

From Basketball to Barney:

Teen Fatherhood, Didacticism, and the Literary in YA Fiction

While the affirmation of nontraditional families may be a hallmark of much contemporary YA fiction, it is particularly complicated in the case of one popular subgenre: the teen pregnancy and parenting novel. Here, the compulsion to honor adolescent readers' diverse family relationships—and to tell the truth about the variety of their lived experience—conflicts with the presumed didactic function of such literature, a presumption that is especially keen in a decade when alarm over teen sexual behavior has prompted a nearly 2500% increase in public funding for abstinence-only sex education¹ (“Spending”). Indeed, although pregnancy and parenting novels have changed significantly over the past 35 years, with more girls keeping and raising their babies (and often making the honor roll to boot), they are still very much cautionary tales about the dangers of teen sexual activity. For example, an astonishing number of their teen protagonists conceive the very first time they have intercourse, and not only in more conservative novels like Louise Plummer’s *A Dance for Three* (2001), in which the girl has a nervous breakdown and ends up institutionalized, but also in more progressive novels like Ruth Pennebaker’s *Don’t Think Twice* (1996), Sarah Dessen’s *Someone Like You* (1998), and Janet McDonald’s *Spellbound* (2001).

While the didactic compulsion of the YA pregnancy and parenting novel may be understandable, it is also often in tension with competing drives. These include not only the celebration of certain non-traditional adolescent relationships, such as the teen parent and child dyad, but more fundamentally, the

challenging cultural work of legitimizing YA literature as literature. As Cindy Lou Daniels wrote in *The ALAN Review* in 2006, YA literature “tends to be ignored by many serious literary critics,” who see it as “a secondary category of child-like storytelling—didactic in nature—and unworthy of serious literary evaluation” (78). Marc Aronson attributes this tendency partly to a “Moral Instruction gang” who “believe that the test of the value of a YA book is the values it supposedly teaches or the role models it theoretically offers” (115) and to parents who want “the book itself to be a kind of adult: a rule giver who inculcated on the page the values the parent is not sure she has instilled on her own” (70). This is particularly the case for realistic fiction, often problematically elided with the “problem novel,” in which issues trump stories and characters; as Michael Cart asserts, the genre is “to YA literature what the soap opera is to legitimate drama” (64).

For these reasons, teen pregnancy and parenting novels are unlikely candidates for major literary awards, and novels like Angela Johnson’s *The First Part Last* (2003) are both highly unusual specimens and very compelling case studies. Written during her tenure as a McArthur Fellow, Angela Johnson’s novel not only earned both the 2003 Coretta Scott King award and the 2004 Printz award but also reshaped the boundaries of the subgenre. Johnson achieves this partly through careful narrative technique but also, I argue, by shifting the focus from teen mothers to teen fathers, whose sexual behavior carries far less cultural weight. This shift is explored at roughly the same time by Margaret Bechard, whose *Hanging on to Max*

(2002) provides illuminating points of comparison and ultimately points toward a similar conclusion: regendering the YA pregnancy and parenting novel may enable it to navigate more successfully between literary and social imperatives.

Although teen birthrates over the last 25 years are actually lower than they were during the 1950s and 1960s, pregnant and parenting girls have come to play a symbolic role disproportionate to their demographic presence, particularly when they are poor and/or dark-skinned. During the early 1990s, adolescent mothers supplanted earlier versions of the so-called “welfare queen” as a favorite media scapegoat—despite the fact that women under 18 comprised less than 2% of welfare recipients (Douglas and Michaels 190). In addition, over the last ten years, federal funding—and social support—for abstinence-only sex education,² both in public schools and through private organizations, has escalated despite a growing body of evidence that it has no effect on teen sexual behavior.³ Consequently, whereas in 1988, only 2% of secondary public schools “taught abstinence as the only way of preventing pregnancy and STIs,” by 2002, 35% of school districts either opted not to mention contraceptives at all in sex ed classes or instructed students only about failure rates (Collins *et al.* 7). Thus the cultural climate reflected in and shaped by both the vilification of the teen mom and the rise of abstinence-only education renders it even more challenging for teen pregnancy and parenting novels to transcend their primarily didactic legacy.

But one of the most striking features of *The First Part Last* is how determinedly it refuses to offer moral instruction about teen sexual activity beyond asserting that teens who don’t use condoms should “call . . . 1-800-ISTUPID” (37). In fact, though Bobby regrets his failure to use birth control, in contrast to the protagonists of so many teen mother narratives, he has no regrets or even second thoughts about having sex. His parents, also unlike so many of the parents in teen mother novels, do not expect abstinence from him. In fact, his mother purchases condoms for Bobby, his brothers, and even his buddies. Moreover, the novel gently mocks his friend K-Boy’s mother, who “almost lost her mind when she found a pack of condoms underneath his bed” and who “didn’t want to hear that he was being safe” but “just wanted him not to do it” (38).

Interestingly, the novel skips over the conventional scene in which the young couple makes the fateful decision to become sexually active, a scene that is almost obligatory in teen mother novels, where it reinforces a logic of poor choices. We are never told how many times Bobby and Nia had intercourse before she got pregnant, though we can infer that it wasn’t the first time. Further, neither he nor Nia are turned off to sex once they discover how “dangerous” it is for teens, but they continue to enjoy intimacy with the blessing of her doctor. Moreover, neither sex nor pregnancy seems to hurt their relationship (as abstinence-only literature and many teen pregnancy novels caution), even when Nia is most frustrated by her condition.

Similarly, the narrative logic of *The First Part Last* also subverts a didactic reading. Certainly if taken out of context, the fact that the teen mother succumbs to severe eclampsia and ends up in a vegetative coma might seem to suggest the

“dangers” of teenage sex. However, the novel is carefully constructed to assure us that this is not a punishment but a rare and random accident. More importantly, the novel ultimately affirms that—*despite* Bobby’s sleep-deprived struggles and even despite his brief lapse into irresponsibility when he plays hooky, spray-paints a wall, gets arrested, and fails to phone the sitter—it is “too right” that he should keep his daughter Feather (11). It also ends with the promise of a happy life when Bobby moves from NYC to rural Heaven, Ohio, as signaled by the idyllic name, by his report, upon looking out the window of his new home, that he feels “as brand new as [his] daughter” (131) and, for some readers, knowledge of the friendship and joy the pair finds there in Johnson’s 1998 prequel.

Finally, the narrative structure also works to challenge conventional expectations of the genre. The novel is comprised of short chapters alternately headed “now” and “then”; most of the “then” sequences are narrated in the present tense, gradually

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revealing the story of Nia's pregnancy through flashbacks. Johnson's avoidance of a linear narrative by itself works to undermine a moralistic reading of the novel, as it frustrates the path through which Action X leads to Consequence Y.⁴ And indeed, among recent teen mother novels, more overtly didactic titles such as Judith Caseley's *Losing Louisa* (1999) and Beatrice Spark's *Annie's Baby* (1998) follow a far more linear plotline than more ambivalent works such as *Don't Think Twice*, which also relies heavily on flashbacks. At the same time, Johnson's use of the present tense in both threads challenges the more conventional split between the knowing self of the present and the naïve former-self of the past, and thus avoids casting Bobby (along with the readers who see through his eyes) in the role of an "adult" assessing past behavior through the lens of maturity.

While Johnson's narrative techniques partially account for her success in creating a teen pregnancy and parenting novel in which aesthetics are not

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subordinated to moralism, her unusual choice of a male protagonist is likely also a major factor. Historically, of course, female sexuality and desire have always been a much greater source of cultural anxiety. Moreover, while the sexuality of all teens is fiercely regulated within the abstinence-only movement, regardless of gender, even here, boys' desires are presumed to be more "natural" and understandable than girls' and therefore less alarming. For example, the popular workbook *Sex Respect* informs students that "A young man's natural desire for sex is already strong due

to testosterone," while "females are becoming culturally conditioned to fantasize about sex as well" (Mast 11, qtd. in "In Their Own Words"). Similarly, in the media discourse condemning the economic and social cost of teen parenting, it is the teen mothers who are criminalized for allegedly expecting taxpayers to

bankroll their babies. Seldom are the babies' fathers taken to task on this point, at least not with the same emotional intensity, despite the fact that a significant number are not teenagers but adults,⁵ and just under half of all non-custodial fathers pay child support in full (Grall 2). Thus it seems reasonable to hypothesize that because contemporary U.S. culture still attaches so much less symbolic weight and social stigma to the sexual and reproductive activities of adolescent men, YA fiction about their experiences in this realm would be less bound by ideological expectation and controversy.

At first glance, a look at Margaret Bechard's *Hanging on to Max* appears to complicate this hypothesis. Strikingly similar to Johnson's novel, despite Bechard's shift to a white, suburban, blue-collar protagonist, Max also tells the story of a likeable young man who quite unexpectedly assumes custody of his child in the absence of its mother. Both Bobby and Sam struggle with the day-to-day challenges of caring for an infant on very little sleep, with parents who are supportive in some ways but not in others, with an overwhelming feeling of responsibility, and with their frustration over the loss of youth and freedom. And in both novels, the denouement involves a moment of weakness in which the teen father briefly lapses into irresponsibility and impetuously reclaims his lost youth. Negative (though not devastating) consequences ensue, and the incident prompts him to reassess his life and his priorities.

However, *Hanging on to Max* seems to approach the issues of teen sexual activity and parenthood with far less moral neutrality than *The First Part Last*. It implies that Brittany's pregnancy (and the couple's decision to become sexually active) leads to the end of the relationship; Sam reports that things "just weren't the same." Furthermore, though Sam doesn't express agreement when his father implies that the pregnancy and, presumably, Sam's decision to have sex in the first place indicate a shortcoming of his upbringing, he doesn't disagree either. When strangers see Sam and Max together and ask questions about their relationship, Sam feels shame at being a teen father and often lets people believe that Max is his brother. Most importantly, whereas the moment of crisis leads Bobby to a deepened commitment to raising his daughter Feather, it leads Sam to to place 11-month-old Max with adoptive parents. Little explanation is

offered, apart from Sam's assertions that Max "needs a real father" and that "everybody ought to have a mother" (195) and the hint that deep down, he wants to be free to "play basketball with Andy" and otherwise be a high-schooler again. But the brief epilogue clearly assures us that in recognizing that he was not ready to parent, Sam clearly did the right thing. Here, 18-year-old Max has grown into an admirable young man, thanks, it is implied, to the guidance of his "proper" adoptive parents. He is happily reunited with his birth father, who, having chosen the "right" path, has also been rewarded with his white-collar dream job, a loving wife, two charming daughters, and a garage full of "stuff."

Yet at the same time, Brittany most definitely does not get pregnant the first time they have sex (or the second, or the third . . .). A key subplot explores the ways that both Sam and his father are still grieving the death of his mother, and it locates Mr. Pettigrew's attitude toward Sam's situation in that context. In other words, his condemnations are shown to be more about his own insecurities as a single parent than about Sam's actions. The narrative structure of *Hanging on to Max*, as in *The First Part Last*, moves easily (though not as systematically) between past and present, with similar effects. In addition, Sam's shame at being a teen parent is foiled against the pride and ease projected by his girlfriend Claire, a classic YA "good girl" who counters a friend's surprise that she has a child by smiling and calmly affirming, "Smart girls get pregnant too." (121) Unlike Sam, she makes a point of correcting those who mistake her for Emily's babysitter, reminding Sam that "we don't have anything to be embarrassed about" (118). Claire and her friend Gemma also foil Sam by achieving real success at balancing books and babies; they excel in both arenas, confidently plan for college, and thus complicate the novel's apparent cautionary message about teen parenthood. *Hanging on to Max* even goes so far as to poke fun at those who assume that a teen parent's story is necessarily a dire warning to other teens; Sam and Claire share a good laugh at the expense of those who see Claire as a "poster child for the dangers of teenage sex" and expect her story to be a "CBS Afterschool Special" (82).

Finally, the inexplicability of the ending might also be taken to mitigate its apparent didacticism. Indeed, book reviewers regularly comment that the

text does not at all prepare us for this sudden twist, nor does it do much to illuminate Sam's reasoning. *Horn Book*, for example, describes the ending as "provocative, some might say maddening" and suggests that the epilogue "seems meant to appease those outraged by Sam's choice" (Heppermann 324). *Kliatt* observes that "readers may not quite understand all of Sam's reasoning" and that "it looks as though the plot is heading in one direction, but it veers sharply after [the] trip to the hospital [where Max gets stitches following an injury]" (Rosser 15). Was this unexpected turn simply a way for Bechard to heighten the drama of the story? Or might its very unexpectedness invite the reader to question whether it is a "good fit" and thus also question the inevitability of the more socially-sanctioned ending? Certainly the sexual politics of *Hanging on to Max* are murkier and more ambivalent than in *The First Part Last*, but it still finally avoids offering an entirely clear message about the consequences of teen sexual activity.

If, as I propose, the shift from a male protagonist to a female one is a strategy that aids the teen pregnancy and parenting novel in resisting the cultural call to privilege moral and social instruction, then how might we account for the varying degrees of success that *Hanging on to Max* and Johnson's acclaimed *The First Part Last* have achieved in this regard? One of the most obvious differences between the two novels is that Johnson is not only writing against the dominant discourse in terms of sex but also of race. The most tenacious and vicious stereotypes about pregnant and parenting teens are—as Douglas and Michaels, among others, point out—highly racialized. The media paints the "typical" teen mother as both African American and herself the daughter of a teen mother, despite ample demographic evidence to the contrary.⁶ At the same time, Johnson must also write against stereo-

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types of African-American males, who are so often portrayed in the media as siring children by multiple mothers yet taking little interest in them. Thus, there is much more at stake for Johnson in resisting cultural pressures to construct a narrative that focuses on the hardships of school-age parenting in order to encourage teen celibacy. For if she shows Bobby and Nia as unwilling or unable to parent, she risks reinforcing media stereotypes that portray urban African Americans (particularly when they are young and/or poor) as incompetent or indifferent parents.

Another key difference is that *Hanging on to Max* makes a more concerted effort to truly “masculinize”

the teen pregnancy and parenting novel. Bechard’s novel not only devotes substantial space to exploring the tensions between the “feminine” activity of caregiving and more traditionally masculine cultural imperatives but also takes pains to construct both Sam and Max (whose original name, “Julian,” is promptly changed because Sam thinks it is “fruity”) as unimpeachably male. By contrast, *The First Part Last* does not make the same attempt to appeal to male readers and even seems to court a female readership. In fact, in an interview for *Booklist*, Johnson reveals that the idea for the novel first came about when her editor reported that a group of sixth-grade girls identified Bobby as their favorite character in *Heaven* and

wanted to learn more about him. Throughout, the novel is wrought with pointed gender reversals, and Bobby himself—gentle, tender, vulnerable, and tearful in almost every chapter—is rendered somewhat androgynously. Perhaps, then, *The First Part Last* imposes greater limits on the degree of identification between the presumed reader and the protagonist and

is consequently more empowered to resist the cultural compulsion to “model” beliefs and behaviors.

Finally, while *The First Part Last* is indeed a “truthful” novel, it is not always a “realistic” novel, at least in the material sense, or in the sense that many adults mean when they use that term in relation to YA literature. And in this way, it represents a significant departure from a mode generally associated with both the teen pregnancy and parenting novel and its progenitor, the much-maligned “problem novel.” *The First Part Last* conspicuously underplays the question of how early parenthood will affect Bobby’s ability to financially support himself and his child or to pursue his dream of becoming an artist. Even in *Heaven*, Johnson’s prequel, we are not privy to the logistics of how, by taking on contract work painting billboards and the like, Bobby manages to pay for Pull-ups and babysitting, much less an apartment and health care. Despite the relatively low cost of living in rural Ohio, this scenario clearly stretches plausibility. By comparison, *Hanging on to Max* is relentless on this point. One of its primary subplots concerns the question of whether Sam will be (or should be) able to attend college or even take the SAT. This becomes one of the primary tensions between Sam and his dad, and the novel’s ending hinges on the assumption that this is an either/or choice for him.

Marc Aronson illuminates the significance of this difference when he yokes together YA literature’s “insistence on ‘realism’” with its “pressure for ‘moral messages’” in identifying the primary reasons why it “splits off from the main art trends of our time” (79) and thus has so much difficulty claiming entry into the realm of the literary. Moreover, he argues, teens value books that feel “real,” but they define “realism” differently than many parents and critics, in terms that are more emotional or psychological than material. This kind of “real” “tells a truth people don’t want to see, because it doesn’t settle, it provokes” (82). It also, perhaps, offers YA writers a way to explore controversial territory without sacrificing art to moral or social imperatives.

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Notes

- ¹ Between 1996 and 1997, spending (federal and state match) more than doubled from \$4 million to \$9 million. When Title V funding began the next year, it increased more than tenfold, and by 2007, it more than doubled again to \$214 million.
- ² Curricula developed for federally-funded programs must either be “responsive to” or “not inconsistent with” the 8-point definition of “abstinence only” established by the government, a definition that includes criteria such as “teaches that sexual activity outside of the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects” and “teaches that bearing children out-of-wedlock is likely to have harmful consequences for the child, the child’s parents, and society.” (“Fact Sheet”)
- ³ The only long-term study of abstinence-only education, commissioned by the Department of Health and Human Services, conducted by Mathematica Policy Research, and published in 2007, found no differences in the sexual behavior of teens participating in the four Title V abstinence-only programs they studied compared to those in the control group (Trenholm *et al.*)
- ⁴ For a different reading of Johnson’s narrative structure, see Lester. He argues that “[t]he novel’s effective alternating now/then organizational pattern reinforces the theme that the present and past are inextricably connected on the basis of choices that we make for ourselves, particularly bad choices made by youngsters who knowingly engage in risky behavior” (429).
- ⁵ The number of adult partners of teenage mothers is very difficult to calculate, as this data is often unreported. The American Academy of Pediatrics, recognizing this difficulty, cites the rate as somewhere between 7% and 67% (Klein); Child Trends reports that, for cases where paternal age was available, 38% of births to adolescent (defined as 18 or under) mothers involved partners at least four years older (“Facts at a Glance”); Michael Males, using California data, claims that just under two-thirds of children to women age 19 and younger are fathered by men age 20 and older.
- ⁶ The persistence of this image could explain why Johnson chooses to represent Nia as the only child of affluent professional parents; in addition to creating an uptown/downtown tension in her relationship with Bobby, Johnson averts reinforcing (and even actively challenges) such assumptions.

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