For this session we’ve been asked to think about what teenage fiction is for, a question that is very closely allied to the concept of who it’s for. What do we mean when we refer to teenagers or adolescents, and who is doing the defining?

History and literature tell us that at one level adult ideas about teenagers have remained constant for a very long period of time. For example, Shakespeare’s Henry V begins with the Bishops of Canterbury and Ely discussing the remarkable change that has come over Prince Hal since the death of his father. In one of the few descriptions Shakespeare has left us of adolescence, the two men compare their new paragon of a King with the teenager he was when, as Canterbury notes,

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...his addiction was to courses vain;
His companions unlettr’d, rude, and shallow;
His hours fill’d up with riots, banquets, sports;
And never noted in him any study,
Any retirement, any sequestration
From open haunts and popularity.'
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(I.i. 54-59)

This description probably sums up how many adults today think about the teenagers they see around them, so it’s worth remembering Ely’s explanation that ‘under the veil of wildness’, Hal has been metamorphosing so that he is ready to take up the responsibilities that come with maturity when the time is right.

It is the relationship between the books now created for adolescents and the kind of self-fashioning Hal undergoes that I want to raise this morning.

One the one hand, I’m concerned that some of the most highly regarded examples of teenage fiction have an idea about teenagers that is not very different from the Bishop of Canterbury’s – that teenagers hang around doing little other than getting into trouble. A different way of thinking about adolescent behaviour was put forward more than fifty years ago by Erik Eriksson, one of the most influential theorists of adolescence in the twentieth century. Eriksson viewed the teenage years as a time of heroic struggle and alienation; a time when young people fought their inner emotions and the adult world in order to emerge as mature and purposeful adults themselves. In other words, like prince Hal, they were very deliberately metamorphosing.

Eriksson’s influence persists to this day, and continues to affect the way teenagers are presented in the books written for them. If you look at any reference work that defines teenage literature, you will see it is said to be characterised by such things as:

- characters caught up in the turbulent and complex emotions associated with the teenage years;
- being addressed to readers presumed to be in this state of turmoil; and
• calling attention to a division between an ‘authentic’ inner self and a ‘false’
  public self.

One more attribute is usually ascribed to this kind of writing as well: it is usually
assumed that its central characters and readers are critical of the world created by
adults and struggle to resist and change it. In Eriksson’s mind, this is central to the
activity of metamorphosis.

While the tendency to be critical of the adult world can be found in much early
teenage fiction, I am concerned that it has started to disappear or be suppressed. As
a result, a significant proportion (I am certainly not saying all) of contemporary texts
for teenagers collude with other forces at work in western society to depoliticise and
emasculate many aspects of youth culture.

Arguably youth culture generally was never more vibrant than in the late 1960s and
70s. Ironically for those of us professionally involved with children’s literature, one
reason for this seems to be that many young people were reading outside juvenile
literature, which had yet to develop the rich body of novels to which teenagers can
now turn. Their reading, from Herman Hesse’s Siddhartha and the works of Carlos
Casteneda to Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, encouraged teenagers to
take on board philosophical, political, spiritual and literary works in ways that not only
taught them to use and deconstruct language to expose what, in typically adolescent
mode they identified as the hypocrisy of adult society, but also encouraged them to
create alternative, often highly developed and sophisticated forms of speech and art
with which to contest and replace them.

The growth in young adult fiction has coincided with changes in how young people in
developed countries see themselves in cultures now firmly under the influence of
corporate capitalism and globalisation. These two great forces are reflected in
publishing for the teenage market. Because of the constraints of time I have to make
a sweeping generalisation, but I’ll stick my neck out and say that one way you can
see this influence is in the way that publishers veer between the two constructions of
teenagers I have identified (Canterbury vs Eriksson): either teens are dismissed as
trivial entities given over to hedonism, or they are treated as damaged products of a
damaging society. The result is a worrying number of books that, perhaps
inadvertently, are enervating and narcissistic, promoting passivity in rather than
empowering their implied readers, who are more vigorously encouraged to shop for
identities than to create their own.

This matters because just as generations have been told that ‘you are what you eat’
so it could equally be said that, ‘you are what you read’. The stories we have inside
us shape how we understand and think about the world. Narrative is the stuff of
metamorphosis.

But, while I harbour some deeply felt anxieties about some aspects of teenage fiction
– including some of the most highly regarded books on the young adult shelves – the
situation is not all gloomy. There are many fine and innovative novels for this implied
readership, and many encouraging trends in recent publishing for teenagers. Often
these reflect a view of teenagers/adolescents that has moved on from Erik Eriksson
and is providing new material for the process of self-fashioning.

I only have time for one example, but it makes my point well. Films, media reports,
research findings and a whole range of other material tells us that incidences of self-
harming among young people are increasing; even that a culture is developing in
which self-harming is regarded as a useful/attractive/recognisable or even as a
fashionable way of dealing with anxiety and unhappiness. You might call this a kind of negative metamorphosis.

At this stage we have no explanation for why such behaviour is currently increasing or how to address it. In the absence of more obviously effective ways of addressing the problem, it seems important to look at the role of narrative – at the stories young people imbibe and generate.

My reading of a number of recently published texts that deal with these issues is that they stand apart from the ‘literature of despair’ that can lead to the kind of apathy I’ve described. Fiction’s ability to establish empathy and provide insights into the motivations behind and behaviour of self-harmers coupled with their depiction of such behaviour as damaging and temporary, has the potential to discourage readers from wanting to experiment with self-harming or to see it as any kind of solution. At the same time, these books help to dismantle the long-standing stigma associated with self-harming, encouraging those who are – or who have friends who are – self-harming to talk about it and seek help.

Self-harming is just one example of many that could be brought forward to show the value of books for teenagers, and the important work being done by writers and publishers in this area. It balances my concern about texts that can demotivate readers; together I think they show how much we need to think about the whole dynamic between teenagers and texts.

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