Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature

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Analysis of Young Adult literature spanning 1975–1999 reveals an imbedded link between body image, weight, and sexuality: thinner young women are portrayed as powerful and in control, while larger women are depicted as sexually passive and irresponsible. Young Adult fiction, often maligned or ignored by literary critics, is an important body of work that should be studied by women’s studies scholars, literary critics, and educators.

Keywords: body image / female sexuality / fiction / weight / Young Adult literature

While many fictional texts marketed for young adults address sexuality, few acknowledge the intersection of sexuality and body image. In fact, many Young Adult narratives that are liberating in terms of sexuality are regressive in terms of body image. The texts that I examine in this article reflect the changing social mores of the 1970s–1990s, years in which women questioned cultural standards of beauty along with repressive sexual stereotypes. These fictions reflect an increasing awareness of body image issues. While in early texts, like Judy Blume’s Forever (1975), weight issues are deeply imbedded and barely acknowledged, in later texts, body image becomes an acknowledged and often crucial aspect of the characters’ development.

A touchstone for many contemporary debates on teenage sexuality, Young Adult fictions frequently depict female sexuality as a threatening force. For young females in a patriarchal society, sexuality (particularly sexual desire) is often represented by educators, parents, and authors as a primitive, taboo drive that must be regulated. As documented by Peggy Orenstein in Schoolgirls (1994) and in Joan Jacobs Brumberg’s The Body Project (1997), coming to terms with sexuality “in a society that treats women’s bodies in a sexually brutal and commercially rapacious way” is a prevalent and pervasive struggle for young women (Brumberg 1997, 210). This struggle may be one of the reasons so many girls turn to Young Adult fiction, a genre that provides multitudinous representations of young girls as sexual beings. More subtly, these texts reveal that young female bodies are important sites of cultural contestation.

Because Young Adult fiction reflects social anxiety about female bodies, texts that are popular among young adults are often censored or challenged by librarians, teachers, and parents. Many of the books considered
controversial contain frank and graphic portrayals of sexuality, and some
of the works most often challenged continue to be vastly popular. While
Judy Blume has now attained renowned critical status, in the early years
of her career she was frequently criticized and vilified for her controversial
and explicit texts. Indeed, whether a Young Adult text is labeled critically
acclaimed or “popular” often depends upon who is reading the book and
whether it contains controversial subject matter. In From Romance to
Realism: Fifty Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature,
Michael Cart argues that many texts “receiving scorn and disapproval
from adult reviewers” are often the most popular with young adult read-
ers (1996, 67). For example, David Rees labels Forever “amazingly trivial”
and “second rate,” and dismisses the novel as being without literary merit
John Gough explains that Forever remains a very popular text, in part
because teens can “find themselves truthfully presented, undistorted, not
in extremis—just ordinary life and its awful emotions” (35). Much like
Forever, each of the texts I examine in this article can be considered a
“popular,” i.e., widely read Young Adult fiction, though many were writ-
ten by award-winning, critically acclaimed authors. Young Adult fiction
reflects girls’ lives back to them, and this literature contains many rep-
resentations of young women that reinforce negative body-image stereo-
types. In this article, I examine several of these portrayals, especially
ones that are linked to sexuality, to demonstrate how they valorize the
contemporary ultra-thin standard of beauty.

Subtitled “A moving story of the end of innocence,” Judy Blume’s For-
ever focuses on the protagonist’s loss of her virginity and her subsequent
discovery of sexual power and pleasure. Yet imbedded in this otherwise
empowering text is an underlying theme of obsession with weight and
body image. Similarly, two texts by Norma Klein, It’s OK If You Don’t
Love Me (1977) and Breaking Up (1980), depict sexuality openly, featur-
ing female characters who use birth control, achieve orgasm, and ask for
what they want from their partners. However, these protagonists derive
their power from their looks: they are in control, powerful, responsible,
and ultra thin. Susan Terris’s 1987 novel, Nell’s Quilt, portrays a young
woman who gains control of her life only after she starves herself into
near anorexia, while Judith Ortiz Cofer’s 1995 An Island Like You, por-
trays young girls struggling with ethnicity as they grow into their bodies
and awareness of their sexuality. Life in the Fat Lane (1998) by Cherie
Bennett graphically shows one beauty queen’s battle with her weight and
her sense of self as a sexual being. In Connie Porter’s 1999 Imani All
Mine, protagonist Tasha has a baby at age fifteen, combats poverty, and
struggles to accept herself even though the images of thin girls she sees
in Seventeen make her feel huge. In Name Me Nobody (1999) by Lois-Ann
Yamanaka, protagonist Emi-Lou diets secretly and tries to come to terms
with her sexuality and her body image.
Although these narratives portray an ethnically diverse group of young girls and women, they also reveal the difficulty many Young Adult fiction authors have resisting the contemporary hyper-thin European ideal of beauty. In a revealing intersection of sexuality and body image, heavy characters are all represented as sexually promiscuous, passive, and powerless, while thin characters appear responsible and powerful. Promiscuous sexual activity, criticized and vilified, is linked to a character's weight. These associations of weight with sexuality serve a dual purpose in Young Adult texts; they reinforce negative ideas about body image and signal the reader to read a fat character as sexually suspect.

In these Young Adult texts, the authors rarely describe male bodies, but female bodies are continually looked at in what becomes a powerful enactment of the male gaze. In many Young Adult texts, readers are encouraged, even directed, to examine characters from the perspective of a judgmental voyeur. Characters (and readers) internalize the gaze that reinforces female objectification, and these social constructions of young women's bodies become accepted norms, mirroring "intimate and minute elements of the construction of space, time, desire, [and] embodiment," as Susan Bordo explains in Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture and the Body (1993, 27). Bordo argues that oppression arises not from "physical restraint and coercion . . . but through individual self-surveillance and self-correction to norms" (27). Young Adult fiction encourages young women's self-surveillance of their bodies.

These authors may still be struggling with the idea that portraying sexuality is acceptable only when the characters fit the stereotype of a sexually desirable young woman. Weight appears to function in the same way that white often serves as a default for race; that is, when the race of a character is not specifically delineated, white is assumed. In these Young Adult literature texts, an unacknowledged weightism functions similarly: unless the weight of a character is specifically mentioned, the reader will most likely assume the character is thin. Only if the character is considered abnormal, i.e., fat or chubby, is her weight mentioned at all. Women and girls who are heavy are always identified as such. Even in diverse and otherwise progressive texts, the fat person is marked as Other.

In trying to attain the impossibly thin standard of beauty promoted by media and industry, many young women and even children see themselves as a fat Other. In a 1986 study of almost five hundred schoolgirls, 81% of ten-year-olds reported that they had dieted at least once (Mellin, Scully, and Irwin 1986). A survey conducted by Psychology Today magazine found that 56% of the female respondents thought they were too fat (Garner 1997). Eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia are widely recognized as major health problems, yet the fact that upwards of 90% of those who have eating disorders are women is not. Furthermore, a 1990 American Association of University Women study showed that negative body image increases the risk of suicide for girls, but not boys.
Contrary to popular belief, young women affected by social pressure to be thin are not just white girls, but increasingly include young women from other ethnic groups. Many ethnicities and cultures such as African American and Latino/Latina are assumed to accept and even desire bigger women. These perceptions are stereotypical according to recent studies that have shown that the Western standard is becoming the norm.\textsuperscript{5} In a survey conducted by \textit{Essence} magazine in 1994, the results from over 2000 respondents indicate that African American women have the same risk for eating disorders as their white counterparts (Villarosa). In their 1996 study of 2,379 nine- and ten-year-old girls, approximately half white and half black, Ruth Striegel-Moore and Linda Smolak found that 40\% reported that they were trying to lose weight. Clearly, body image issues damage women of all ages, races, and social classes.

In Blume's \textit{Forever} (1975), the differences between thin and heavy characters are painfully clear. One of Katherine's friends, Sybil, has low self-esteem because she is fat. The novel begins with a reference to Sybil's weight and sexuality, which presents a warning to readers:

Sybil Davison has a genius I.Q. and has been laid by at least six different guys. She told me herself, the last time she was visiting her cousin, Erica, who is my good friend. Erica says this is because of Sybil's fat problem and her need to feel loved—the getting laid part, that is. (9)

Here, Sybil's promiscuity is directly linked to her weight. In \textit{Forever}, Blume portrays Sybil as flawed because she is fat. A lack of control over her weight parallels a lack of sexual control; her voracious appetite for food translates into an appetite for sex. Ironically, while Sybil is shown to be promiscuous in contrast to Katherine's monogamy, Sybil's sexual activity is described in terms of her passivity, as in Sybil "has been laid" [9]. Katherine, who often initiates her sexual encounters and also gets "on top" [186] to ensure her orgasm, comes across as in control and in charge of both her body and her sexual life. We are told that Katherine is five-foot-six and weighs 109 pounds [20], a weight considered dangerously underweight or starving according to the Body Mass Index (BMI), the current standard for determining healthy weight. Nonetheless, Katherine doesn't seem to worry about her weight, but overhears her father reminding her mother [who also weighs 109 and is five-six] "if she doesn't [you don't] start to work out at the gym soon, she'll [you'll] wind up with flabby thighs" [29]. Katherine views this dialogue as loving husband-wife joshing, but underlying the comment is a thinly veiled threat for readers as well as for Katherine's mother: attractiveness is based upon non-flabby thighs. This scene motivates Katherine to internalize social ideas about standards of beauty; even at her already ultra-thin size, Katherine enacts self-assessment.

Thus, confident, assertive, and responsible, thin characters in Young Adult fiction do more than simply display themselves as models of appro-
appropriate body type; they also perform body assessments on themselves. In Norma Klein's novel, *Breaking Up* (1980), sixteen-year-old Alison Rose contemplates her image in the mirror while trying on her new bathing suit:

> Maybe this is a vain thing to tell about, but once in gym the teacher was weighing us and seeing how tall we were and when she came to me she said "You have a perfectly proportioned body. Do you exercise a lot?" I felt awful because I never exercise at all! But I said I played tennis a little. "Well, whatever you're doing, it's the right thing," she said. "Keep up the good work." [58]

Alison embodies the thin ideal, and she doesn't even have to exercise to attain her "perfectly proportioned body." Moreover, her character typifies the sexual assertiveness that comes with a sanctioned body type. She ends her unsatisfying relationship with a boyfriend she's outgrown in order to pursue her best friend's older brother, initiating the new relationship by telling Ethan, "The thing is... I might have a crush on you" [75]. Confident and sexually assertive, Alison replicates the cultural ideal of ultra thinness as a necessary component to self-confidence.

In another example of sexual assertion, Norma Klein's *It's OK If You Don't Love Me* (1977) depicts protagonist Jody deflowering her new boyfriend. Jody, who at five-foot-five inches and 115 pounds is almost as thin as Katherine in *Forever*, embodies sexual responsibility and control. She is "on the pill," enjoys sex, and only has sex with her boyfriend. During their first sexual intercourse, he orgasms so quickly that Jody complains, "I didn't even have time to try and come myself" [132]. Jody, like Katherine in *Forever*, takes responsibility for her own sexual pleasure. Unlike their non-skinny counterparts who embody passivity, Katherine, Jody, and Alison project sexual confidence and self-assurance.

Twenty years later, in Connie Porter's *Imani All Mine* (1999), body image seconds a more overt aspect of a character's development. Tasha's lack of self-confidence is directly correlated to her size. Turning the judgmental gaze on herself, Tasha fantasizes while reading *Seventeen* magazine:

> There was this white girl in a plaid dress that was red, green and black that look like a tablecloth. . . . I imagined me at one of them parties in a velvet dress and fifty pounds skinnier with some braids Eboni put in. They tight and hurting my head, but I ain't care because they looked good. [60]

Here Tasha has already accepted the idea that even if braids hurt her head, pain is less important than looking good. She endures the pain of self-mutilation, forcing her feet into the too small skates at the skating rink in order to conceal her actual shoe size. Moreover, Tasha provides a startling example of a passive subject during consensual sexual explorations with her boyfriend, Peanut. When she has her first orgasm (ever) with Peanut, he tells her, "Tonight, I made you a woman" [147]. Tasha
doesn’t reply, but looks at Peanut and sees herself reflected in his eyes. In contrast to Katherine’s efforts to achieve orgasm, Tasha has little agency in achieving sexual pleasure.

Young Adult literature tends to valorize monogamy over multiple sexual partners, reinforcing social constraints on sexual freedom. In Forever, Katherine’s appetite for sex is moderate and regulated; she only has sex with one person, and an entire chapter is devoted to her trip to Planned Parenthood to obtain birth control. Sybil, however, is unable to control her body’s size or her sexual experiences. Consequently, Sybil is punished for her sexual activities (and her weight) with pregnancy. In Presenting Judy Blume, Blume herself reinforces the perception of Sybil as irresponsible by maintaining “a girl like Sybil might have a genius IQ but she has no common sense” (Weidt 1989, 37). While Sybil’s sexual activity is perceived as reckless and dangerous, Katherine’s sexual activity, notably with one male who is her boyfriend, is shown to be perfectly acceptable and even desirable for a young girl.

Katherine’s sexual exploration and pleasure at her first and subsequent orgasms are part of what have made Forever a controversial book. While parents and others have complained about the book’s sexual content, no critic has acknowledged its regressive portrayals of body image. In Disturbing the Universe, Roberta Seelinger Trites, a well-known critic of Young Adult and Children’s fiction, critiques Forever as a work that reinforces cultural sexual standards that “at once liberate and repress sexuality.” She also views Forever as a kind of “self-help” manual, albeit one that sends “conflicting messages” to teenagers [2000, 88]. Trites acknowledges that Forever shows Katherine’s desire for sex as natural, but she does not comment on the significance of Katherine’s weight for her sexuality. In fact, Trites makes no comment on Sybil’s weight or body image at all.6 She aptly describes Katherine as the “apotheosis of control” and criticizes Sybil for “callowness,” but nowhere does she link Katherine’s control or Sybil’s lack of control to body image or weight [90]. Trites’s observations about the power differential between Katherine and Sybil are astute, but she leaves out a key reason for the disparity.

When young women read Forever, one of the most reprinted texts in Young Adult fiction, they see that sexual activity can be fulfilling, pleasurable, and safe.7 But they are also shown that in order to experience positive sexual activity, they must conform to an impossible standard of beauty or they will end up like Sybil: lonely, promiscuous, desperate, and pregnant. Sybil may be smart (she is accepted into several Ivy-League universities) but she is still fat, unhappy, and out of control. Her attendance at a prestigious university hinges on figuratively erasing evidence of her promiscuity by giving up her baby for adoption. Though Forever’s portrayal of sexuality subverts gender bias, Blume reinforces negative messages about body image for young women.
Two decades later, in a society where ultra thin is still the ideal, young women whose bodies develop early or who are simply more endowed are automatically viewed as sexual. Judith Ortiz Cofer reveals some of the dilemmas that come with cultural expectations about body size in her book of short stories, *An Island Like You* (1995). In "Beauty Lessons" fourteen-year-old Sandra, who happens to be thin and flat-chested, describes the well-endowed Jennifer with derision, but she notes that Jennifer has "the look that boys like" (42). In turn, Jennifer taunts her as Sandra goes up to the board to do a math problem:

[S]omeone pushes Jennifer's button, the one that makes her talk in one-syllable words, and she calls out, “Come on Sandi baby, show off your brains. What size are they? I think they’re triple A cup, myself. Hee, hee, hee.” (44)

Sandra is teased for being flat-chested, while Jennifer is portrayed as the dumb bimbo with big breasts. The female body draws criticism from girls as well as boys. And just as Sandra and readers view Jennifer's body as inappropriately sexual, Leora Tanenbaum in her book, *Slut! Growing up Female with a Bad Reputation*, observes:

When everyone else in the class is wearing training bras, the girl with breasts becomes an object of sexual scrutiny. . . . A girl with visible breasts becomes sexualized because she possesses a constant physical reminder of her sexual potential. (2000, 8)

Awareness of her sexualized body occurs for the narrator of Susan Terris's *Nell's Quilt*, when Nell feels herself being looked at by a lecherous neighbor and in that instant realizes her large breasts mark her as a sexual object:

Tobias lowered his eyes and sniffed as I took hold of the second heavy bucket. The moment its weight was in my hands, he lurched, tipping the yoke against my breasts. Startled, I staggered backward, alarmed to find his eyes examining my body. (1987, 25)

During this encounter, Nell realizes her voluptuous body attracts male attention. Soon, she begins to starve herself.

Using starvation to suspend the onset of sexual maturity complicates the meaning of being thin. For many young women controlling food intake provides a sense of power, but that sense of power is false, since deliberately reducing one's body size usually diminishes physical strength. In *Nell's Quilt*, Nell starves herself in order to deter her upcoming arranged marriage to a man she barely knows. In this historical novel, set in 1899 rural America, readers are drawn into Nell's struggle for autonomy, self-definition, and personal choice. But Terris presents Nell's decision to stop eating as a positive act of self-control and self-definition. While readers may find Nell's struggle for self-preservation "enthralling,"
the author's depiction of strength as coming from her newly acquired thinness is appalling. Readers never know Nell's weight before or after her transformation, but before she starves herself she is described as outweighing her male friend of the same height by “ten pounds or more” [14]. At one point a young girl calls her “fat” [19]. But as Nell stops eating, the leanness of her body becomes the focus of her gaze:

When I passed the mirror a second time, what I saw was altogether pleasing. I saw someone I liked. It was Nell Edmonds. She was lean and smooth. Her belly was flat. A cap of sleek hair clung to her head. But she didn't look like a boy, more like a young girl—a strong and wiry one whose eyes glinted with a strange yellow fire and whose fingers were long and thin and ringless. [91]

Again, it is the thin and sleek figure that allows young women to attain a sense of power and control of their own destinies. While the idea of the desirable female form may be inverted in Nell's Quilt because Nell's suitor prefers her bigger body, the overall lesson is familiar. Female power, sexual and otherwise, is connected to a thin, lean body.

Cultural differences in standards of beauty are amplified in Lois-Ann Yamanaka's Name Me Nobody [1999]. In this novel, weightism and lookism appear in the protagonist, her family, and her peers. As with Porter's Tasha in Imani All Mine, Emi-Lou's body and who has the power to control it are the focus of this novel. Alternately called “Fat Albert” or “Emi-fat” by classmates, ninth-grader Emi-Lou sees all of the slights and losses in her life as an expected result of her perceived unattractiveness. Emi-Lou believes she's losing her lesbian best friend Von because Von has taken a lover. Her struggle over relationships with boys and her friendship with Von are viewed through the lens of body image. At a dance, Emi-Lou sees a boy she likes and tells herself:

The skinny part of me wants to like Sterling. The fat part of me inside keeps reminding me: Who you kidding, chubs? He doesn't like you, fatso. He's only your friend, dork. You're making a fool of yourself, Fat Albert. It's all in your mind, white whale. [102]

Here Emi-Lou internalizes the brutal and cruel voices she hears almost every day. She takes on the role of social monitor, reminding herself of her status as a fat, unattractive Other. Everyone in Emi's life has something to say about her weight, and Yamanaka shows that a young girl's body is seen as a defining characteristic. Even when Emi-Lou finally accepts that the boy she likes, Sterling, might actually care for her. She never feels self-acceptance; her acceptability as a female is shown to be dependent on male perception and validation. Again and again, lookism asserts authority in determining the worth of female bodies.

The idea that a female body has to be thin, lean, and non-voluptuous in order to attain status and power also appears in Cherie Bennett's Life
in the Fat Lane (1998). A white Southern belle and multiple beauty pageant winner, Lara unexpectedly gains 100 pounds when she develops a mysterious metabolic disorder. Because of her physical change, Lara must rethink her entire way of seeing herself, her life, and other people. A unique portrayal of a girl’s battle with her weight, the novel is structured to correspond with Lara’s weight gain: in chapter 128 she weighs 128, in chapter 145 she weighs 145, and so on up to her top weight of 218. Enumerating the chapters exposes and reinforces the female obsession with weight and numbers. These chapter headings also draw the reader into the obsession, forcing us to turn each page with dread. “How fat will she get?” we worry. With each pound she gains, Lara becomes less a person and more a sideshow freak.

At the end of the novel, Lara begins to lose weight as inexplicably as she had gained it. Though Lara had come to terms with her increased weight, Bennett capitulates to the regressive stereotypes that she previously skewers by having her heroine lose weight. Readers may begin to feel manipulated; we triumph with Lara as she begins to accept herself and her body, but then the weight starts to disappear. We worry—will Lara’s newfound self-acceptance be lost? Is it really better to be thin after all? The book’s answer is yes; thin is desirable.

Like Forever, Life in the Fat Lane portrays a daughter inheriting her mother’s unhealthy body image. Lara and her mother both exercise every day and are obsessed with dieting, food, and body image. Lara’s mother smokes cigarettes to avoid eating, and worries constantly about maintaining her status as a former beauty queen. In Forever, Katherine learns by watching her mother and listening to her father; in Life in the Fat Lane, Lara is directly trained by her mother and her father to be totally consumed by her appearance. In Forever, even though the parents are presented as enlightened, progressive, and permissive, Katherine’s father wants to ensure his wife won’t get fat thighs. However, Lara’s father, despite her mother’s attempts to retain her youthful looks, has an affair with a younger woman. In many ways Lara’s mother is portrayed as silly, obsessive, and vain. She can be read as an example of what can happen when women rely only upon looks for self-esteem. Thus, even though life in the “fat lane” ultimately capitulates to regressive stereotypes, body image problems are exposed.

What has changed since the publication of Forever in 1975 and Breaking Up in 1980 is that in more recent Young Adult fictions weight issues are no longer imbedded and unacknowledged. In the older texts, weight is submerged in character descriptions, but not addressed as being a “problem.” But in texts like Imani All Mine and Name Me Nobody, weight issues are examined and commented upon by the characters and the narrators. In these more recent texts, body image and weight issues are clearly depicted, even appearing as aspects of conflict within the plot. These authors por-
tray characters that literally embody the struggles of young women who must try to conform in a society that condemns them for not being thin. Porter's and Yamanaka's works reveal that powerful cultural pressure still exists for young women to uphold an unrealistic standard of beauty.

Young Adult fictions provide compelling examples of how female bodies continue to be a site of cultural contestation. Critics, teachers, and readers should not disregard these deeply imbedded ideas about the connection between female sexuality and body image. Just as magazines, television, and films perpetuate and reinforce an idealized standard of beauty, popular Young Adult literature of the last twenty-five years has often perpetuated an unrealistic beauty ideal. Moreover, Young Adult literature should be taught in women's studies and feminist theory courses as well as in courses that focus on adolescent and children's literature to illustrate the participation of these texts in the construction of female sexuality and body image.

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Notes

1. In this article, liberating will refer to portrayals of female sexuality that give primacy to female sexual pleasure and gratification and that show female characters who can initiate and engage in sexual activity outside of marriage without being considered sluts. Regressive means portrayals that uphold a standard of beauty that is impossible for most females to achieve. In this context, regressive means any attitude about the female body that takes for granted that thin is the only option, and therefore, any other body size is unacceptable.

2. In her book The Body Project, Joan Jacobs Brumberg examines how social and cultural focus on the female body impacts the lives of young women and girls (1997).

3. Challenging a text is a process usually initiated by parents, parent groups, civic associations, and even librarians. The challenge involves questioning
the appropriateness of a text, usually because of perceived objectionable content. Challenged books are often removed from school library shelves, or only checked out to students who have explicit parental permission. Judy Blume is frequently cited as the most often challenged Young Adult author.

4. The male gaze, as described by Laura Mulvey in her 1989 article “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” is based on psychoanalytic theory and espouses the idea that in film, males are the ones doing the looking and females are primarily the sexual objects of the male gaze. In this article, I use the term gaze to indicate the idea of objectifying female characters’ bodies as sexual objects under scrutiny, whether the looker is male or female.

5. Ruth Striegel-Moore and Linda Smolak’s 1996 chapter in Developmental Psychopathology of Eating Disorders shows that young black girls’ dissatisfaction with their body image increases with age at almost the same rate as Caucasian girls. However, other studies show that black girls report less dissatisfaction with body image than do Caucasians.

6. Surprisingly, issues of body image in Young Adult fiction have received almost no critical attention. There is no book-length critical text that specifically focuses on body image in the Young Adult genre and very few articles address the issue more than cursorily. In the sixth edition of Literature for Today’s Young Adults, a sourcebook for teachers and librarians, body image is mentioned only briefly in a section entitled “Body and Self” (Nilsen and Donelson 2001). The authors note that “It is almost obligatory in realistic fiction for young protagonists to express dissatisfaction with their appearance” (135), and then go on to mention books which address the development of secondary sex characteristics. Issues of weight are not addressed. Even veteran Young Adult critic Michael Cart neglects body image in his critical history From Romance to Realism: 50 Years of Growth and Change in Young Adult Literature (1996). Cart addresses other important issues such as sex, abortion, sexual orientation, and violence, but body image issues are not analyzed; he does not even acknowledge they exist. One text that does acknowledge body image as an important aspect of the lives of young women is Brenda Daly’s 1989 article, which analyzes humor in the Young Adult romance novel, “Laughing with, or Laughing at the Young Adult Romance.” Daly argues that the general lack of humor in these fictions is connected to a lack of appetite among young female protagonists: “heroines must pretend to have exceedingly small appetites, whether for food or sex” (50).

7. Forever has been in print continually since its original publication in 1975 and has been published in eight languages.
References


