

Teen-Agers Are for Real

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The trouble is, grownups write about teen-agers from their own memories, or else write about teen-agers from a stand-off, I'm-a-little-scared-to-get-close-they're-hairy view. Teen-agers today want to read about teen-agers today. The world is changing, yet the authors of books for teen-agers are still 15 years behind the times.

In the fiction they write, romance is still the most popular theme, with a-horse-and-the-girl-who-loved-it coming in a close second. Nowhere is the drive-in social jungle mentioned, the behind-the-scenes politicking that goes on in big schools, the cruel social system in which, if you can afford to snub every fourth person you meet, you're popular. In short, where is reality? On the other side of the coin, there are the hair-raising accounts of gangs, motorcycle and otherwise; gangs hold a fatal fascination for adults. Adults who try to write realistically seem to mix up the real with the dirty.

And speaking of realism, nothing makes a teen-ager blush more than a grown-up writer trying to use "gear," "fab," "camp," "groovy" in dialogue. The rule is: If you don't say it yourself, don't say it. It comes out fake. And one of the more redeeming qualities of teen-agers is their loathing for anything fake.

The teen-age years are a bad time. You're idealistic. You can see what you should be. Unfortunately, you see what is, too. You're disillusioned, but only a few take it as a personal attack. These few make the headlines as "hippies."

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Recently a friend of mine had an adult lean over and leer at her: "I hear you teen-agers experiment a lot with sex."

"Oh yes," she said brightly. "Drugs and booze, too." Later she told me, "Always tell people what they want to hear," and shrugged. There was no communication. Sex and drugs and alcohol *are* teen-age problems. They're adult problems, too. Why not some honest talk instead of nudging and sly prying on one side and bitterness and suspicion on the other?

Teen-agers yell, "Listen to me!" and grownups say, "Cut your hair, and we'll talk then." To the adults' "You can't do that," the usual reply is, "Watch me."

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And through all this mess, we still get books on Mary Jane's big date with the football hero. Why not write it realistically? (I said real, not dirty.) Most kids nowadays date for status. There are cliques and classes and you date so you can say you had a date with so-and-so, the president of the student council. You may loathe him, but personal likes and dislikes don't matter anymore. And the higher up the social ladder you go, the cooler it gets. You say what everyone else says. You wear what everyone else wears. And you are so cool, so scared someone is going to think you're not "In," that you don't have time to think about another person. Your date is there to enhance your status. It's a role you're playing for a very cruel audience, and you don't make slips.

That, friends, would make a realistic romance. Because in spite of everything, you may still make slips.

Now let's take the business of cars. Teen-agers spend half their waking hours in cars, and yet they are scarcely mentioned in teen-age literature. If they're mentioned at all, it's the story of how Tommy fixed up his jalopy and won the local drags, or lost them and enriched his character: either ending is satisfactory. Yet Tommy is more likely out dragging his SS397 up and down the local strip, impressing girls and risking his life and other people's lives, and if the cops chase him to give him a ticket he (1) stops because he lives on the very "right" side of town and his parents or friends can fix the ticket; (2) stops because it's the local cop, who probably just wants to say, "Why don't you take it out to the expressway tonight. I'll match you against my cousin's Vet"; or (3) runs.

That would make a realistic story about cars.

All we hear is how teen-agers are rebelling against authority, against lack of authority, against country, against parents. This is partly true. It is more true that all we are doing most of the time is asking, "Why?" and getting as an answer, "Because it's always been done this way." If there were more stopping and explaining *why* it's always been this way, there'd be more understanding. Understanding breeds communication. There we are back at the root of the matter.

Books for teen-agers portray us as a carefree group, when all we hear is "The future is in your hands!" Our parents didn't have to worry through their childhood about whose hands the future was in. And when responsibilities did come, they were ready for them. Now, from 13 on, you wonder about the future. No wonder, then, by 17, some say, "You made the world, you fix it," and retreat into a hazy drug world where there are no responsibilities.

People are always asking for teen-agers' opinions on things, and writing about them. You've heard of people reading the symptoms of a disease, and then suddenly developing the disease? Well, you can't pick up a magazine or a newspaper that doesn't declare that teenagers are rebellious, over-worked, over-pampered, under-privileged, over-privileged, stupid and sex-crazed. No wonder some develop the symptoms.

Adults who let small children watch hours of violence, unfunny comedy, abnormal behavior and suggestive actions on TV, scream their heads off when a book written for children contains a fist fight. But violence too is a part of teen-agers' lives. If it's not on television or in the movies, it's a beating-up at a local drive-in. Things like this are going to take place as long as there are kids. Only when violence is for a sensational effect should it be objected to in books for teen-agers. Such books should not be blood and gore, but not a fairyland of proms and double-dates, either. Sometimes I wonder which extreme does the most harm.

Teen-agers should not be written down to; anyone can tell when his intelligence is being underestimated. Those who are not ready for adult novels can easily have their love of reading killed by the inane junk lining the teen-age shelf in the library. Parents complain of their children's lack of enthusiasm for reading, but if they had to read a "Jeri Doe, Girl Reporter" series, they'd turn off, too.

Teen-agers know a lot today. Not just things out of a textbook, but about living. They know their parents aren't superhuman, they know that justice doesn't always win out, and that sometimes the bad guys win. They know that persons in high places aren't safe from corruption, that some men have their price, and that some people sell out. Writers needn't be afraid that they will shock their teen-age audience. But give them something to hang onto. Show that some people don't sell out, and that everyone can't be bought. Do it realistically. Earn respect by giving it.