

A Review of *Youth Cultures: Texts, Images and Identities*

Kimberley Reynolds

Kerry Mallan and Sharyn Pearce (eds) (2003)
Youth Cultures: Texts, Images and Identities
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Youth culture and children's literature have had little to say to each other since teenagers officially came to public recognition in the 1950s. There are obvious reasons for this silence – not least the fact that youth culture is definitionally engaged in plotting a trajectory away from childhood. Additionally, children's literature's long association with education, acculturation and approved behaviour also marks it as a body antithetical to much of what youth culture stands for. Yet academics of children's literature invariably embrace texts for and about adolescence in their spheres of interest. YA novels are included in course syllabi, and some challenging literary and cultural analyses of fiction for teenagers have emerged in recent years, spearheaded by Robyn McCallum's *Ideologies of Identity in Adolescent Fiction* (1999). Indeed, a number of children's literature scholars have done significant work on the formats and narratives adolescents encounter both outside mainstream culture and beyond the pages of conventional print-based texts. However, the key texts in youth culture have tended to be produced by those in cultural studies and the social sciences, who often seem unaware of the place of fiction in youth culture – unless it is popular fiction in the form of comics and magazines¹.

Youth Cultures is a much-needed study of youth culture that is highly alert to children's literature as part of the mix, and which provides energetic, entertaining, wide-ranging and often penetrating insights into the contemporary youth scene, which the editors are at care to point out is not here defined by age alone, but takes into account 'the cultural spaces that youth occupy and that are represented in the texts produced for them, about them, and, sometimes, by them.' (p.x). This allows contributors to take on the closely linked phenomena of precocious children, tweenies, and kiddults as well as popular literature, film and TV, computer games, magazines, popular music and music videos, fashion, journalism, and arts education policy. Together these provide a cultural context for both the images of youth

constructed in texts and assumptions about their readers. The importance of addressing this diverse group of textual forums collectively is highlighted by the American sociologist of youth cultures, Henry Giroux, a notable influence on the volume: 'The literacies of the post-modern age are electronic, aural, and image-based' he says, and the only way to 'aggressively subject dominant power to criticism, analyses and transformation as part of a reconstruction of a democratic society' (cited on p.70) is to become literate in all of these media. *Youth Cultures* demonstrates and promotes precisely this kind of trans-media literacy.

Half of the fourteen contributors are well-known in the field of children's literature studies, though of these only Rod McGillis, Claudia Nelson and Lisa Sainsbury choose to write about children's books. Somewhat curiously, their contributions are clustered towards the end of the volume, though in practice most readers would encounter the kinds of texts they discuss before moving on to the range of films, popular music, magazines and fiction discussed in the remaining chapters. Leaving aside this structural point, one of the strengths of this well-edited collection is its internal coherence. Chapter follows chapter with a felicity that points to strong communication between editors and contributors, and perhaps strategic dialogues between contributors as well.

These are all important attributes of *Youth Cultures*, but what strikes me as worth particular attention is the broadly optimistic tone of the collection, which argues that 'despite the heavy imprints of corporate power on aspects of youth cultures, and popular cultural texts and practices in particular, youth are both resistant to and embracing of these various cultural expressions.' (p.xii). In the run up to the millennium it could be argued that at many levels, youth culture in much of the western world had become politically quiescent, perhaps as a result of corporate capitalism's success in urging young people to lifestyles predicated on consumption rather than confrontation. Significantly, there is much in having young people construct themselves as apolitical shoppers that is highly convenient for governments as well as corporations, an idea David Buckingham raises in his chapter on 'Living in a Young Country? Youthful Creativity and Cultural Policy in the United Kingdom'. Buckingham also reminds us that many of the politicians

who make up the party formerly known as Labour grew up at a time when youth culture embraced politics and protest. They cut their political teeth on student activism, and regularly allude to their rock 'n roll pasts when they need to reassert their youthful and 'right on' credentials (the British PM is not above a bit of public guitar strumming when it serves his purposes). This combination of the commodification of youth and the interventions of adults who, reluctant to give up their youth, use their positions of economic and cultural power to remake youth in their own image, is discussed at some length by Karen Brooks in 'Nothing Sells Like Teen Spirit'.

Brooks acknowledges that there is a complex dynamic between youth and the way it is depicted and experienced in contemporary culture. On the one hand, she says, young people are victims of a kind of cultural cannibalism, devoured not just by adults, but also by themselves as the principal consumers in society. On the other, even images produced on behalf of youth by large corporations—including those that depict youth as essentially hedonistic—'have the power to transform attitudes and present different modes of being by recovering, for young consumers, a meaningful discourse that empowers teens as political subjects with legitimate voices in a global market.' (p.9).

This belief in the power of even discredited mass-media images to empower the young is characteristic of *Youth Cultures*, and offers a corrective to a more jaundiced discourse that the volume acknowledges also circulates around youth. The tendency to dismiss current youth culture seems to emanate from 'baby boomers' who credit themselves with participating in a cultural revolution whose legacy has been profound and enduring (and let's face it, they were exciting times). Perhaps ironically for those of us professionally involved with children's literature, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, when baby boomers were young, they couldn't turn to the extensive body of adolescent fiction now available, so reading teenagers took themselves to writers like Herman Hesse and Carlos Casteneda, and books such as *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, texts which encouraged them to take on board a range of philosophical, political, spiritual ideas. As German critic Winfred Kaminski noted when writing about youth culture as late as the 1980s, it

was in the hands of young people who 'were linguistically competent and, therefore, able to attack adult abuses of language' (1984, p.202). They could, he argued, not only use and deconstruct language to expose what they identified as the hypocrisy of adult society, but they also had the ability and the desire to create alternative, often highly developed and sophisticated forms of speech and art with which to contest and replace them. Contributors to *Youth Cultures* refuse to buy in to the notion that it has all been downhill since then, and that much of what is on offer to young people is vacuous and so neutering. For instance, John Stephens's study of a specific genre, teen films of abjection, concludes that the thoughtful, filmically literate, viewer will acquire insights from these narratives into the processes accompanying maturity; not least 'recognizing the development from abjection to agency as pivotal for the human transition from teen to agential adult' (p.135), with all that this transition implies.

Ultimately this baby boomer was persuaded by the text's upbeat conclusions, sometimes reluctantly, as in the case of Sharyn Pearce's engagingly-argued reading of *American Pie* – a film I had hitherto dismissed – as a 'manual of self-formation' which promulgates an appropriate ethos of masculinity for boys growing up in the twenty-first century by encouraging 'critical self-reflection, moral commitment, and responsibility to others' (p.70). Pearce's chapter follows Clare Bradford's reading of romance and antiromance in popular music, which has a particular interest in the contradictions inherent in pop music/music videos, especially with regard to gender identity and the acquisition of agency. Bradford's analysis of the position of teen queen singers and their positions in a business in which their material is likely to be written, produced, recorded, designed and choreographed by men is penetrating, and refuses to provide easy answers. The complexities of the dynamics she discusses are evident in her recognition that despite their male progenitors, 'Many of the texts produce strong arguments for female autonomy at the same time that they themselves constitute commodities with the global economics of record and media companies.' (p.45).

The shift from Bradford's focus on the pressures on female identity and agency to Pearce's on the formation of new masculinities provides a nice counterpoint, but it is not

representative of the balance in the volume, which undoubtedly gives more attention to the position of girls and young women than to boys and young men. For instance, in addition to Bradford's piece, Mary Celeste Kearney documents the 'increased involvement of female youth as cultural producers over the last decade' (p.18); John Hartley and Catherine Lumby look at the way girls are constructed in fashion and the news media; Kerry Mallan considers female action heroes and female subjectivity; and Gordon Tait's 'The seven things all men love in bed' is a study of the way young women learn to construct feminine identities through their magazine reading. Pearce's is the only chapter to foreground male experience. The lack of contributions considering boys struck me particularly because at the time I was reading *Youth Cultures*, the Australian news media was reporting the end-of-year academic results, which focused their attention on the 'boy problem'. The now familiar and depressing spectre of boys' declining academic performance and its consequences for their futures briefly came to the fore, with headlines such as 'Boys will never catch up [with girls]' (*West Australian*, 16 January 2004) and cartoons including one which featured a father in a maternity ward who, on hearing the words 'Congratulations! It's a boy!!!' responds, 'BLAST!!! I had my heart set on an academic!!!' Overall the place of boys as consumers of, makers of, and constructions within popular culture, and popular culture's influence on the perceived crisis in boys' achievement and prospects, is underplayed in this volume. Similarly, the different experiences of youth on the basis of such things as race/ethnicity, wealth, class, and nationality demand greater attention, especially in the case set out by Karen Brooks in relation to the commodification of youth and youth culture.

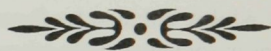
No book can do everything, and it would be wrong to focus on areas not covered by this excellent collection. *Youth Cultures* is a valuable addition both to the study of youth and to the study of what young people read. Each of the contributions is worth reading; all are well written, and many are witty and energizing as well. Its span is impressive, managing to encompass nineteenth-century evangelical fiction (Claudia Nelson's 'The Unheimlich Maneuver', a characteristically thorough and stimulating study of waif fiction past and present) and the work of Terry Pratchett (David Buchbinder). The gross (Rod McGillis),

the playful (Lisa Sainsbury) and the abject (John Stephens) are all given their place. I made *Youth Cultures* a set text on an MA module I teach on radical children's literature, and pleasingly, students are working their way through the complete volume rather than cherry picking chapters that pertain to specific topics. A paperback edition at a more affordable price would be greatly welcomed!



END NOTE

1. A notable exception to this is J. Fornas and G. Bolan (eds) (1995) *Youth Culture in Late Modernity* (London, Sage) which included three chapters on youth and reading by Ulf Boethius.



REFERENCES

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Kimberley Reynolds is Professor of Children's Literature and Director of the National Centre for Research in Children's Literature at the University of Surrey Roehampton, where she co-convenes the MA in Children's Literature. Two recent publications include *Children's Literature and Childhood in Performance* (Pied Piper Press, 2003) and *Representations of Childhood Death*, co-edited with Gillian Avery (Macmillan, 2000).