

## Ruling the Court: Reflections on Midcentury Junior Novel Romances

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I started reading romance novels when I was twelve years old. These books were not my mom’s forbidden paperbacks, which had titles like *Wild Rapture* or *The Golden Barbarian* and which featured cover illustrations of beautiful white women falling out of their dresses. My romance novels had tamer titles, such as *Going on Sixteen*, *Senior Prom*, or *To Tell Your Love*. The illustrated white girls on their covers were never in danger of falling out of their clothing—indeed, more often they modeled an additional cardigan and string of pearls—and they were always posed with a boyish date in the background. It was as if the covers were designed to reassure readers that there was nothing particularly wild or rapturous (or “barbaric”) inside; instead, they advertised glamorous high school romance: high in sugar, low in sex, always with a happy ending.

These romance novels—collectively known in their era as “junior novels” and now known as “malt shop books”—were published from the 1940s through the early 1960s, and were *the* books read by teen girls of the time (aside from *Gone with the Wind*, of course). Writing in 1956, librarian Emma L. Patterson observed their popularity, noting that “the growth of the junior novel appears to be one of the most amazing phenomena of the book world. Twenty-five years ago it had no existence as such. Today no young people’s librarian could stock her shelves without it” (381). By the early 1990s, when I was reading these books as discarded library copies, those original girl readers were pensioners, librarians stocked their YA shelves with very different texts, and the entire junior novel genre had been virtually forgotten.

My adolescent passion for these (frankly outdated) texts may seem a bit odd. There was a world of contemporary teen romances available by the early 1990s, including Bantam Books’ *Sweet Dreams* or Scholastic’s *Wildfire* series, not to mention *Sweet Valley High*. To me, those books were all too new—although they were romances, they smelled too much of current YA, which in that period often assumed the form of the “problem novel,” a novel that attempted to portray realism by focusing on a single social concern. Critic Sheila Egoff snarkily declared that such concerns “sound like chapter titles from a textbook on social pathology: divorce, drugs, disappearing parents, desertion, and death” (196). Admittedly, my

friends and I mined the problem novels for their titillating—yet disappointingly staid—post-Judy-Blume descriptions of sex (the teen pregnancy problem novels were the best for this), but the stories themselves were of no real interest.

The older junior novels, conversely, were beautifully UNrealistic (while also being problematically white, cisgender, and heterosexual—I am ashamed to admit that my teen self did not consider such lack of diversity). They described malt shops and high school hallways in ways that sounded bright and exciting and life changing. Dances, in particular, were rituals from which junior novel protagonists inevitably emerged as popular, well-dressed swans—a far cry from the acne-induced rites of terror that I associated with school dances. I loved the junior novels for their Cinderella-style transformations of awkward teen girls, and for the way their wish-fulfillment narratives equated success with female popularity. While romance was the driving force behind these narratives, the boys themselves were hazy, undefined characters; they were important, yes, but they were secondary to the true object of the protagonists' affection: the popular girls at school—those girls who instinctively knew how to appear feminine, how to charm boys, and how to rule. The queens.

This doubled object of romance (the boy / the girls who open the gates to popularity) appears in the wellspring text of the junior novel genre: Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth Summer* (1942). Ostensibly about Angie Morrow's first love, the novel also describes Angie's emerging popularity by way of that love. The parallel is not subtle; as Angie narrates:

It's funny what a boy can do. One day you're nobody and the next day you're the girl that some fellow goes with and the other fellows look at you harder.... And the girls say hello and want you to walk down to the drugstore to have cokes with them because the boy who likes you might come along and her might have other boys with him. Going with a boy gives you a new identity—especially going with a fellow like Jack Duluth. (51-52)

*Seventeenth Summer* established many of the key tropes of the genre, but to me the novel is too sophisticated, too full of references to Angie's sister's obvious sexual affair to be a typical junior novel (despite Angie's repeated emphases on her own personal innocence and sexual naïveté—emphases the novel subtly undermines). Still, the junior novel genre emerged dramatically in its wake, with some texts—such as Betty Cavanna's *A Girl Can Dream* (1948)—making direct reference to *Seventeenth Summer*, and many others reinscribing the doubled romance object of the boy/ the girls who grant popularity.

As a teen, I hunted discarded copies of these junior novels with an almost religious fervour. Those by Cavanna were my second favorites, because Cavanna put her girls to work in developing skills (flying a plane, becoming an artist, learning how to sail) or attending school in exotic lands such as France or Brazil. She always gave her protagonists a good boy and a happy ending. I was not yet concerned with my personal happily ever after, but I repeatedly read Cavanna's *Passport to Romance* and begged my parents to let me go to boarding school in Switzerland, where I would inevitably become fluent in multiple languages and meet a handsome ski instructor named Gil. Sadly, my parents' teachers' salaries did not lend themselves to such expense, and I attended my local public high school, where I took French classes, but never met a Gil.

Dwelling above all other junior novel authors (at least, for me) was Mary Stolz. Stolz's novels are difficult to characterize; while they share many typical junior novel tropes, they also possess a sophistication (of both writing and content) that separates them from the more typical novels of Cavanna, Anne Emery, Rosamond Du Jardin, Janet Lambert, or any of the other major junior novelists. Stolz may have been writing for teens, but in her finest moments she could compose like Virginia Woolf, allude like T.S. Eliot, and establish complex social codes and hierarchies worthy of Edith Wharton. Her junior novels are, in a word, *literary*, and I state that while recognizing both my obvious bias and the fact that "junior novels" and "literary" are often antithetical.

It is in Stolz's novels that the parallel of the heterosexual romance plot with the protagonist's desperate fixation on the popular girls in school is most obvious. Dody Jenks, protagonist of *Pray Love, Remember* (1954), for example, understands that gaining a boy's interest leads to acceptance with the popular girls: Dody "knew by instinct how to charm boys. And, she had told herself simply, charm *them* and the girls will have to like you, whether or not they do" (40). Similarly, Betty Wilder in *And Love Replied* (1958) emphasizes how approval from the girls leads to the *real* popularity: "Boys might be kings, but it was the girls who ruled the court" (123).

To twelve-year-old me, such passages were startling for their clear articulation of a truth I had failed to recognize. Forty-year-old me has very different thoughts, of course, but I can still remember my teen self's sincere belief that Mary Stolz understood things in a way that no other YA author I had read appeared capable, regardless of the fact that her novels were several decades out of date. Of course, not all junior novels were so obviously or so sharply manipulative. Still, as a genre, they often celebrate heterosexual romance more as a predatory pursuit than as the product of love. Looking back, perhaps that is what most attracted me to them: the junior novels placidly establish a teen girl protagonist's love with a handsome boy as the plot's culmination point, celebrating it with a special dance and perhaps even a school ring, but they also position that heterosexual love as something she achieves en route to greater success and to her happily ever after... with the popular *girls*, and with her own newly-found (and flexed) power.

Dreamy.

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