

# Reading for Pleasure

*It's only natural for adolescents to feed their curiosity about sex with fiction.*

Essay by Christine Heppermann

Recently I went looking for Judy Blume's novel *Forever* in the Minneapolis Public Library and found that, at almost every branch, all copies were either missing or overdue by at least a year. This is the book my parents confiscated from me when I was in junior high after somehow discovering it contained

what they perceived to be inappropriate sexually explicit material, or, in their word, "trash." A friend of mine wondered if the rash of "missing" library copies might have a similar explanation. Perhaps crusading adults stole them and cut them up like expired credit cards; or held a private book barbecue to insure not only that their children would never be sullied by the story of eighteen-year-old Katherine and Michael's intimate encounters, but that no young Minneapolis library card holder would. Yet I prefer to imagine a different scenario. I imagine adolescent girls throughout the city pulling *Forever* from its hiding place, the way I did when I found where my parents had stashed it (beneath the handkerchiefs in my father's top dresser drawer). I imagine them reading it secretly, dog-eared all the "good parts" so they can return to them whenever they get the inclination and the opportunity. At some point these girls grow beyond the book, so it remains forgotten on the back shelf of the closet or in a shoe box underneath the bed. Years later they might come across it accidentally and, if enough time has

passed for it to lose its status as forbidden fruit, wave it gloatingly in front of their parents. "Hey, Mom, remember when you wouldn't let me read this?"

When adults talk to teenagers about sex, they often stick to topics in the "dangers of" or "protection from" categories—AIDS, pregnancy, contraception. Little is said about the more personal, intimate subject of sexual desire. According to Nathalie Bartle, author of *Venus in Blue Jeans: Why Mothers and Daughters Need to Talk about Sex* (Houghton Mifflin, 1998), much of the silence surrounding this aspect of sexuality stems from adults' reticence to discuss it even among themselves. Bartle interviewed twenty-three mother-daughter pairs for her study of communication about sex and found that even mothers who could speak frankly about reproductive issues seemed "unable to use forthright language for the pleasurable aspects of sex." Another concern, as one mother Bartle spoke with expressed it, is that revealing too much about sexual pleasure to teens will lead them to become sexually active. Thus, the automatic response

to a kid caught reading a sexy book or watching a steamy movie is to take the book away, turn the television off, and hope it doesn't happen again.

But what does this approach really accomplish? When my parents simply whisked *Forever* out of my hands, banishing it without further comment, it told me that my sexual thoughts were somehow bad or unnatural. It also sawed away at an already fragile line of communication between us. How could I possibly feel comfortable talking to my parents about sex if they considered it a subject that should never have entered my brain in the first place?

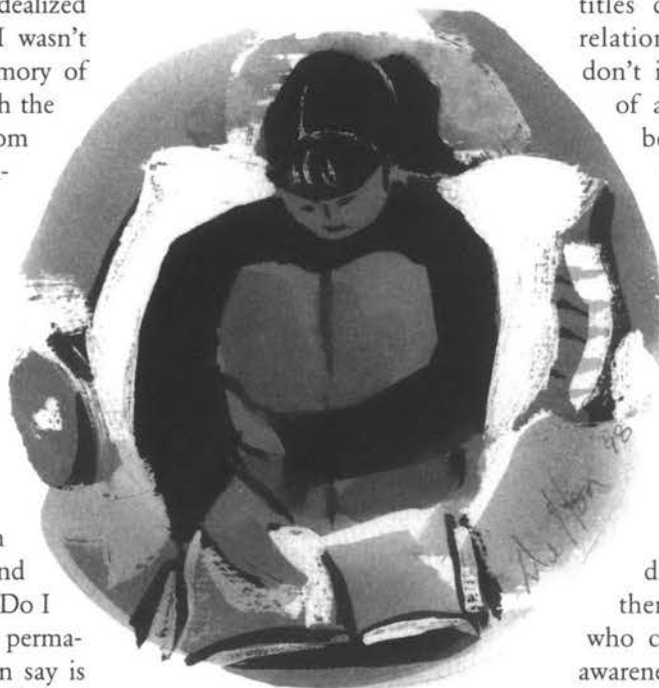
I'm sure other thirteen-year-olds over the years have wished, as I did, that they could get their parents to believe Katherine when she says in *Forever* that "reading and doing are not the same at all." For me, scanning the back covers of the young adult paperbacks at B. Dalton's looking for code words like "John and Darlene were young and in love" was not a search for a how-to manual. Excruciatingly shy and insecure about my looks, I could barely muster the courage to call boys I liked (if only to hang up when they came to the phone), let alone allow them to get anywhere near enough to touch me. But I was interested in sex—extremely interested—and books like *Forever* offered a way for me to feed my curiosity without the physical and

emotional risks of actual contact. They acknowledged my feelings, allowing me to explore seriously and in private questions I couldn't conceive of asking my parents and couldn't bring up to my friends without the standard giggles and embarrassment.

More than a few of the novels I read back then undoubtedly idealized sex or showed me pictures I wasn't ready for. I have a hazy memory of tunneling into the bushes with the neighbor kids to read aloud from a rain-warped paperback without covers. I don't know how or where we acquired this book, but I do know it frequently used words like "digit" and "unit" in a way that had nothing to do with math. An adult romance entitled *A Change of Heart* somehow became part of my personal library. It featured a sickly young woman who had a heart transplant and blossomed into a sex maniac. Do I feel these books harmed me permanently? About the worst I can say is that they introduced me to really bad writing at a young age. Besides, these weren't the books I went back to over and over again, as I did with the teen romances. It seems I developed a kind of built-in monitor to detect reading material that was emotionally too mature—dare I say inappropriate?—for me. The monitor began beeping when I tried to read Judy Blume's *Wifey*, for instance, an adult novel about the sexual fantasies of a bored housewife. The perspective didn't interest me and the descriptions were too graphic for comfort, so I put the book down after the first chapter.

Revisiting *Forever* after all these years, I can't say it's great literature, either. The picture of the unmade bed on the front of the hardcover edition pretty much sums it up. It doesn't

have subtle characterization, a unique plot, or a fully realized setting; it does have enough descriptions of sexual encounters at regularly spaced intervals to keep the average thirteen-year-old turning pages to the end. Perhaps I felt drawn to it in seventh grade partly because of its mundaneness. I did-



n't need to read costume dramas set on tropical islands, fraught with bodice ripping and muscular, raven-haired strangers, to make sex sound exciting. What I wanted most was to peek in at the average relationships of average teens, and *Forever's* blandly suburban Katherine and Michael experienced the awkwardness, thrills, and conflicted emotions I could imagine myself experiencing.

Of course, parents today might worry that *Forever*, written in the mid 1970s, contains outdated attitudes that go beyond fondue parties and embroidered jeans. AIDS naturally does not exist in any character's vocabulary, and Katherine and Michael use condoms just until Katherine can get a prescription for the pill. Yet if we

decide this novel will jeopardize young people's safety, then we might also have to consider doing away with *Lady Chatterly's Lover*, *The Tropic of Cancer*, and anything else published before the early 1990s.

For reasons even more central than the dearth of recent young adult titles dealing with healthy sexual relationships (i.e., relationships that don't involve incest or other forms of abuse), this hardly seems the best solution. I tend to agree with Nathalie Bartle that the potential danger lies not in the books themselves, but in adults' reluctance to provide children with a context for them. "All too often we don't talk," Bartle says in *Venus in Blue Jeans*, "believing that silence or directives without dialogue are protective strategies. But we are not protecting our children from sex; we are protecting them from context." Teenagers who come to these books with an awareness of the responsibilities and risks sexual activity entails, who have not just a vague idea but a clearly articulated view of their family's moral attitudes, can enjoy the stories while realizing that they might do certain things differently. It is impossible and in most cases counterproductive to try to shield kids from all the books, movies, television shows, commercials, magazines, billboards, and comic strips containing sexual references. It is completely within our grasp, as uncomfortable as the task might seem, to equip them with the information they need to critique the media's depiction of sex intelligently. As for the overdue fines at the library, they can pay those by themselves. ~

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