girl in this book, it's really hard to be a young parent."

As I asked her to, Angel annotated her copy of *Make Lemonade*. On her copy she circled the words 'drab" and "diagram," and wrote "don't know" beside them; after a line in the text that says "the tabs" of the teenage mother's babysitting advertisement have not been taken by anyone, Angel wrote, "shows that a lot of

people don't care about teen moms." After certain things the toddler character says, Angel wrote, "cute!" At a different point Angel wrote "just like most friends—not supportive." In one paragraph the teenage mother Jolly says, "Reality is I got baby puke on my sweater and shoes/and they tell me they'll cut off the electricity/and my kids would have to take a bath in cold water/And the rent ain't paid like usual./Reality is my babies only got one thing in the whole world and that's me and that's reality." Angel circled that paragraph and wrote "ain't that the truth."

None of the teenage mothers who read this novel immediately identified with the teen mother Jolly, though, as they had identified with the teen mother who tells the story of *Imani All Mine*; primarily, when they read *Make Lemonade*, they identified with the younger, inexperienced girl, Verna, who is the first-person narrator of the story. The young women were, then, conventional readers, reading as the text asked them to. Because I was surprised that they didn't identify with the teen mother more than they did, I asked Angel directly about whether she saw herself as being like Jolly in any way. Angel answered, "Oh, struggling, I guess, we're both struggling. Except I'm a lot neater. Except when it comes to my car and my bedroom. But—I don't have two kids, but I don't have a job, either. But like that girl I want to give Ben more than I can but I don't have a job so I know I can't."

Brenda, who was older than most of the young women she went to school with, was critical of the teen mother, using her to defend her own moral self and to express her ideas about what a life well-lived entails. Brenda criticized Jolly using the same words she used for other teen mothers she knew: "She shouldn't be having kids just to have kids cause she thinks that they're cute, I think that's what that Jolly is doing, they don't tell you if she's black or white but I know a lot of them just having kids, saying, oh I want a mixed baby because they're so cute."

Not surprisingly, this personal way of responding to the text was the girls' most common response. In this novel in which the teen mother did not tell her

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own story, the teen mother readers identified primarily as the text asked them to, with the younger main character, the teller of the story, Verna LaVaughn.

The Helpless Reader

Casey's husband Sam was trying to help her learn how to become a better reader; at twenty-five, a manager at the local Menard's, Sam had two years of college behind him and, as Casey said, "read lots of books, just tons of books." His goal was to help Casey graduate from high school and go through college. When he learned that Casey was reading *Make Lemonade* in a book club with me, Sam asked her to read it out loud to him every night. They read sitting together on their couch, with their baby Russ in a car seat next to them. In describing her reading to me, Casey said she enjoyed how emotional her husband became at some parts of the book, for example:

> when the baby gets the spider caught in her throat. I mean he was scared, he didn't want her to die . . . it was so funny, and he said why, it's not funny! But I kept reading, and he's like, why don't you go back, and I'm like, no! I want to find out! But he got all upset, he like, was almost crying. Russ was there next to us when I was reading and I could see Sam was thinking about him, about what could happen to him, just like when the baby almost died. I laughed at him but. . . I was getting kind of emotional too.

Casey and her husband were clearly feeling that "helplessness native to reading" that Andrew H. Miller (2002) writes of when he describes readers who feel "perfectly helpless" as they watch characters make bad choices that will lead them or those they love to danger (81). Some part of Casey and Sam's intense reactivity to this scene in the novel—particularly Sam's tears—is an expression of that helplessness, and also of their growing awareness of their powerlessness as parents. As Casey and Sam read together they were aware of the many discourses that told them that young parents can not possibly be good enough; they imagined what could happen to their baby son if they were not vigilant parents. Casey sometimes seemed irritated by the way in which the young adult novels

we read claimed to know who she was as a teenage mother (Blackford, 2004, 40). She made it clear that she did not see herself in Jolly and was not particularly interested in knowing her. But in this one case she seemed to experience no distance: she and Sam were right there with Jolly, experiencing the panic of having a baby who nearly chokes to death.

The novel *Make Lemonade* participates in many of the discourses that surround and try to explain teenage mothering. In that a character in *Make Lemonade* calls Jolly a "magnet for bad luck" (73), it participates in the "wrong girl" discourse (Kelly 74). In that it foregrounds Jolly's poverty, *Make Lemonade* also participates in a "wrong society" discourse; in that Jolly's family is nowhere to be found, it participates in a "wrong family" discourse.

A Dance for Three

Some weeks after the group finished reading *Make Lemonade*, I read *A Dance for Three* (2000) by Louise Plummer with Angel, at her suggestion. When I called her from work to say happy birthday—she had just turned eighteen—Angel volunteered, "I read an interesting book myself, *A Dance for Three*. It's about a girl who gets pregnant. Her name is Hannah and the guy is Milo and she gets pregnant and waits three months to tell him and when she does he punches her right in the face. Then she goes crazy and is in a mental hospital. It's real good."

A Dance for Three is a book about a girl in trouble. Written by a professor of English who says she decided to write the book when a relative of hers became pregnant out of wedlock, it strives to show how unwanted pregnancy can be related to a host of other problems a young person might be having. There is of course some truth to this idea that girls who get pregnant early are often girls with other problems: One of my teacher informants said that most of the five hundred teen mothers she had taught over the years had become pregnant after some tragedy had happened in their lives: "A grandmother died, there was a divorce, a serious breakup. It was amazing, the connections were so clear," this teacher said. This connection was confirmed in conversations with older teenage mothers who, looking back, claimed that they started "acting wild" when their grandmother died or their father left home.

Seeking, I think, to show a teenage mother in a compassionate and more complicated light, *A Dance for Three* speaks to this pattern of pregnancy after tragedy or loss, as none of the other books mentioned so far in this essay have. The character Hannah is dealing with grief over the death of her father, and with her mother's agoraphobic response to that death; she falls in love with the no-good (but good-looking) male character in the novel when he sings a song her father had sung to her (Plummer 35).

A Dance for Three is one of those books that participates primarily in the "wrong girl frame" (Kelly, 47; Luttrell 27); like that discourse, the novel is complex because its author is trying to show compassion for the confused teenage narrator who makes some bad choices. This novel is also one that serves "both to reflect and perpetuate the cultural mandate that teenagers rebel against their parents" (Seelinger Trites 69); it clearly presents Hannah's pregnancy as a form of deviance, and it shows the main character in a "rebellion/repression dynamic" as she learns to accept the institutions—the family, the school, the mental hospital—that shape her life (69). This novel is clearly another "tool of socialization" (54) in which the narrator rebels by becoming pregnant and having a nervous breakdown and then, through the help of a surrogate mother figure, (in this case a therapist) accepts the importance of institutions in her life, and becomes a person ready to accept conventional, adult life.

But the book is unusual in that it speaks to an issue none of the other YA novels I've read addresses: the pain an unwanted pregnancy can create for other members of the family. It is as if, in most of these books, the main characters' lives do not affect the lives of the people they live around. In *A Dance for Three,* however, the brother of the father of the baby goes to see it in the hospital and mourns its loss when

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it's adopted, saying that "Uncles have no rights" (Plummer 218). One of the older women I spoke to for my study, Jennifer, who became pregnant out of wedlock when she was in high school, told me that her brother's reaction to her baby was a major force in her decision to keep the child:

> There was no way I had any idea what a parent was, I had no idea. And so honest to god I had the papers signed and everything. I thought, when I went to the hospital, that I was giving him up. For adoption. They wouldn't let me see him because of that. But my brother came, he's younger than me, and he had seen him, and he said, well you're going to keep him, aren't you? And I just said, yeah I think I am, and he goes, oh, good, and he really felt so glad, and I think he thought it would be more like a brother for him. And then I got to see him, and that's how I made that decision.

Few of the young adult novels I've read about teen parents capture the appreciation and/or regret some of the young mothers I've spoken with express about their decision to keep their children.

Angel seemed to like *A Dance for Three* in part because it retained a violent quality that seemed true to her life. I think she also liked the book because it helped her present her identity to me, an identity that was very much wrapped up in being a teen mom. She liked talking to me about this book because it helped promote that sense of knowledge and authority that becoming a teenage mother had given her.

When I asked her which, of all of the pregnant teens she had read about in our time together, she "identified" with most, she talked about the reality she found in *A Dance for Three*:

> In this one—Hannah? Because like in that one I thought everything was going to be perfect with Jack and stuff and then we fought all the time and the first time I told him he was like, are you sure if it was his, just like Milo in that book. He lied about me and said no I never had sex with her. And Milo beat her up. I related to that part, too, because Jack and me have been in quite a bit of fights. Never to the point where I had to go to the hospital but almost! I pressed charges against him but then I dropped them but he had to stay in jail for one day.

When I asked Angel why she had dropped the charges against her boyfriend Jack, she said, "Well, I love him. He doesn't want to be with me. Well, he acts like he wants to be with me but he doesn't act like he wants to be with me?"

The character Hannah in *A Dance for Three*

expresses bewilderment similar—though nowhere near as moving—to the bewilderment Angel expresses here. The character Hannah has many more supports than Angel had, and her violent boyfriend—though he doesn't come to much grief in the novel—is scolded for his bad behavior by the author in ways Angel's boyfriend most likely will never be. One of the pleasures of reading fiction, I suppose, is that we can see people get what they deserve.

Conclusions

It's a little too simple to say that most of the twenty or so YA novels about teen mothers I've read do not do well at replicating the complexities of the real lives of teen mothers. Most do not, as Nichols says, describe the financial difficulties, the particular problems of parenting, or the difficult choices teen mothers must make, but some of them—like the three I read with three real teen mothers above—do, according to the young mothers I spoke with, capture some aspects of their real lives. Among those aspects are the pleasure and strangeness of a changing body, the sense of condemnation from others, the burden of new responsibility, and the violence of some teen relationships.

Mediated through conversations with a sensitive teacher, each of these novels and others like them can be of use in the classroom. In classes where most of the students are not pregnant or mothering, young adult novels about teen mothers could be used to provide a springboard for discussion of gender expectations and stereotypical representations of teen mothers and their boyfriends. In traditional classrooms conversations about the fact that most of these books were written by women might be fruitful; students might, as Seelinger Trites suggests, attempt feminist readings of some of these novels, discussing ways in which they might be about "female education, female identity formation, female voice, and female choice" (151). Students might begin to talk about whether they believe that women's morality and ideas about relationships are the same as or different from those of men. Boys in a co-ed classroom might be interested in defending themselves against the often flat and negative depictions of boyfriends in young adult novels about teen pregnancy.

When Angel describes learning about labor on

"the pregnancy channel," instead of from a doctor, midwife or mother, when she describes her boyfriend's mother videotaping the birth of her son ("but from the side, I didn't want any crotch shots"), when, with Casey and Brenda, she compares her real life experiences to the experiences of the characters on *CSI* or *Crossing Jordan*, she is providing opportunities a teacher might take up. Though most teachers discuss the impact of new media on their students, surprisingly, none of the YA novels about teen mothers I read with Angel, Casey, and Brenda described media in the lives of the young mother characters. Only *Imani All Mine*—of the twenty young adult novels about teen mothers and pregnant teens I have read— made any mention of media images. Teachers and students might speculate about this lack; why is the world in which these young mothers live described in such simple, conservative terms, and what does that do to a reader's understanding of the novel's teen characters? Asking questions like these of YA novels can encourage students to develop a more critical attitude toward all novels they read.

Finally, teachers might also begin after school book clubs, like the one I created, expressly for pregnant and mothering students. In such a book club, through reading some of the texts described here, a teacher might, as Deirdre Kelly suggests, open up a conversation about "the meanings of being a mother, a student, a worker, and a citizen in today's society. Students could compare the competing images of the good mother . . . and discuss who benefits and who is marginalized by such images" (147). Such a conversation could start, perhaps, with the images of the mothers of the teens in the novels I read here— Hannah's troubled mother, Verna LaVaughn's critical mother, and Imani's preoccupied mother—and move on to the kinds of mothers the teens seem to be themselves. As part of this conversation students could look at the images of school in these novels, ask whether school is idealized in each novel or not; they could ask why mothers are still willing to send their children off to an institution such as school (Grumet qtd. in Pitt, 2006, 101).

I was continually struck by the isolation of the young women with whom I worked. Casey, Angel, and Brenda had children and mothers, boyfriends or husbands, but often times these people were not available to help the young women through the complicated and new experiences of birthing and raising a baby. The burdens of poverty fell hard upon most of the relatives of these young women, and the amount of time and effort it took relatives to make it through a regular day meant that time for important conversations was often just not there. The support these relatives did provide was compli- cated—whether by the youth, arrogance, and selfishness of a boyfriend, the preoccupation of a soon-to-be-laid off bar- tender mother, or the different age of a husband. Reading these young adult novels about teen mothers did provide a kind of "community-through- literature" (Coffel 19) that I hoped it would. The books were important as springboards to conversa- tions; because of the use of these books, with all their flaws, the young women with whom I worked began to feel that that they were not as alone and isolated as they had thought they were; they began to feel that their voices were heard.

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