

Brittany P. Burchett. What Makes a Book “Dirty”? Defining “Sexually Explicit” Content in Books Banned for Teens. A Master’s Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. November, 2017. 86 pages. Advisor: Sandra Hughes-Hassell.

According to data collected by the American Library Association, the #1 reported reason a book is banned or challenged is for “sexually explicit” content. The majority of these books were challenged due to concerns about teenager readers. The ALA provides no definition on this term which could guide librarians in selecting content and responding to these challenges. The goal of this paper was to create a definition of the “sexually explicit” challenge. This was done through a qualitative content analysis of the sexual content in fifteen books that received this complaint between the years of 2015 and 2015. A single definition could not be created from the varied results. However, eleven overarching themes relating to sexual content emerged. These themes provide guidance as to what librarians can expect to find in a book that receives this challenge.

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Young Adults’ Libraries – Collection Development

“WHAT MAKES A BOOK “DIRTY”? : DEFINING “SEXUALLY EXPLICIT”  
CONTENT IN BOOKS BANNED FOR TEENS

by  
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## **Introduction**

The practice of book banning in America today has much less support than it has had historically. In a Harris poll taken in 2011, 56% of Americans believe no book should be banned; (“Survey Shows” 129). The ALA official policy states that libraries should challenge censorship and not remove books “based on partisan or doctrinal disapproval” (“Library Bill of Rights”).

The issue becomes more complicated, however, when looking at books for young people. 45% of people surveyed said that books with references to sex should not be in school libraries; 48% said the same about books with violence, and 62% about books with explicit language (“Survey Shows” 129). Even books that were not written for young audiences face this threat. At high schools in particular, works by writers such as JD Salinger, Toni Morrison, and Alice Walker, none of whom wrote for teens, have been challenged in school libraries.

Overall, thousands of books receive “challenges” to their presence in libraries from parents, teacher, and other community members. From 2000-2009, over five thousand books received challenges. 85% of book challenges are believed to go unreported (“Top Ten Most Frequently Challenged Books”). The American Library Association does not present aggregate data from after 2009. A total of twenty-three reasons for complaints were recorded, as well as a category for “other”. Some of these phrases are more specific such as “homosexuality”; others, such as “unsuited to age

group” are much more nebulous. The ALA does not offer any definition for these phrases. It also does not cite whether these were the exact wordings used in the challenges recorded, or if they have developed these labels themselves to group challenges by theme.

The top complaint was “sexually explicit,” almost always used to refer to books for and/or read by teens. The sexual content in these books is varied in detail, frequency, and tone – as a result, librarians who receive this complaint about a book cannot know, unless they have read it, what this complaint actually means for the book in question. The ALA official materials don’t give any guidance about specific complaint for the majority of the books unless a particularly high-profile incident occurred.

It is impossible for librarians to read all the books in their collection, and so they cannot be familiar with all potentially objectionable content. Unreported challenges complicate this problem even further. Since 85% of challenges go unreported, a librarian could read all of the books the ALA reports as receiving “sexually explicit” challenges and still be unprepared to respond if they encounter a challenge to a book that was not on the ALA list. Presenting a collection development policy can be helpful in responding to patrons challenging books. However, more knowledge about the book’s possibly objectionable content could help librarians better prepare for these challenges and respond to them with more confidence.

The “sexually explicit” challenge was chosen for this study not only because of its frequency, but because sexual development plays a critical role in the development of

teens. Of Robert J. Havighurst's *Eight Developmental Tasks for Adolescents*, seven are related in some way to sexual development (Cruz). Because sexual development is so critical to the lives of teenagers, the "sexually explicit" challenge carries a weight that other challenges, such as "violence," do not. Determining the effect of sexual themes in media on teenagers and their development is beyond the scope of this study. Others have studied this topic, and those findings will be discussed in the literature review.

When selecting materials, it is vital to be conscientious and aware of what kind of sexual content may be present in the materials. We may not be sure exactly how sexual media impacts teens. However, we should be aware of the power and potential such content has to influence teens in some way. It is therefore of the utmost importance that we have all the knowledge possible about the materials in our collection. Compiling a definition of the "sexually explicit" challenge will increase librarians' awareness of sexual content in the library. This, in turn, will enable them to act with a suitable level of care when recommending and discussing these materials with teenagers and their parents.

## **Research Question**

When the challenge “sexually explicit” is applied to a book, what does it mean? Is there any consistency to be found in the way this phrase is used? My goal is to create one unifying, operationalized definition for the term “sexually explicit” that librarians can refer to when responding to this complaint about a book in their collection. It will not encompass the entire spectrum of challenged books, but rather operate as a “mean” definition for what “sexual content” means when applied to most books. This definition can then be used to help librarians select books and give an informed defense of their selection choice.

## A Note on These Results

Librarians and teachers often struggle with the problem of self-censoring. Self-censorship occurs when librarians, attempting to make “safe choices”, restrict access to materials that might cause conflict (Schliesman 225-226). In one study, teachers reported that they avoided books that dealt with controversial issues “out of caution, outright fear, or a desire to avoid book challenges” (Boyd and Bailey 659.) Wishing to avoid this kind of conflict is understandable. “As long as ‘obscenity’ and ‘harmful to minors’ exists, retailers and distributors will want to know in advance when they are likely to run into trouble (Heins 72). The complaints that librarians and teachers face often are not couched in these legal terms, but the risk, and the sentiments it inspires in those who provide materials, are the same. However, “censorship can be insidious” (Heins 72). The risk of displeasing patrons must be balanced with the risk of inadvertently barring access to materials. Therefore, the definitions developed by this research be used with care. They should be used to help develop selection policies and prepare librarians to defend their choices. They should also be used for making practical decisions for shelving and recommending books – some libraries, for example, shelve *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* in the “Adult” section, and do not set it out on teen displays. It is still readily available, but promoted for an older audience. My goal is to help librarians make and defend informed, careful choices. If the research performed and conclusions developed herein are used to restrict or limit access to materials in any way, it violates the author’s intention and misuses this work.



## **Literature Review**

The issue of banning and challenging books, especially for young people, is a complex one. As Jenkins phrases it, “Book censorship is an act that involve complaints about specific texts...on the other hand, book censorship involved causes, beliefs and goals that are far larger than any particular text...some have described book censorship as the tensions of society writ small (228). To study it properly, one must look at a number of issues that influence these challenges. I plan to first provide a brief background on this history of challenging and banning books in the United States. I will focus this history on efforts to ban books for young people. I will also reference a few seminal events in the history of censorship in the United States, particularly ones that pertain to works of fiction.

I then plan to provide some context about teen sexual development and its importance to their overall development. I will review studies of current sexual behaviors and attitudes among teens. I will then look at the impact that media in general, and sexual media in particular, has on teenagers. After presenting what the effects, both deleterious and beneficial, are, I will also review literature about what parents fear the effects of media, and sexual media in particular, to be. The issue of book challenges would barely exist if not for the fears of parents. Whether those fears are valid or not, their existence shapes the debate, and so they deserve to be studied. I will conclude by noting some

existing schema for rating other types of media, and what kind of success or failure they have encountered.

### **A History of Book Banning in the United States**

The Oxford Dictionary defines censorship as “The suppression or prohibition of any parts of books, films, news, etc. that are considered obscene, politically unacceptable, or a threat to security” (“Censorship”). As cited in Heins’ book, *Webster’s Dictionary* defines “to censor” as “to examine in order to suppress or delete anything considered objectionable” (Heins 3). Heins expands on the definition to say that “Censorship happens whenever some people succeed in imposing their political or moral values on others by suppressing words, images, or ideas they find offensive” (3).

Before the nineteenth century, no legal definition for the term “obscenity” existed, and no book was ever banned for that reason (Heins 19). The progenitor of obscenity laws was Anthony Comstock. He and other private organizations promoted a Victorian set of social codes, particularly with regards to women’s behavior, by controlling and suppressing related information (Heins 19, 28). The Comstock Law of 1873 banned the mailing of “lewd, indecent, filthy...obscene” materials (Heins 19).

Since then, the laws have evolved. In *Roth vs. California* (1957), judges ruled that obscenity was “speech about sex without any redeeming social value” and was not protected under the First Amendment (Heins 21). This was clarified slightly with the establishment of the three-pronged test in *Miller v. California* (1973): to be obscene, a work must 1.) have “a prurient interest in sex” as the dominant theme, 2.) offend

contemporary standards of decency, and 3.) lack redeeming social value (Brockwell 133). Because these standards are so vague, confusion and inconsistency persist in their application. Obscenity law, according to Heins, “can’t be enforced with any fairness or consistency” (33).

Throughout history, a key concern of those seeking to ban books was the safety of children. In 1910, E. A. Baker stated that one of the roles of the library was to act in loco parentis towards those that cannot judge for themselves (qtd in Sayers 194). In 1928, W.C. Berwick Sayers wrote a lengthy defense of censorship in libraries, vehemently condemning “immoral” books and claiming that “no librarian would willingly buy a book he knew to be worthless from a political and moral viewpoint” and that librarians must keep the “sanity...to recognize what is decent and what is not” (Sayers 195-196). In *Regina vs. Hicklin* (1968), the courts made it a crime to circulate materials that could “corrupt and deprave those who are open to such immoral influences,” a category that included not only children but women, especially younger ones (Heins 20). Today, a modified version of the three-pronged test from *Miller vs. California* is used to determine if a work is “harmful to minors,” although it has the same inherent vagueness as the original test (Heins 24).

Schools have regularly been battlegrounds for book banning. The corpus of cases involving the legality of book banning in schools is vast. In the famous case of *Board of Education, Island Trees Free School District vs. Pico*, five high school students sued the school board after nine books were removed from their school library. The court ruled that citizens can take school officials to federal court if they attempt to censor materials in school libraries (Nocera 20).

Since Pico, there has been considerable variation in how these cases are handled. In 1982, the Supreme Court ruled that “books can’t be removed for partisan or political reasons...our Constitution does not permit the official suppression of ideas (Heins xxii). Later cases established that schools have the discretion to make policy and that they have a “role in inculcating values that trumps free speech.” (Heins xxii). The contentious debate over whether books in schools can be censored due to content is one that continues into the present day, as will be discussed below.

### **Sexual Behavior of Teenagers in the United States**

While studying adolescent development, Havighurst wrote that “Sexual maturity is achieved during adolescence. Sex attraction becomes a dominant force in an individual’s life” (34). From 2012-2013, over half of teenagers had had intercourse by age 18 (NSFG). Their sexuality is related to every other role in a teenager’s life – student, friend, child, etc. (Chilman 124). Successful sexual development supports an adolescent’s success in other developmental tasks (34). If healthy sexual development is not achieved at all, “it means an unhappy adult life” (Havighurst 34). However, it does not always happen at the same time during adolescence. Sometimes, it is delayed, especially in adolescents focused on academics (Havighurst 35). Chilman points out that all adolescents are different, and individuals approach and perform sexuality in many different ways (125, 128). Since sexuality a key point of adolescent development, adolescence is an ideal time to promote sexual health.

However, culture plays a crucial role in deciding what “healthy” means. Marriage “varies as society varies. Children adopt the ideas and ideals about marriage that are

prevalent in their society” (Havighurst 53). In his writing, Havighurst equates “sexuality” with “marriage,” at least ideally. For Havighurst, “Sexual satisfaction is not tied closely to marriage” only for the American lower class (54). Havighurst links this non-marital sexual activity to a variety of problems in the lower-class, from “illegitimate children” to economic dependence to a high death-rate (Havighurst 54). Writing in 1990, Chilman discourages complete sexual freedom for teens, saying that it “trivializes the depth and meaning” of it; however, she also says that adolescents do not need to totally abstain from sexual activity (Chilman 124).

In 2010, a survey of Dutch and American college women showed that both groups believed it was ok to have sex with their boyfriends (Brugman et. al, 39-40). However, American women were more likely to feel pressured into have intercourse for the first time, whereas for Dutch woman, love and commitment was usually the motivator (Brugman et. al). American woman also reported being taught that sex is “bad” and “dirty,” that their parents did not speak to them about sex, and they received “just say no” messages at school that left them feeling “unprepared” (Brugman, et. al, 39-40, 43) Dutch women experienced far more openness about sex from school and parents (Brugman et. al, 41-42). Attitudes vary across, and even within, cultures as well as time. The definition of “normal and healthy” is constantly shifting, making it harder for adults to judge what behavior should be a concern.

Sexual behavior is also influenced by a number of demographic factors. Havighurst’s link between extramarital sex and the lower class, while elitist, is not specious (Havighurst 54). Socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic status are a greater cause of risky sexual behavior than pop culture (Best 142). Poor contraceptive use, for example,

is linked to a variety of factors, most of which are closely related to poverty and racism (Chilman 128). Sexual minority students (lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, specifically) also have a “higher prevalence of many health-risk behaviors than compared with nonsexual minority students” (Kann et. al 77).

According to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) done by the Center for Disease Control (CDC), the percentage who have never had sex has decreased since 1991 (“Trends”). From 2011-2013, 44% of female teenagers and 47% of male teenagers had intercourse (Martinez and Abma). However, risky sexual behavior in American teenagers has decreased. From 2011-2012, 79% of female teenagers and 84% of males used contraceptives during their first intercourse (Martinez and Abma). The rates of teenagers who had first intercourse before age 13 or have had four or more partners have declined since 1991; the percentage of those who used alcohol or drugs before intercourse have declined since 1999; and the percentage of those who used birth control pills has increased since 1995 (“Trends”). Teen birth rates have been falling since 1991, and in 2015 they reached a historic low, both for all women ages 15-19 and for nearly all racial and ethnic minority groups (Hamilton and Mathews). However, America still has the highest teen birth rate of any Western country (Hamilton and Mathews).

### **Impact of Sexual Media Content on Teen Sexuality**

Teens frequently turn to media intentionally as an information source for sexual content because their sexual education classes are insufficient and parents are silent or disapproving (Bleakly et, al 458, Brown et.al, 213, Pattee 31, Hargrove and Livingstone 211) As Brown, et. al phrase it, “while adults battle [over what to teach teenagers about

sex, teens are provided an inadequate, often confusing, potentially harmful picture of sexual expectations” (4). Media is an “important sex educator” that can help fill that gap (Brown et. al, 4)

Pardun, L’Engle, and Brown found in their research that “the more sexual activity a teen sees, the more likely he or she is to be sexually active and anticipate future sexual activity” (88). Bleakley et. al found a feedback loop - more sexually experienced teens tend to be exposed to more sexual media, and the more they are exposed to sexual media, the more likely it is that they have progressed in their sexual activity (458). Teens themselves believe that sexual content influences behavior even though they know it is fictional (Steele 240). According to Hargrove and Livingstone, the media should be aware that they can cause confusion and possibly harm to adolescents’ sexual health (211).

That is not a universal conclusion. In one study, talking about movies with friends allowed girls to engage in “identity talk” – “to sort out, study, and firm up beliefs on race, class, and gender” (Steele 244). This “identity talk” can presumably extend to the sexual identity that teens are in the process of developing. The absence of sex in media also can have negative effects, as teens don’t get to learn the consequences of both positive and negative sexual behavior (Pardun 222).

When it comes to the sexual content of literature, some negative results have been found. One content analysis showed that books often presented sex as occurring outside of relationships, which may encourage teens to view that as acceptable, and that books rarely showed negative consequences for sex (Callister 283). However, most of the results studying the impact of literature have shown either no results or positive ones.

According to Jenkins, research has not shown that reading has the power to shape thinking in the way it is traditionally thought to; reading by itself actually changes people very little (233). She cites a study done by Joyce Lancaster which showed that reading acts more as a booster for one's existing beliefs than a catalyst for new ones (qtd. Jenkins 235). Pattee adds that stories can help teenagers understand desire, romance and sexuality by engaging in vicarious experiences and can provide them language to label and express their sexual experiences (34). Sexually explicit young adult literature can help fill the gap left by incomplete sexual education because it is one of the few places teens can find descriptions of sexual maturation and the mechanics of the sexual act (Pattee 34, 36).

Dawn Heinecken did a qualitative study of female readers of the *Alice* series by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor, which often appears on the ALA's "Frequently Challenged" lists. Heinecken found that the books had a number of positive impacts on the young fans. She found that the books: helped the girls construct resilient identities; helped them to feel "normal" about their sexual desires rather than ashamed of them; helped them to cope with feelings of shame brought on by their changing bodies; inspired them to think critically about their lives and decisions; promoted their sense of agency; helped them to understand their wants and desires, but also encouraged them to wait to have sex until they felt comfortable with the choice; helped them feel more confident and assertive; brought them closer to claiming sexually agency and challenged notions of female perfection (Heinecken 105, 111, 113-119). Ultimately the books "heal[ed] and strengthen[ed] the young female subject" (Heinecken 119). Sexually explicit young adult literature can be a "safe and private haven for teens to explore the physiology of desire" (Pattee 32).



Media impact is also determined by the individual piece of media and the individual adolescent. What is learned will vary according to one's sense of self and lived experience (Brown et. al 9). If a piece of media depicts something they feel they may encounter in their lives, they'll pay more attention (Steele, 240). Since all teens are individuals, they will be impacted differently by different media. One reader's response cannot predict another (Jenkins 233). Older teens are less likely to be influenced than younger ones (Steele 241). Furthermore, context is key (Hargrove and Livingstone 205). In four cases of book challenging in 1959, the judge told the jury to read the book as a whole, establishing the precedent that "context is important for the consideration of content" (Hargrove and Livingstone 205).

### **Parental Fears**

Many parents hold deep fears about their adolescents' developing sexuality. Havighurst links sexual independence to a change or weakening in emotional bonds with parents (37). Parents "want their children to grow up, but are afraid of what the world may do to innocent and inexperienced youth." (Havighurst 37).

Some parents take a pragmatic view of adolescent sexuality and believe that it is normal and natural, and that teenagers should have accurate information about sexuality so they can make wise choices (Heins 37, Best 9).; however, others take a protective view and want their teenagers shielded from anything involving sex (Heins 37, Best 9).

"Middle-class parents are highly protective of their adolescent children, and worried about what life can do, especially to their daughters" (Havighurst 38). These fears are fueled by urban legends about teenage sexual behavior, which are hyped by the media

that cause parents to panic (Best xvii, 129). They are also stoked by right-wing forces such as the Moral Majority, which came to prominence in the 1980s, and, at its worst, “attempt[s] to impost their narrow orthodoxies on the communities in which they live by stripping books they don’t like from the library (Nocera 22)

One of these fears is that children and teens’ sexual behavior will be negatively influenced by the media they consume. Whether research supports that idea or not, those fears are a persistent and potent force in today’s society. Book challenges come, overwhelmingly, from parents. According to data collected by the ALA, from 2000-2009, parents were the top instigators of challenges (“Number”). They issued twice as many as the second largest group, “Other Initiators” (“Number”)

While sometimes provoked by a political agenda, book complaints are often “serious concerns, deeply felt by their proponent” (Nocera 23). Some parents are disturbed by the social realism that has become prevalent in young adult novels, some of which present detailed, unromanticized depictions of sexual behavior. (Jenkins 228). Discussing the trend towards controversial novels, Rebecca Hall writes that “many of these edgy reads incorporate frank dialogue, shocking circumstances, a dysfunctional, sometimes graphic existence, and always a radical departure from the more benign storylines (30) In her book *Places I Never Meant to Be*, young adult author Judy Blume writes, ”I wanted to write the best, most honest books I could...If someone had told me then that I would become one of the most banned authors in America, I would have laughed” (qtd. Hall 30)

There are other reasons parents challenge books. Some find the content to conflict with their values; some do not realize that teachers and librarians put a great deal of

thought and professional judgment into selecting books for minors (Schliesman 221).

Many parents have not read the books they challenge, and have drawn conclusions based only on the title or a few excerpts (Nocera 23). Finally, some “do not necessarily realize that their right to determine what their own child reads does not extend to limiting what other people’s children will read or have access to in the classroom or library”

(Schliesman 221). Blume adds:

“I believe that censorship grows out of fear, and because fear is contagious, some parents are easily swayed. Book banning satisfies their need to feel in control of their children’s lives. This fear is disguised as moral outrage. They believe that if their children don’t read about it, their children won’t know about it, and if they don’t know about it, it won’t happen.” (qtd. Petrilli 4).

## **Media Ratings**

There are no ratings systems in place for books, a fact that distinguishes the medium from most other types. Ratings systems are in place for music, television, and film, video and computer games, coin-operated archives, and Internet sites (Bushman and Cantor 131). The rating systems were developed by different organizations and so are not standardized, although there are some commonalities among the systems.

For example, The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) uses an age-based ratings system, with the stated goal of helping parents “determine each motion picture’s suitability for viewing by their children.” (qtd. in Nalkur et. al, 440). These ratings are determined by content, including sex, violence, and explicit language, as well

as theme; however, there are no separate content-specific ratings (Nalkur et. al 440). The Classification and Ratings Administration (CARA), the branch of the MPAA that designs ratings, does not use official criteria (Nalkur, et al 441). The ratings are designed to “reflect the current values of American parents” (qtd in Nalkur et. al 441). This is consistent with the youth-specific three-pronged obscenity standard, which states that a work is “harmful to minors if it is ‘patently offensive’ according to prevailing standards among adults regarding what is fit for minors” (Heins 24). The ratings system for television, designed by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and modeled after the MPAA system, rates programs for age-appropriateness (ex: TV-G, TV-PG, TV-MA) and adds separate content ratings, including ratings for sex, violence, and explicit language (S, V, L) (Signorielli 278-279).

Age-appropriateness in media is a chief concern, both for parents and for those designing rating systems. However, these ratings systems have flaws. The MPAA rates harshly when it comes to sexual content but is more lenient in allowing youth exposure to violence (Nalkur, et al.) Nalkur, et al, recommend that more empirical research on what is “harmful” be used in developed these ratings (445). Phrases such as “harmful” and “current values” are mutable when applied to any form of media. The established television ratings do a “somewhat decent” job of indicating mature content, but only when applied, and a number of programs are not given content-based ratings at all (Signorielli 296). Furthermore, Nalkur, et. al, found that adolescents manage to obtain restricted materials despite the ratings (445). Thus, it is hard to tell whether establishing a ratings system for books would make a difference, even if it could be done. As Signorielli advises, individual parental guidance is more important than standardized

regulations: “ratings systems... only work...if parents take time to discuss with their children what they watch and why.”

## Methods

The ALA has a list of the Top 10 Frequently Challenged books for each year, starting with 2001. Included in the list are the complaints given for each book. If a book has received the “sexually explicit” complaint, it is listed next to the book’s title. Children’s titles will not be included. The books will either be young adult titles or adult titles banned because of concerns about teenage readers. Many books were banned for several years, but each title will be included in the population only once, so that there is a wider range of potential content to study. Some books were banned multiple years, but had different complaints; regardless, if a book had any “sexually explicit” complaints, it was included in the population. There are thirty-six books in the population and four series (each of which is a single line item). Using a randomizer, I selected seventeen items. Three were three series. In two of those series, three of the books had been banned, including the first one. I added the first one to my sample. For the other, eight books had been banned, but not the first one, so I randomized those titles and picked two of them. Upon analysis, one of the books, *The Hunger Games*, had little to no sexual content. Without context for why the challenge was made, I decided to leave the book in the sample. To compensate for the little data this book provides, I randomized the titles one more time and selected a final title. I also eliminated four books from the sample that turned out to have child narrators; as a child’s view of sex cannot be compared equally to an adolescent or adults’. Total, I have a sample size of fifteen books (see Appendix).

The obvious limitation to my sample is that my population consists only of books that received reported challenges. Since 85% of challenges go unreported, it is possible I omitted a significant number of challenged books. No information is available about those challenges, however, and so I cannot account for them. Using the information available, I believe the population is a comprehensive one.

<b>Title</b>	<b>Author</b>	<b>Total # of Years On List</b>
<i>13 Reasons Why</i>	Asher, Jay	1
<i>Forever</i>	Blume, Judy	1
<i>The Perks of Being A Wallflower</i>	Chobsky, Stephen	7
<i>The Hunger Games</i>	Collins, Suzanne	1
<i>The Chocolate War</i>	Cormier, Robert	7
<i>We All Fall Down</i>	Cormier, Robert	1
<i>Looking for Alaska</i>	Green, John	4
<i>Fifty Shades of Grey</i>	James, E.L.	2
<i>Blood and Chocolate</i>	Klause, Annette Curtis	1
<i>The Earth, My Butt, And Other Round Things</i>	Mackler, Carolyn	2
<i>TTYL</i>	Myracle, Lauren	4 ( <i>as TTYL (series)</i> )
<i>Intensely Alice</i>	Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds	4 ( <i>as Alice(series)</i> )
<i>Patiently Alice</i>	Naylor, Phyllis Reynolds	4 ( <i>as Alice (series)</i> )
<i>My Sister's Keeper</i>	Picoult, Jodi	1

### **Qualitative Content Analysis**

I performed a qualitative content analysis on these books. Qualitative content analysis “uses inductive reasoning, by which themes and categories emerge through...careful examination and constant comparison” (Wildemuth 309). “Sexually explicit” complaints can derive from many aspects of the text – a word, a scene, a general theme. The complaint is always made against the text as a whole. Therefore, it isn’t sufficient to study the books for repetitions of a specific, finely described complaint. My goal was to determine the meaning of the “sexually explicit” complaint, and to do that, I evaluated the texts as a whole and examined them for any content that could be considered “sexually explicit.”

In this analysis, I evaluated aspects of the sexual content present, such as type of content, frequency, level of detail, and tone present. The patterns emerged were used to create my definition. The units of analysis were pieces of text – words, paragraphs, sentences – that carry sexual signifiers.

One part of my analysis consisted of directed content analysis, a tactic in which the researcher starts the initial coding using relevant research findings (Hsieh and Shannon 1281). I compiled my coding instrument from several extant ones. Pardun, L’Engle and Brown’s article, “Linking Early Exposure to Outcomes: Early Adolescents’ Consumption of Sexual Content in Six Media,” uses a coding instrument for sexual content that I adapted (82). Signorelli, in her study “Age-Based Ratings, Content-Based



Ratings, And Television Content, Is there A Problem?” also creates a coding instrument to use in her study that I incorporated into mine (284). The vocabulary used to evaluate content on the “Internet Content Ratings Association” website was also used (“The ICRA Vocabulary”). These coding instruments evaluate a variety of sexual content. They provide codes for specific sex acts, as well as sexual behavior and nudity. These instruments also evaluate the sexual content within its context, coding for importance of the sexual content to the plot. These instruments have codes built in for explicit language, violence, and romantic content, which I omitted. Romantic behavior is not the same as sexual behavior, although they may be presented together. The American Library Association also lists “explicit language,” and “violence,” as separate challenges. Therefore, to avoid overlap, violent behavior was coded only when it is sexual (rape or assault) and explicit language was coded only when it refers specifically to sex. I also coded for anatomical references and for other sexually themed language.

However, I also evaluated the content more broadly. I studied the detail present. The space spent describing a sexual act and the vividness with which it is described both contribute to the overall challenge of “sexually explicit.” Furthermore, I decided to code for the tone the book takes towards its sexual content. Is the content presented positively, negatively, or neutrally? If there are sexual acts in the book which are devastating, that gives a very different meaning to them than if they are fun and empowering, or a serious indicator of commitment.

I complemented my directed content analysis approach with a grounded theory approach. In this approach, which Hsieh and Shannon refer to as “conventional qualitative analysis,” coding categories are created from directly examining the raw data

to see what codes emerge (Hsieh and Shannon 1279). Qualitative coding frequently reveals new and unexpected themes, and coding manuals must reflect them (Wildemuth 310). I adapted my instrument and developed new codes as new latent themes emerged throughout my analysis. Ultimately, my coding instrument went through several iterations to account for new discoveries.

## Results

### A Note on Outliers

Two of the books in the sample were outliers in terms of sexual content. *The Hunger Games* has almost no sexual content. *Fifty Shades of Grey* was marketed as an erotic novel and therefore deals exclusively with sexual content. *Fifty Shades of Grey* is also several hundred pages longer than any other book in the sample. It was included in the population since the concerns expressed specifically mentioned teenagers; however, it is the only book that was never marketed or promoted to teenagers. Both of these remained in the sample, since they still met the pre-established criteria, although an extra book was added to compensate for the lack of content in *The Hunger Games*. As outliers, it is unavoidable that their presence will have some effect on the results.

### **Sexual Feelings and Physical Arousal**

Most of the books include some reference to physical desire. Physical desire is equally present for males and females; however, the way it is depicted is starkly different. Physical desire is often placed in a romantic or sensual framing, and is shown with physiological rather than sexual responses – for example when Patrick in *Intensely Alice* “start[s] breathing harder” as he touches Alice (*Intensely*, Naylor 114). This allows authors to indicate sexual arousal while eliding the actual process of arousal.

This framing occurs most often for women. Jane in *We All Fall Down* feels her heart go into “scary palpitations” (*All Fall*, Cormier 125). When Vivian in *Blood and Chocolate* plans to seduce her boyfriend Adam, “her heart skipped faster”; later, she describes “the blood singing in her veins” (Klause 50, 264). Katniss Everdeen in *The Hunger Games* “feels a stirring in her chest. Warm and curious” (Collins 298). *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things* describes a female’s physical arousal: “It feels so good I’m getting wet”; however, the same character’s desire is later described in romantic terms: “My stomach does a flippy thing” (Mackler 120). *Intensely Alice* is one of the only books frank enough to avoid this phrasing, as Alice says “A flood of warmth spread along my inner thighs...I felt myself getting wet” (*Intensely*, Naylor 114, 124). Even the erotic novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which features a Ana’s erotic arousal on nearly every page, often keeps the feeling themselves vague (“crippling me with a dark, tantalizing desire”) or describes them with non-sexual signifiers (“I feel it...deep in my belly”) (James 57, 484). The subtextual discomfort with women’s anatomy becomes

textual in the book when Ana thinks of her genitals as “down there,” language which has been historically used to avoid the subject of female sexuality (James 110).

Signs of explicitly sexual arousal (e.g., erections) are much more likely to be described for men. Male desire was usually vivid but brief, using phrases such as “I did get an erection,” “he felt himself hardening,” (Chobsky 111, *Chocolate*, Cormier 90). Although more vivid, male desire was still briefly described. *Gossip Girl* states starkly that “Nate’s hard-on looked like it was going to take over the world” (von Ziegesar 137).

The books have few instances of masturbation, especially for women. Total, women only masturbate in two books. In one of these, the woman only does so because her boyfriend tells her to, and she finds the idea unappealing. Males masturbate twice as often as females, and the language used is often stark. In *13 Reasons Why*, for example, a male character is seen “cramming his dick in his pants!” (Asher 88). In *The Chocolate War*, a male character is found with “one hand furiously at work between his legs” (*Chocolate*, Cormier 99). However, just as with physical desire, scenes of masturbation are never long for either sex. It is usually brief and frank, as in *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* – “I forgot to tell you how much I masturbate now, which is a lot” (27).

The same patterns also show in the descriptions of erotic fantasies. Erotic fantasies do occur in about a third of the books. The sexes experience roughly the same amount of erotic fantasies. These are rarely long or detailed. Often these fantasies stop short of sexual intercourse. One (female) character in *TTYL* speaks about a fantasy by saying...” Now we will play pretend...[he] kisses my eagerly parted lips” (Miracle 167).

Michael in *Forever* simply says “I dreamed about you...it was very sexy” (Blume 50).

This allows authors to create a sense of eroticism without including graphic sexual fantasy.

### **Sexual Language**

Overall, the most instances of the four categories of sexually-related behaviors (feelings, language, sexual behaviors, and sexual crimes) occur within the category of “sexual language”. Five out of the seven types of sexual language are present in over half of the books. Another, “homophobia,” is present in close to half (six out of fifteen). Only “Mentions of sexually transmitted diseases” are rare, occurring in three books.

Once again, the physiological aspects of sexuality are underrepresented, especially for women. The lack of references to sexually transmitted diseases shows this, as does the fact that the words “vagina” and “clitoris” are mentioned in only one book, *Fifty Shades of Grey* – “he palms my clitoris” (Grey 116). Anatomical references are male-focused. The same reluctance to describe female sexual arousal also extends to discussing female bodies in any detail unless those bodies are being objectified. Two-thirds of books reference a penis or an erection, such as “he led my hand to his penis. ‘Katherine, I’d like you to meet Ralph’ (Blume 77). Twelve reference breasts or nipples, which are typically object of male desire – “He caressed...my breasts...I could feel my nipple stiffen” (*Intensely*, Naylor 113). The other commonly mentioned body parts are the lips (three books) and the behind (four books). In *13 Reasons Why*, a list that

compares female body parts leads Hannah to be admired for her “best ass,” while Clay admits that “It wasn’t til that list came out that I even noticed Angela Romero’s lips. But after that, I became fascinated with them” (Asher 37, 52).

Around half of the books include explicit requests for consent to sexual activities. Michael asks Katherine “Can we try it this way?” (Blume 174). This is a positive trend. Lara asks Pudge “Have you ever gotten a blow job?...Think it would be fun?” and when he agrees, the resulting encounter is mutually enjoyable (Green 126). However, the requests do not always translate to consensual behavior; sometimes, requests are either left unanswered or the response is not honored. When Marcus touches Hannah’s thigh, he asks “Do you want me to move my hand?” and when she does not answer, he continues to touch her. (Asher 141). She does not want this touching; however, she tries to signal that with her eyes and not her words, a signal which Marcus then ignores. This request for consent does not lead to a consensual encounter, or even to clear communication. Christian Grey’s dominant/submissive contract is designed to ensure he has Ana’s full consent; he tells her “I’m not going to touch you – not until I have your written consent to do so” (James 74). But he does not keep this promise. Later, he assaults her several times. Such inconsistent messaging is particularly present in this book. When Ana asks Christian to flog her for the first time, he checks with her again to be sure he has her consent “Are you sure...are you ready?” (James 505-6). Ana agrees, but then when she does not enjoy the experience, she blames Christian, even though she has not blamed her for his previous assaults. This contributes to creating an incomplete and confusing

message regarding consent, one which also manifests in later categories. There is an understanding that consent is important, but not of how it works.

The sexual language present causes particular problems for women. Sexual harassment occurs in eight out of fifteen books; only in one of these instances is the victim male. A third of the books contain multiple instances of sexual harassment. In some cases, it is brief and easily dismissed, as in *Intensely Alice* – “You can give us head whenever you want” (*Intensely*, Naylor 213). Sometimes, it is treated as a joke, as when Vivian’s male friends present her with “box after box of lacy underwear” and tell her to “try them on” (Klause 85). In other cases, it is more threatening. Twenty-four-year-old Gabriel pursues teenage Vivian and tells her “I’m looking forward to the bedrooms...I will court you. And I won’t give up. I’ll follow you...I will wait for you because you are meant to be mine” (Klause 160). When Jenny tries to get away from Chuck in *Gossip Girl*, he tells her “I’m not finished with you yet” (Von Ziegesar 187)

Similarly, sexual gossip focuses largely on women. “Sexual gossip” is used to code for rumors only; gossip that arises from confirmed acts is coded elsewhere. It is present in a total of eight books. In three of these, the only target is male; in two others, there is a brief piece of gossip about males accompanying several detailed rumors about women. Occasionally, this gossip is stated in a neutral or admiring tone, as in *Patiently Alice*: “Guess who’s sleeping together...Jill and Justin” (*Patiently*, Naylor 202-203). More often it is vicious, as in *Forever* – “Sybil Davidson...has been laid by six different guys...Erica says this is because of Sybil’s fat problems are her need to feel loved”



(Blume 1). Cruel sexual gossip is the foundation of *Gossip Girl*, which features characters who gossip as well as gossip columns about the characters interwoven through the text. Serena is the primary victim of this gossip, with a few examples being: “Doesn’t she look [expletive]ed?... Maybe she had a prostitution ring up there.... heard she got kicked out for sleeping with every boy on campus...they had to get rid of her, she’s so slutty” (Von Ziegesar 21, 46, 51). *Gossip Girl* includes brief vicious gossip about a male character as well – “heard he was up to some kinky shit” (Von Ziegesar 63).

As these were all books banned in the last decade, the prominence of homophobic language is surprising. This is made more so when considered with the underrepresentation and negative representation of same-sex acts. The only male character who faces sexual harassment faces in from another male, and it is accompanied by homophobic insults – “You’re a fairy...a queer. kiss me’...said Janza, puckering his lips” (*Chocolate*, Cormier 201-2). Neither of these characters is gay; the proposition and the insults are simply an easy way for Janza to degrade Jerry and impugn his masculinity. Bullies in *Perks of Being a Wallflower* call Patrick, who is gay, a “faggot” (Chobsky 150-1). There are no LGBT characters in *TTYL*, but the characters still use “tray fruitay” and “lesbo slut” as insults (Myracle 60, 154). Other times, homophobic language is subtler. When Charlie in *Perks of Being a Wallflower* talks about Patrick’s relationship with Brad, he says, “Brad assumed the role of the girl in terms of where you put things. I think that’s pretty important to tell you” (Chobsky 44). In her first meeting with Christian, Ana

asks him if he is gay, a question which is they both see as offensive: “‘I’ve wanted to spank you since you asked me if I was gay’ ...Christ, I wanted to spank myself after that question!” (James 287).

Eleven books have instances of “other sexually themed language”. This language most often occurs when the characters are speaking, writing, or otherwise expressing themselves. Characters use creative sexual language to express themselves or communicate. The tones of this expression vary. Sometimes it is neutral. This is the case with the contract in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, which discusses a variety of extremely graphic sexual acts in list form— “No acts involving fire play. No acts involving urination. No acts involving children or animals...” (James 107-8) More often, sexually themed jokes, anecdotes, or innuendoes are used for humor, making or sharing a connection between people. In *Intensely Alice*, characters at a bachelorette party play a version of “Pin the Tail on the Donkey” involving a ‘handsome guy...missing one important piece of equipment; the women joke during the game, “‘You’ve got a one-nut man!” (*Intensely*, Naylor 74). In *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Patrick and Charlie exchange outrageously graphic, and probably untrue, stories about the sexual exploits of their classmates, such as “‘they did it doggie style with one of the sandwich bags!’” to cheer each other up (Chobsky 159). The characters in *Looking for Alaska* frequently tease each other with sexual language, and comments such as “‘I’d give you a pity blow, but I really am attached to Jake,’ or “Pudge got his hog smoked!” facilitate a sense of camaraderie. (Green 129). Intimate sexual dialogue also serves to create a shared connection, as in

*Forever*, when Michael tells Katherine, “Good mattress...nice and firm...in case you’re interested” (Blume 99)

Sexual language is often used for aggressive purposes. In addition to the high number of books with sexual gossip and sexual harassment, several books include creatively expressed sexually themed threats and insults. These create a hierarchy of dominance fueled by cruelty, setting characters in conflict and provoking negative emotions such as anger, fear, and shame. Harry in *We All Fall Down* reveals that he didn’t finish raping Karen – “didn’t even get her nice little white panties off” (*All Fall*, Cormier 14). Julia derides one of her lovers by saying “He had a dick the size of a cocktail wiener” (Picoult 157). Christian Grey sexual threatens Ana throughout *Fifty Shades of Grey* to demonstrate his power: “Stop biting your lip, or I will fuck you in the elevator...I could make you stay” (James 149, 272)

Several of the sexual jokes and innuendoes serve this aim as well, dividing characters rather than creating a shared experience. The list circulated in *13 Reasons Why* that names Hannah as “Best Ass in the Freshman class” is one example of this; as it degrades the girls on the list and reduces them to body parts (Asher 37). Vivian responds to male harassing her by saying “You can hold tight of your balls and twist” and later tells them to go back to their “head-banger sluts” (Klause 56, 60). The main character in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things*, who is overweight, derides herself by repeating the joke, “What do a fat girl and a moped have in common? Answer: they’re both fun to ride, as long as your friends don’t see you” (Mackler 13). The characters in

Blood and Chocolate are werewolves, and frequently refer to partners as “mates” and intercourse as “mating,” which has violent, bestial connotations.

### **Consensual Sexual Behavior**

The “sexually explicit” complaint does not signify that there is sexual intercourse present. Nearly all the books have kissing (light or passionate) and sexual touching. Of the thirteen books with sexual touching, though, only seven of these books contain genital touching

Five books have vaginal sex, three have implied sex acts, one has anal sex, and two have oral sex. Where sexual intercourse acts are present, they are rarely detailed. Three of the five acts of vaginal sex occurred in the past, and are only referenced by characters, such as when Gwen in *Patiently Alice* tells her friends that she and Leo had intercourse: “First base, second base, third base, the whole ball game” (*Patiently*, Naylor 218). Most likely, the implied sexual acts are vaginal intercourse as well, but by their nature, it is difficult to discern. Julia in *My Sister’s Keeper* describes one sexual act vaguely by saying, “Our bodies remember where to go,” and another by describing “our bodies...like a Mobius strip” (Picoult 155). Two characters in *Perks of Being a Wallflower* are described as “fooling around” (Chobsky 43). The one book with anal sex, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, implies it at some points and mentions it once with great delicacy. Charlie, the narrator, describes an encounter between Brad and Patrick by

saying “Brad assumed the role of the girl in terms of where you put things” (Chobsky 44).

There is also very little detail paid to the physiological processes of sexual behaviors. Only five books contain male orgasms, and only three contain female orgasms. In books containing female orgasms, they occur during a partnered encounter in which the male also orgasms, such as when Katherine “came right before Michael...I couldn’t control myself anymore...as he finished I came again” (Blume 174). In another example of a book avoiding a portrayal of full sexual intercourse, *Intensely Alice* has Patrick and Alice both orgasm while touching each other: “I felt warm wetness in the palm of my hand...a few minutes later, in the dark of Botany Pond, I came” (*Intensely*, Naylor 114). Interestingly, there are more bodily emissions from females than males, which is inconsistent with other portrayals of female desire. It is worth noting that female emissions can be discussed with delicacy, whereas male emissions may require more graphic detail. For comparison, in *Intensely Alice*, Alice simply “feels herself growing wet,” in her encounter with Patrick, but Patrick “ejaculates” – an anatomically correct but sexually graphic term that is used in very few of these books (*Intensely*, Naylor 114).

Overall, the sexual behavior in these books is centered on eroticizing non-genital contact. This is done with kissing, touching of breasts or “bodies,” and nudity. “Passionate” kisses are delineated in several ways. Often, descriptors are added; in *Blood and Chocolate*, during a kiss, Vivian “feels the heat of him searing through his shirt” (Klause 205). Passionate kisses are often forceful, as in *Fifty Shades of Grey*, where

Christian's lips "glide down my throat, claiming and possessing me," and a kiss is described as "wild, ravaging my mouth with his" (James 191, 429). Characters kissing passionately often move away from the lips: "started kissing my neck and ears. Then my cheeks. Then everywhere" (Chobsky 126). Finally, they are indicated by length, such as when Alice and Patrick share a "long, sideways kiss" (*Intensely*, Naylor 113). The intensity of these kisses makes the sexual tone of the book stronger.

The descriptions of sexual touching vary. When genital contact is involved, they are often graphic, as when *13 Reasons Why* described Bryce "sliding [his] fingers in and out" of Hannah's vagina (Asher 265). In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Christian "thrusts his finger inside of me and I cry out...he palms my clitoris" and later "he leans down and washes between my legs...his fingers skillfully stimulating me through the cloth" (James 115). Non-genital touching is often vaguer. In *The Chocolate War*, Tubs is aroused when his girlfriend "brushed against him...he felt himself hardening" implying some sort of sexual contact but leaving it unclear (Chocolate, Cormier 90). In *My Sister's Keeper*, Campbell and Julia's bodies touch "like a Mobius strip," a description which is erotic but offers no detail. Sexual touching in *Blood and Chocolate* is similarly erotic but nonspecific – "her claws...traced promises on his body" (Klause 124).

There seems to be an emphasis on making the books feel sexual, so that teens can identify with the sexual journeys of the protagonists, while keeping the behaviors fairly mild. One surprising piece of evidence for this is that "kinky" sexual acts (defined as "activities in which the participant eroticize sensations or emotions that would be

unpleasant in a non-erotic context”) are present in eight books, one more than contain genital touching (Easton and Hardy). In the BDSM-themed novel *Fifty Shades of Grey*, these acts varied and intense. But in most books, the kinky acts in these books are fairly tame. Oxadelagnia is the most common for the characters in these books. Brian in *My Sister’s Keeper* “bites down on my lip so hard I taste blood” (Picoult 35). Chuck in *Gossip Girl* “bit [Blair’s] big toe” (Von Ziegesar 131). Other examples of lightly kinky acts include Froggy in *The Earth, My Butt, and other Round Things* “pulling gently at [Virginia’s] nipples” and Michael in *Forever* “pinn[ing Katherine] down on the bed” (Mackler 58, Blume 100). Since society tends to regard even light kinky behavior as shocking, so these behaviors enhance a sense of “raciness” without adding genital contact

Consistent with this pattern of including the intense emotion sex generates but not the sex itself, there are twelve first time acts in these books but only five instances of lost virginity. For Alice, her encounter with Patrick in *Intensely Alice* is “the first time I ever touched a boy like this” (Naylor 114). Virginia in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things* is thrilled when “Froggy Welsh the Fourth has made it up my shirt!” (Mackler 56). *Looking for Alaska* describes, at length, Pudge and Lara’s first time with oral sex (Green 126-129). Depicting first-time acts allows authors to capture the drama and intensity of new sexual experiences for their teen readers without having to include any sexual intercourse. Target audience does not seem to impact this choice by the author – *My Sister’s Keeper* and *Perks of Being A Wallflower* imply sexual acts, and they are both adult novels (Note: For *Perks of Being A Wallflower*, this varies depending on

the library system; while it was originally marketed as a teen novel, some libraries put it in the adult section).

Only two of the books have any same-sex content. In *Gossip Girl*, a kiss between two girls is mentioned as awkward, then dismissed – “were they just messing around like two drunk girls” (Von Ziegesar 116). It is worth noting that there is a separate complaint the ALA receives for “homosexuality,” so perhaps parents chose to issue that challenge instead. Since “homosexuality” is not inherently sexual, the two terms don’t function as equivalents, and so there seems to be some irregularity here

### **Sexual Crimes**

The sexual aggression present in the “Sexual Language” category continues here. More than half of the books contain sexual assault. A third of them have instances of both harassment and assault. More than a third of the books with assault contain multiple instances of it. Nearly half of the books have specifically rape or attempted rape. *We All Fall Down* opens on a scene of graphic rape: “he saw Karen Jerome being dragged across the front hallway...they were holding her arms to the wall while Harry screwed her. His pants and striped shorts were halfway down his legs...Randy’s right hand was like a suction cup on her breast” (*All Fall*, Cormier 3, 10). As quoted in the last section, Harry later establishes that the rape was not completed; however, that does not lessen the horror of the assault. *Fifty Shades of Grey* contains six episodes of assault, two of which lead into rape. *Blood and Chocolate* contains two clear assaults and another that, despite being



coded as consensual due to its tone, is an assault because the girl is underage. *13 Reasons Why* contains three assaults and one rape. All three of these books place sex in a violent, aggressive, negative framework. So does *The Hunger Games*. Peeta and Katniss cannot fully consent to any of the kissing they do. They are relying on their sexual interaction to please the viewing audience and help them to survive. Katniss reflects at one point that she needs to kiss Peeta more frequently and intensely: “If I want to keep Peeta alive, I’ve got to give the audience something more to care about” (Collins 261). This is not coded as assault, since they are both victims and both perpetrators. However, it places sex in an aggressive, coercive framework. It also establishes sexuality as a social commodity – Peeta and Katniss are not permitted to own their own sexuality. This idea of society influencing or even claiming a person’s sexuality manifests repeatedly in these books.

Consent in these books is poorly depicted. In many cases, either the characters are unclear as to what constitutes consent or the narrative is unclear. In *Thirteen Reasons Why*, Hannah does not respond when Marcus asks for her consent. When he continues to touch her, she signals with her eyes that she wants him to stop, and then pushes him off. It is an assault, but Hannah does not take the opportunity to explicitly express a lack of consent when she had a chance to do so. In *Forever*, Katherine recalls that “Fred.... tried to stuff his tongue in my mouth,” and the consent of the action is in doubt. In *We All Fall Down*, Buddy’s stalking (“he trailed her from store to store”) is shown to be romantic, as it results in Jane falling in love with him. Mickey’s is shown as predatory, as it ends with

Jane's kidnapping and assault ("The Avenger watched her through that inch... 'Did you touch me when you tied me up?'" ) (*All Fall*, Cormier 87, 174).

In three novels, non-consensual sex is portrayed as consensual. As quoted above, Gabriel in *Blood and Chocolate* threatens to pursue Vivian, who is seventeen, until she consents. She tells him multiple times that she does not want him: "*You will not make me offer you my belly. I did not choose you willingly...* Damn him... I don't want fierce, I want gentle" (Klause 152, 160). During his so-called "pursuit" he assaults her: "he held her tight... his tongue parted her lips... she pushed on his chest and struggled in his arms, but he wouldn't let go" (Klause 160). In the end, they share a long, passionate kiss and enter a relationship that is framed as consensual and romantic – "His kisses pressed her down into the oblivion of the mattress as her hands explored his chest... his claws tracing lines down her back" (Klause 263-4). Vivian thinks "My father... this is how I make it up to him," implying that she is reluctant (Klause 264). But immediately after, in the book's last lines she is described as running away with Gabriel with her "blood singing in her veins" (Klause 264). The narrative seems to endorse the view that Vivian's desires are more reliable than her hesitations. More disturbingly, it endorses the idea that a seventeen-year-old under pressure from her family can consent enthusiastically to a relationship with an adult man who has assaulted her.

In *13 Reasons Why*, Hannah weeps while Bryce touches her vagina, and it is clear on her face that she does not want him to: "Your pinky touched the top of my underwear... sliding your fingers in and out... All I did was turn my head, clench my

fingers and fight back tears” (Asher 263). However, she does not reject him in any other way, and she considers this encounter to have been consensual, as “I, for the record, did nothing to stop [Bryce]...did not tell him to get away.” This interaction is not dissimilar from the described earlier with Marcus. She does not answer Marcus’s request for consent. Instead she uses facial expressions, “trying to catch someone’s eye...my eyes were begging for help” (Asher 143). Eventually, she fights Marcus off – “My fingers were fighting to pry your fingers off...I rammed both my hands into your side” and Hannah thinks of this event as assault (Asher 143). When Hannah physically fights him off, the revocation of consent is clear. However, before that these scenes are fairly similar; Hannah says nothing but looks clearly unhappy. In one case, she expects people to ignore her facial expression and in the other she expects people to respond to it. The ambiguous, contradictory portrayal of consent here perpetuates confusion as to what consent actually looks like.

The consent in *Fifty Shades of Grey* is extremely unclear in five of the six events, all of which involve Ana and her boyfriend Christian. Christian often asks for consent, and Ana never thinks of herself as a rape victim, not does the text call her such. However, she often uses the word “assault” to describe the sexual contact while it is occurring, such as when she thinks “there’s no way I can do this anymore” and Christian tells her “I know you’re tired...I’m going to fuck you heard from behind” and so Ana must “brace [her]self for his assault” (James 327-329). Furthermore, she often says “no” when Christian initiates sexual activity, only for him to ignore her. “‘No.’ I protest...’If you

struggle, I'll tie your feet too'" (James 193). Once, he is able to coerce her into letting him continue by saying "Katherine is probably listening outside right now" (James 192). At one point, she reminds him that she hasn't signed the contract, but he proceeds to hit her and assault her. Sometimes she is aroused when she says it, and both she and Christian seem to think that equals consent – an attitude that occurs often in real life. Sometimes these scenes involve long exchanges, in which Ana repeatedly says no and Christian continues with foreplay until she is aroused enough to say yes. In one exchange he says finally, "you can come," to which she thinks "Like I have a choice" (James 275) Christian wields Ana's own body against her. Ana enjoys even Christian's most violent assault, as follows: "I fight my body as it tries to arch in response...his thumb circles my clitoris and presses down...He grabs me suddenly and flips me over...he plunges inside of me. I cry out...I can't take this...*I'm helpless, lost in an erotic torment* (James 195-196, emphasis mine). The text communicates that the ends justify the means - Christian knows she will enjoy it, and therefore it is acceptable for him to continue, even when she rejects him. As with Vivian and Gabriel in *Blood and Chocolate*, ignoring consent is portrayed as yielding positive results.

Women are more often the victim of sexual crimes. Only two of the assaults are against males, and both were underage boys assaulted by adults. At the climax of *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, Charlie remembers watching TV while his "aunt was doing what Sam was doing [i.e. touching his genitals]" (Chobsky 209). Christian recalls that "one of

my mother's friends seduced me when I was fifteen" (James 154). Both occur in books that also include the assault or rape of women. Only women are stalking victims.

### **Attitudes Toward Sex and Sexuality**

In contrast to the limited presence of sexual behavior, attitudes and messages about sex are omnipresent in these books. This is another indicator that the label "sexually explicit" refers to the presence of any sexual themes or content, and that sexuality has an outsize significance in these books compared to the amount of sex the characters have. Attitudes and messages can be either expressed by characters or through the narrative itself.

This quantity of messages adds another layer of complication to the most problematic aspect of these messages. In these books, attitudes and philosophies about sex are mixed to the point of being contradictory. This impacts the results in three ways. For one, several of the emergent themes contradict each other, such as "Sex as a sign of love" versus "Negative/Aggressive Framing". "Mixed Messages Within the Text" emerges as a major theme here. Finally, mixed messages exist not only within books but across the books in the sample. This impedes the study's goal of creating a single operationalized definition for the term "sexually explicit".

Abstinence for teens is a controversial issue, not just for teens, but for adults and those who act *in loco parentis*. This makes the representation of abstinence in these

books particularly important. Some books make no statement on abstinence. Other books express both positive and negative views. For example, in *Gossip Girl*, Blair says that when she and Nate were kissing passionately, “‘like a good girl, she made Nate stop’” (Von Ziegesar 8). However, on the same page, Nate thinks of that as just the “line Blair always gave him,” and Cyrus, Blair’s mother’s boyfriend, tells him, “‘Don’t listen to a word that girl says [regarding sex]’” (Von Ziegesar 8). Total, nine books express some negative attitude towards abstinence. Most common among these negative views are a shaming of those who haven’t had sex (which will contrast sharply with other attitudes and consequences discussed below) and a sense of milestones that need to be met. Virginia decides to seduce Froggy because “I was tired of being the only teenager in America – if not the world – who had yet to French kiss” (Mackler 3). Vivian decides that Adam is not taking the initiative sexually because he is trying to be polite, and thinks, “*I’ll teach you to be less polite*” (Klauser 52). The anonymous gossip columnist says of Nate, “I guess we’re supposed to admire his self-control [for confessing to Blair that he cheated rather than having sex with her] but...so disappointing” (Von Ziegesar 144) When Christian discovers Ana is a virgin, he is appalled: “‘I knew you were inexperienced, but a virgin!’ He says it like it’s a really dirty word” (James 109).

Yet a few books express support for waiting. Four books do an admirable job emphasizing that it is important to take things at your own speed, and in these books, the narrative respects the characters’ choices. In *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, when Charlie asks Sam, “‘What if I don’t want to do anything sexual with [Mary Elizabeth]?’”, Sam replies, “‘Just tell her you’re not ready’” (Chobsky 113). In *Forever*, Katherine holds firm to her conviction that she does not want to rush into sex, and the narrative rewards

her for it. She “asked Michael to go slow with me and he promised he would,” and she repeatedly expresses to Erica that “you should at least love” the person you have sex with (Blume 27, 30). When Michael and Katherine’s relationship becomes sexual, it is satisfying for them, and Katherine’s strong conviction change Erica’s mind: “I want it to be special, like you and Michael...so I’ve decided to wait” (Blume 184). Both *Alice* books also display this respect for the characters and their decisions.

Characters express many philosophies about sex. These can often be seen as dichotomies. For example, “sex as serious” and the related categories can be juxtaposed against “sex is no big deal”. Many books contain both views. Virginia tells herself to “never, ever, every push the relationship thing,” but her sister tells her that “[Losing your virginity] should definitely only happen to someone you love” (Mackler 11, 15).

However, to the extent that one view dominates, it is “sex is serious”. A majority (9 total) make some statement to that effect. Virginia has resisted developing feelings for Froggy, but after he touches her breasts, she begins to “snuggle into the crook of his arm” (Mackler 58). Jane discovers in herself “secret places that had never existed before Buddy” (*All Fall*, Cormier 130). Other related attitudes (“sex as a sign of love,” “sex is for committed couples only,” and “sex requires communication”) are frequently endorsed. In seven books, sex is shown to only be a sign of love. *Patiently Alice* refers to the act of sex as “ma[king] love”, and one character in the book says later, “‘You’ve got to be able to trust’” (*Patiently*, Naylor 16, 57, 218). Alaska is outraged at the portrayal of sex in pornography, as it goes against what sex is meant to be: “‘This is not a man and a woman. It’s a penis and a vagina. What’s erotic about it?’” (Green 87). The only couple in *The Chocolate War*, Tubs and Rita, have a loving relationship: “she was a sweet girl

who loved him for himself alone” (*Chocolate*, Cormier 90). Many books endorse the importance of communication between couples as well. Buddy believes that “he could never explain to [Jane] what happened [to her sister],” but holding back this truth results in their break-up (*All Fall*, Cormier 191). Communication facilitates closeness in *Forever*. Katherine and Michael communicate their anxiety about sex - “Show me what to do...I feel so stupid...’Don’t,’ he said,” and Katherine later states that “You can’t have a decent relationship without honesty” (Blume 56). Only two books express that sex is only a casual act.

Other dichotomies are: sex as pleasurable vs. scary/embarrassing/gross; and sex as normal vs. gross/shameful. Unlike the “serious vs. casual” dichotomy, however, no clear consensus emerges for either of these. Some take a consistent stance. *Looking for Alaska* treats sex light-heartedly, accepting that it is both normal (‘Could the two people who are making out please be quiet?...Those of us who are not making out are drunk and tired’’) and pleasurable (‘’Think [oral sex] would be fun?...DO I?!?!?!!’’) (Green 122, 126). In *Intensely Alice*, Alice believes that sex is pleasurable, a little scary, and ultimately normal: “I think most girls would admit that...even though they want it, they’re scared half out of their minds” (*Intensely*, Naylor 20). Katniss decisively views sex with distaste and fear: “I wonder what he thinks of all this kissing...I’ll never marry, never risk bringing a child into this world” (Collins 72, 310).

However, this is unusual. Jerry wonders “Why did he always feel so guilty [about his sexual desires]?” but Tubs “eagerly anticipates the delights that await him” (*Chocolate*, Cormier 18, 191). *Gossip Girl* endorses the view that (heterosexual) sex is normal: “she was a girl and he was a boy. There have been plenty of songs written about



this” (Von Ziegesar 134). However, Blair also finds her mother kissing Cyrus to be “revolting,” and characters in the book are shamed continually (Von Ziegesar 12). Katherine knows that sex is “natural” but is “embarrassed” when she hears her parents having sex (Blume 52). Additionally, Katherine is aware that sex is pleasurable (“sometimes I want it so much”) but also finds it intimidating, a feeling that Michael shares: “‘You might as well know...I’m scared out of my mind’. ‘Me too’” (Blume 52, 103).

Continually, attitudes are endorsed but then refuted by the text, further complicating matters. After she discovers that her brother date-raped a girl, Virginia finds herself “repulsed by sex” but later realizes that “Forcing yourself on someone is completely different than consensual fooling around” (Mackler 136, 178). Mickey thinks that Jane “shouldn’t be kissing [Buddy] like that, like some animal”; however, Mickey is a villain in the story, and he is not only predatory but insane (*All Fall*, Cormier 164).

The books endorse the idea that “sex is private”. Julia is horrified when Campbell’s friends make crude comments about her, demanding, “‘What did you tell them about me?’” (Picoult 210). Katniss tells herself that “whatever I’m feeling, it’s nobody’s business but mine” (Collins 297). Alice refuses to tell her friends the details of her time with Patrick, as it is “so personal, so intense” (*Intensely*, Naylor 26). However, as discussed elsewhere, this is undermined by the level to which other individuals and society influence teens’ sexual behavior. Characters may wish their sex lives to be private, but they can’t escape from society’s intrusion.

Virginity – having it and losing it – is very important. This is reinforced in many other categories as well. Christian Grey is not the only character to be upset when his

partner is a virgin. Campbell in *My Sister's Keeper* reacts with displeasure to discovering Julia's virginity – “you didn't say you were a virgin” (Picoult 156). In *TTYL*, one character excitedly reveals that she thinks her boyfriend will be “the one I go all the way with” (Myracle 31). Michael asks Katherine if she's a virgin and tells her that while it doesn't matter, “it's better if [he] knows” (Blume 21). When Katherine does lose her virginity to Michael, it feels momentous to her: “I am no longer a virgin” (Blume 106). Alice frets over how far she and Patrick should go sexually: “Sometimes I wish I had answers. I hate having to think, ‘Should I do this? Am I ready? Is it time?...How do you show that you want to without saying you're ready, especially when you're not sure if you're ready or not?’” (*Intensely*, Naylor 47). This adds another dimension to the “sex is serious” theme. Not only is sex serious for a couple, but the decision to have (or not have) sex marks an individual, emotionally and socially.

In over a third of the books, sex is tied to power, and almost always negatively so. This is clear through the number of assaults in the text. Sexual assault results from a need to dominate, rather than sexual desire. However, the texts make the sex/power connection in other ways as well. This connection dominates *Blood and Chocolate*. Throughout the books, statements like the following are made: “reveling in the way she made him drunk with wanting her.... a female on the loose was a dangerous creature... she could challenge another bitch for a male she fancied.... he waited for her to admit his dominance.... I will not offer you my belly. I did not choose you knowingly” (Klause 104, 115, 152). *Fifty Shades of Grey* consistently blurs the lines between BDSM and assault. Both of these are about power, and so the sex/power link is reinforced on nearly every page. Examples include: “I want you to willingly surrender yourself to me...the

more you submit, the greater my joy...Every time you move tomorrow, I want you reminded that I'd been here'...he uses sex as a weapon...'I'm going to [expletive] you on this couch this minute, for my pleasure, not yours'" (James 100, 121, 201, 351).

This echoed in the instances of objectification. Objectification was present in a total of ten books, and both genders were equally objectified. In *The Chocolate War*, the boys "devour [girls] with [their] eyes" (*Chocolate*, Cormier 136-7). The anonymous gossip columnist refers to Blair as "a nice slice of B pie" (Von Ziegesar 144). Vivian refers to one of her mother's sexual partners as her "boy toy" (Klauser 27). This sex/power link supports the negative tone that the books frequently take towards sex.

The link between sex and money also connects to power, and to the negative/aggressive framing of sex. Dan fantasizes that "Serena would be willing to live in squalor" to be with him; Dan's sister Jenny doesn't understand why Chuck "hadn't asked her what her name was" (Von Ziegesar, 50, 187). In the world of *Gossip Girl*, the siblings are showing a sexual naiveté that is notable because they are also the least wealthy characters. Julia knows that Campbell's parents disapprove of her because "she doesn't have a trust fund!", a fact that contributes to their break-up (Picoult 283.) While Tubs knows Rita loves him, he is also desperate to buy her a bracelet for her birthday: "the bracelet was more important than anything else" (*Chocolate*, Cormier 91).

These mixed messages present among and throughout the books are most perhaps irresponsible when expressed about the issue of consent. Nonconsensual sex could be "accepted", "encouraged", "dismissed", or "condemned". Three books contained no statement on consent. Only five books in the entire sample contain an unequivocal condemnation of nonconsensual sex. In *TTYL*, a character states simply "You tell him

no! And if he keeps trying, you slap his face!” (Myracle 173). Two of these still contained mixed messages, but the narrative is very clear which one is correct. Virginia’s parents both accept excuse Bryan for committing date rape, but Virginia is outraged: “Why is my family acting like it’s a normal family meeting?...Neither Mom nor Dad said anything. I wished they would yell at him” (Mackler, 110, 130). The text confirms that Virginia is right to feel this way, and later Virginia expresses outright that “forcing yourself on someone is completely different than consensual fooling around” (Mackler 178). Harry makes excuses for the assault on Karen – “We didn’t have time to rape her...she shouldn’t have been there in the first place” (*All Fall*, Cormier 15-16). But Harry is the perpetrator of this terrible crime, and both the narrative itself and the characters wholly condemn what happened. Buddy even contradicts Harry openly, “That wasn’t fun...raping a girl, for crissake.” (*All Fall*, Cormier 13). Buddy (alone with Jane) is one of the few characters who show a nuanced understanding of consent: “They could not get enough of each other, which made it necessary to have rules. Unspoken rules, but rules all the same, declaring boundaries, how far they could go...Buddy never pushed beyond those silent limits” (*All Fall*, Cormier 130). Here, consent is a necessary but also positive part of a romantic relationship – it lets Buddy and Jane know, not only what they can’t do, but what they can.

But few books are so clear. Most books express some condemnation of nonconsensual acts but accompany it with acceptance or dismissal that the text does not refute. There is a discrepancy between the general philosophy characters express and how they face specific events. In *Gossip Girl*, everyone knows that Chuck Bass is a predator (“he just crawled in bed with [a drunk girl]”) but accept that because “Chuck was a Bass,

and so they were stuck with him” (Vin Ziegesar). But when Chuck attempts to violently assault Jenny, Dan and Serena are appalled: “Get out of here!” (Von Ziegesar 196). Characters often advocate for consent generally but dismiss specific acts of assault as long as they are nonviolent. When an adult male harasses Alice on a plane, she deters him by calling the attention of all the passengers: “Good for you, Alice!” Gwen told me after I’d embarrassed him” (*Intensely*, Naylor 146). However, both *Alice* books mention that a man fondled Pamela when she was twelve – a very serious crime. But when the story is told in *Intensely Alice*, the girls “get into the act” and tell it as a comic story, “shrieking” with laughter (*Intensely*, Naylor 161). Hannah emphasizes that “If you touch a girl, even as a joke, and she pushes you off, just leave her...alone” (Asher 52).

Most characters accept or excuse assault, including Hannah herself, when she witnesses one: “I could have stopped it...If I could have thought about anything I would have opened those doors and stopped it” (Asher 227). Most often, some form of the excuse “that’s just how it is” is provided. In *The Chocolate War*, Archie describes leering at girls as “rape by eyeball...something you do automatically” (*Chocolate*, Cormier 136). Charlie is distraught when he witnesses a rape – “I started to feel sick” - and believes they should tell someone, but “Sam shook her head this time. She then explained about all the things you have to go through to prove it.” (Chosky 32). *Blood and Chocolate* and *Fifty Shades of Grey* both express all four attitudes on consent. And in these two books, as previously discussed, a *lack* of consent is shown to be positive, since both women end up enjoying themselves. In these narratives, society excuses nonconsensual acts; perpetrators of sexual crimes rarely face consequences and never legal ones.

Pressure to have sex further blurs the philosophies on consent. Characters face a great deal of pressure to be sexually active – only in three books do characters experience no pressure at all. Partner pressure is the most common, and it falls overwhelmingly on females. Christian places an inordinate level on pressure on Ana throughout the novel. He repeatedly urges her to sign the contract: “Say yes. To our arrangement. To being mine...if you give yourself to me, it will be so much better” (James 138, 142). When she expresses her concerns with the contract, he pushes harder, sarcastically saying “May I bring your attention to the definition of “submissive” and implying that, if she wants to be a submissive, she needs to be more “docile” (James 208). As described in “sexual crimes,” he places physical pressure on her as well, touching her until she’s so aroused she consents (James 192-194). Katherine faces repeated pressure from Michael: “Please, Michael,...don’t.’ ‘Why not?’ ‘Because...’ ‘Excuses, excuses’...’Your body says you want to...if I didn’t know better I’d say you were a tease.” (Blume 42, 51). Katherine is a confident girl, and it is worth noting that the pressure never actually works. In fact, since she has already made Michael promise “to go slow,” the two of them may just be re-enacting the roles of pursuer and pursued that society expects of them (Blume 27).

Societal standards operate subtly on these characters, with punishing results; in seven books, characters pressure themselves to be sexually active. Overwhelmingly, it is females who face this pressure. Virginia tells herself that she has to “go further than skinny girls...if you can’t sell him on your body, you better overcompensate with sexual perks” (Mackler 15). Occasionally males do as well. Lester, Alice’s older brother (who is presented as an authority) tells her that when it comes to having sex, boys feel, “more

nervous than scared, I'd say. The guy's the one who has to perform'" (*Intensely*, Naylor 20).

Since most of these books are about teens, it is important to evaluate the role that adults play. The adults in these books are very present in the lives of the teenagers. However, their role is not 'always positive. In three books, the pressure/coercion to have sex comes from adults, and half of the books contain a predatory adult. Gestures by predatory adults are often small, but female protagonists notice them, as when Cyrus "hugged [Serena] a little too tightly" (Von Ziegesar 17). Predatory Gabriel in *Blood and Chocolate* has already been discussed. However, Vivian's mother Esme supports his predations and pressures Vivian to have sex with him: "I'll leave you alone to get used to the idea...you've had your taste of rebellion, now it's time to get serious" (Klause 155, 186). Many adults, both predatory and well-meaning ones, offer damaging or contradictory messages about consent, accepting or dismissing nonconsensual acts. Since teenagers learn from the adults in their lives, this may be the cause of the confusion about and disregard of consent.

But in many cases, adults are involved and supportive. "Involved" adults were often "cautious" adults as well. Alice's father wants to be sure she isn't going to stay in Patrick's bedroom when she sees him: "'Does he know yet where you'll be staying?'" (*Intensely* Naylor 20). Jane's parents ask her, "'When are we going to meet this mystery man?...I don't like the idea of having you dash out of the house and into his car'" (All Fall, Cormier 136). A number of adults offered sex talks to their teens. They advocated for the idea that sex is serious, and often emphasized that consent is important. Virginia's adult sister "sat [her] down and had a sex talk...she said...[losing your virginity] should

definitely only happen with someone you care about” (Mackler 7, 11). Katherine’s mother tells her “You have to be sure you can handle the situation before you jump into it...I’m not going to tell you to go ahead but I’m not going to forbid it either”. Later, both Katherine’s mother and grandmother offer her articles and pamphlets containing advice for teenagers about sex (Blume 84, 111, 118). Teens often appreciate this, as Charlie does when his father talks to him: “wear protection...if she says no you have to assume she means it’...Things like sex don’t embarrass my father. And he’s actually very smart about them” (Chobsky 124). Adults often open lines of communication as well, encouraging their teens to come to them Charlie’s father does this. “If you need to talk to somebody you can come to me” (Chobsky 124) Katherine’s grandmother does as well” - “I don’t judge, I just advise” (Blume 118). It is worth noting however, that these talks almost never discussed the mechanics of sex.

The level of pressure and adult involvement shows that to some extent, a teen’s sexuality does not belong only to them. It is heavily influenced, and perhaps even claimed, by others and by society at large. More evidence of this is present when one looks at stereotypes expressed in the books. A number of negative stereotypes surrounding sex exist in society, and unfortunately, these are reinforced in most of these novels. Negative stereotypes are typically gendered, and that is reflected in these books. Both genders were subject to negative, damaging stereotypes.

For boys, the expectation of their behavior is clear. Nine books contain the stereotype that “all boys are horny,” and six reinforce that with the stereotype that “boys who don’t want sex aren’t ‘real men’”. Campbell says that for boys, “when you’re seventeen it’s all about the now, not the after” (Picoult 287). To conform to society’s



standards, they are expected to be sexually active. In *Looking for Alaska*, Alaska tells the Chief what the four “bases” are, and adds, “It’s like you skipped the third grade” (Green 99). Alice’s brother Lester tells her that “‘It’s carved in a man’s brain...a little section...labelled S-E-X’” (Patiently, Naylor 162). This creates an interesting tension when compared with the “internalized shaming” theme: boys who conform to this stereotype nevertheless feels shame when they do so. Negative stereotypes create punishing situations for teens.

For teenage girls, it is even worse. Five books establish that “girls are prudes,” while eleven express that “girls who have/want sex are sluts/dirty”. When Dan hears the rumors about Selena being a “slut,” he thinks, “Serena was no slut; she was perfect, wasn’t she?” (Von Ziegesar 51). Nate has had sex with Serena before, but when she asks him to “sleep with her,” he “ha[s] no trouble imagining her doing all the things he’d heard she’d done” (Von Ziegesar 142). Julia asks Campbell if, now that he’s seduced her, “You can scrape me off your shoe like something you stepped in” (Picoult 216). In *TTYL*, Zoe asks Maddie, “You don’t think she’s going to sleep with [her boyfriend], do you?” to which Maddie replies “She may be a fool...but she’s no skank” (Miracle 36). This double standard is most easily demonstrated by Byron and his friends in *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things*, who throw a “Virgins and Sluts” party: “The cover charge is ten bucks, but it’s a sliding scale, depending on how much skin you reveal” (Mackler 52).

This contradicts the earlier message the books tried to show about “sex as normal,” and it creates a double-bind for teenage girls. If they have or want sex they are sluts; but if they abstain, their friends may shame them, and if they are still virgins, their

partner may shame them. The “slut” is a particularly frightening specter to girls, and they fight to defend themselves from such a charge. Hannah says she “is not, and never was, a slut,” and goes on to say that she was never promiscuous – which implies that if she had been promiscuous, she would have deserved shaming, and that she’s upset because she’s being falsely accused, not because it is wrong to shame girls for being sexual (Asher 30). When Alice buys panties to wear to spend the night with Patrick, she “want[s]..to look sexy but not slutty” – since she is considering having intercourse with him, this phrase makes no sense but still typifies the fear of the archetypal “slut” figure (*Intensely*, Naylor 64).

Related to this, ten books express outright that the burden of sex falls to girls. This burden may take many forms: the responsibility to say yes, the duty to say no, the responsibility to obtain contraception, etc. After Maddie and Angela save Zoe from an uncomfortable situation with a male teacher, Maddie tells her, ““I can’t believe you let yourself be alone with him,”” (Myracle 176). Christian tells Ana, ““you need to sort out some contraception”” because he dislikes wearing condoms (James 271).

Often, several of these stereotypes are displayed in just a line or two. Elizabeth tells Alice that girls should always have “back-up protection...in case she’s in a situation she can’t control” to which Alice replies that “if she can control it enough to get a guy to put on a condom, I’d think she could get herself out of there” (Patiently, Naylor 9). Blair wants to be a “good girl,” so she “made Nate stop [before intercourse]...she kept making him stop” (Von Ziegesar 8). Not only does Blair have to abstain to be a “good girl,” but she is the only who sets the pace. Setting the pace is not necessarily bad; however, it is still a responsibility, and one that females are overwhelmingly given. Virginia’s sister gives her advice that emphasizes these gendered stereotypes about both sexes: “She emphasized the importance of knowing your body...because horny teenage boys aren’t trying to figure that out” (Mackler 11). This attitude not only burdens females, but absolves males of responsibility.

### **Experiences/Consequences of Sexual Behaviors**

While most of the books do not depict orgasm, they do contain portrayals of sexual pleasure. In every book but one, at least one character expresses at least some pleasure from a sexual act. For Virginia, her encounter with Froggy feels like “the nicest moment in [her] entire life” (Mackler 58). When Sam finally kisses Charlie, “it was like everything made sense” (Chobsky 202). Ana describes some of her encounters with Christian as “extraordinary...heavenly...it’s the sweetest, strangest most hedonistic feeling” (James 114, 135, 323). Males and females experienced roughly the same amount of pleasure during sexual acts.

However, there are a wider variety of negative experiences; positive experiences had only one sub-category, “pleasure”, whereas negative experiences had four. As a result, while no single category of negative experience had as many instances as “pleasurable” did, there were more instances of negative experiences overall. Half of the books had “unpleasant or painful sex”, half had “embarrassing or awkward” sex, five had characters experience sex as a “chore”, and five had characters experience sex as “frightening”.

Since most of the books have teenage protagonists who are experimenting with developing sexuality, some distinctions must be made with the negative categories. It can be normal, especially for young people, for sex to be “awkward/embarrassing” or even “frightening.” Therefore, these were further broken down into “normal” and “negative”. For example, Virginia is “worried that Froggy is going to attempt to take off my

shirt...there's no way I'm letting him see my upper arms and thighs" (Mackler 5). This is a normal fear. But when boys try to rape Karen in *We All Fall Down*, "her frantic eyes [were] wide with horror" (*All Fall*, Cormier 11). Obviously, this is a drastically different kind of fear than Virginia's. *Fifty Shades of Grey* contains examples of both. In *Fifty Shades of Grey*, Ana is participating in BDSM for the first time. It is "the most exciting and scary thing [she's] ever done" – a natural reaction to this new experience (James 323). But at another point, Ana finds the games "demeaning and scary," which is not a neutral or normal kind of fear.

The theme of sex as more burdensome for females continued here. Males experiences fewer negative emotions overall (there were fewer male protagonists, which may have made these numbers. Only Charlie in *Perks of Being A Wallflower* experiences fear with sex, and it is "normal fear": "'Are you nervous?'" "'Uh-huh.'" (Chobsky 126). Conversely, four females had "frightening" sex; two instances were "normal" and two "negative". The disparity is even starker in the "unpleasant/frightening" category. There were only two instances of males experiencing "unpleasant or painful" sex; in one it was "normal" and in the other "negative". Women experiences "unpleasant or painful" sex eight times, three of which were "normal" and five of which were "negative". In some cases, this was due to the fact that the breaking of the hymen can make vaginal sex painful for females. In *Forever*, Katherine does not enjoy losing her virginity: "I felt a big thrust, followed by a quick, sharp pain" (Blume 106). Once again, *Fifty Shades* contains examples of both kinds of experience: Ana cries out and "feels a weird pinching sensation" when she loses her virginity to Christian (James 117). However, she has a number of excessively painful experiences later, when Christian is hitting her: "Holy

[expletive] it hurts...the pain pulses and echoes across the line of the belt” (James 274, 505). Other times the sex was not physically painful, but still unpleasant. Julia in *My Sister’s Keeper* says about one encounter that it “wasn’t an improvement on my first experience” (Picoult 157).

Sex as a “chore” was a uniquely female experience; while a third of the books included females feeling sex was a chore, no males experienced that. Ana asks Christian to whip her even though she does not want him to, because “if I do this for him, maybe he will let me touch him” (James 504). In Serena’s encounter with Chuck, she finds that “he was heavy and she couldn’t get him off her,” and while this does not scare her, it annoys her (Von Ziegesar 132).

The exception in the “Negative Experiences” category was “Embarrassing/Awkward”. There were nearly the same number of these experiences for males (five) and for females (six). In *Forever*, Michael is embarrassed when he climaxes early: “I’m sorry...I came before I even got in...I ruined it” (Blume 104). Lara’s attempt to give Pudge fellatio is awkward for both inexperienced teens: “I knew at this point something else was supposed to happen, but I wasn’t quite sure what...she took it out of her mouth and looked at me quizzically. ‘Should I do sometheeng?’” (Green 126). For Nate and Serena, their first encounter was “awkward and painful and exciting and fun, and so sweet they forgot to be embarrassed” (Von Ziegesar 127). As in real life, both genders face possible confusion and embarrassment in their early sexual encounters.

Often, the sex was not completed. In five books total, sexual activity was halted by outsiders, as when “Brad’s father caught Brad and Patrick together” (Chobsky 147). In seven, it was halted by a participant; when Sam begins to touch Charlie, provoking

traumatic memories, “[he] stopped her” (Chobsky 202). Sometimes these coincided; when a participant halted it, it was because outsiders were nearby. At one point, Katherine tells Michael, “Not now...not with them in the other room” (Blume 27). This achieved a certain level of realism, as it can be hard for teenagers to find adequate privacy to experiment sexually. This also enabled authors to reasonably include sexual content without having to include intercourse. Sometimes consensual sexual activity was halted; other times, assault is successfully thwarted

All the books contained negative consequences of sexual behavior, although only twelve contained some positive consequence from sexual behavior. Only three positive consequences, either social or emotional, appeared in at least a quarter of the books. In seven books, characters experienced “happiness” as a result of sex. When Elizabeth in *Patiently Alice* tells her friends that Ross touched her breasts, she is “grinning stupidly” (*Patiently*, Naylor 114). In *Intensely Alice*, the day after their sexual experience, Alice says she is “glad [she] came” to see him (*Intensely*, Naylor 118). Charlie in *Perks of Being a Wallflower* says that “It was the kind of kiss that made me know I had never felt so happy in my whole life” (Chobsky 171).

Sex takes on a social aspect here as well. “Approval from peers” is one of the three common positive consequences, appearing in six books. In *The Hunger Games*, Katniss and Peeta’s kisses are staged to please their audience, and they succeed – “When he kisses me, people in the room actually sigh” (Collins 368). Elizabeth’s friends in *Patiently Alice* are supportive and encouraging when they hear that a boy touched Elizabeth’s breasts, as “for Elizabeth, this was major!” (*Patiently*, Naylor 145).

In seven books the relationship between the partners is strengthened. In *The Earth, My Butt, and Other Round Things*, Virginia overcomes her fear to establish a public relationship with Froggy: “I kiss Froggy Welsh the Fourth...right in front of everyone” (Mackler 244). After Patrick and Alice’s mutual masturbation leads them both to orgasm, Alice “curled up in Patrick’s arms, and all I could say to him was ‘Patrick’” (*Intensely*, Naylor 114). At one point after intercourse, Michael tells Katherine, “‘I’ve never felt so close to you before’” (Blume 140).

By contrast, six different negative consequences all appear in at least a fourth of the books. Notably, one of the most common negative consequence was “breakups/arguments relating to sex”. This can be seen as the inverse of the “relationship/love strengthened” category, but the numbers were even higher – nine books included an argument or breakup related to sex. When Michael finds out that Katherine kissed Theo, he breaks up with her, saying “‘You think things can be the same for us...now?...[They] can’t!’” (Blume 204). Campbell and Julia have several fights relating to their sexual relationship, which culminate in a bitter break-up: “‘What did you think, that it would be fun to go slumming?...And now you can scrape me off your shoe....I don’t need you’...I pushed Julia away from me. Walked down that cemetery hill” (Picoult 216). After Christian whips her for the first time, she screams “‘Don’t touch me!’”; he then tells her “‘I can’t make you happy...not doing what I want to do,’” and she leaves him (James 507, 509). While the nature of the impact varied, sex clearly had a strong impact on the relationship of the participants.

Negative emotional consequences were varied and numerous. A clear link emerged that showed sexual activity to have a negative impact, rather than a positive or



neutral one, on “confidence”. Only three books showed cases of increased confidence or feelings of maturity after sex. Emotions tied to a loss of confidence were more prominent. Nine books contained instances of internalized shame (which will be discussed more below). In nine books, characters regretted the sexual activity they engaged in. After an encounter with Christian, Ana feels like “a receptacle – an empty vessel to be filled at his whim” and when she assures Kate that it was “good sex, not dreadful at all,” Kate responds, “then why are you crying?” (James 201). Later, at the end of the book, Ana reflects that “I did follow my heart, and I have a sore ass and an anguished broken spirit to show for it” (James 508). In *Looking for Alaska*, when Alaska realizes that she cheated on Jake with Pudge, she shouts, “God! How many times can I [expletive] up?” (Green 132). When her counselor asks Hannah, “did anything happen that night that you regret?” she says “Yes,” (Asher 276). Gwen in *Patiently Alice* tells her friends that “If I had to do it again, I wouldn’t make the same mistake...I would have waited” (*Patiently*, Naylor 218).

Additionally, in four books, characters were left confused after sex, a feeling which also causes a loss of confidence. When Campbell discovers Julia is a virgin during their first encounter, she “wonders[s] what happened when you opened yourself up to someone...only [for them] to discover you were not the gift they expected” (Picoult 157). Ana expresses repeatedly that “this is so confusing...this is so much to handle.” (James 126, 176).

Males and females faced negative social consequences and positive emotional consequences in equal numbers. There was less balance for negative emotional consequences and positive social consequences. Females experienced more of both,

which means that total, female experienced more consequences overall (positive and negative, emotional and social) than males. These numbers did not appear to be affected by the gender of the protagonist.

However, there were two notable differences when it came to gender and consequences of sex. Physical consequences present in the books included pain/injury, pregnancy, sexually transmitted disease, and in one case, death. However, the portrayal of physical consequences is deeply gendered. Females experience physical consequences in a third of the books. After the assault, Karen in *We All Fall Down* is left in a coma, “bruised and broken” (*All Fall*, Cormier 5, 10). Ana is left “sore” after five separate sexual encounters with Christian (James 126, 160, 276, 373, 507). Sybil in *Forever* gets pregnant (Blume 145). In *Blood and Chocolate*, Gabriel accidentally kills his lover during sex: “I changed [into a werewolf] when we made love...one night...I couldn’t turn back...in the midst of a kiss, she pulled away from me...called me a filthy beast...I hit her...I didn’t mean to kill her” (Klause 259-260). Males experience physical consequences only twice. One of those instances involves Brad and Patrick from *Perks of Being a Wallflower*, the only gay characters in the entire sample. Brad is badly beaten by his father after being discovered having sex with Patrick: “When he caught them...Brad’s father started beating Brad...the belt kind [of beating]” (Chobsky 147). This is the only time physical harm is done to a male. The only other physical consequence experienced by a male in the sample comes when Michael, in *Forever*, references having had a sexually transmitted disease in the past. This is dealt with in a few paragraphs (“I had it once...VD”) and has no consequences. Physical consequences, therefore, are almost entirely confined to females and gay males.

The second gendered difference occurs in regard to shame after having sex. Females experienced much more “gossip/shaming” as a social consequence. After Maddie takes off her shirt at a party, her friends gossip about her: “I know Maddie was drunk, and I’m not blaming her, but God” (Myracle 140). When Nate confesses to Blair that he cheated on her with Serena, Blair assigns most of the blame to Serena rather than Nate: “Who hasn’t slept with Serena? That nasty, slutty bitch!” (Von Ziegesar 138). Elizabeth in *Patiently Alice* is appalled to hear that Gwen is not a virgin: “But...you go to church!...you could’ve gotten pregnant!” (*Patiently*, Naylor 219). Mickey in *We All Fall Down* abducts Jane Jerome to punish her for her sexual behavior, telling her, “You were with him so you can’t be nice.” (*All Fall*, Cormier 171). This is consistent with the finding in “sexual language” that women experience more sexual gossip.

However, another type of shame was also coded – “internalized shaming”. Here, the numbers were slightly higher for males - males placed shame on themselves in five books, whereas females only did it in four. This is an interesting difference from “internal pressure,” which females experienced much more. Males shame themselves for their desires as well as their actions. Buddy in *We All Fall Down* “never pushes beyond those silent limits” with Jane, and when he gets an erection while touching her, “he fell away from her, shuddering, then became still, silent...tears had spilled from his eyes” (*All Fall*, Cormier 130). Jerry in *The Chocolate War* asks himself, “Why did he always feel so guilty after he looked at Playboy and the other magazines?” (*Chocolate*, Cormier 18). Internalized shame features heavily in *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Ana shames herself continually after encounters with Christian; after she invites him to whip her, she thinks, “What was I thinking? How could I let him do that to me?...Embarrassment and shame

wash over me... This is grief – and I’ve brought it on myself” (James 506, 513-514))

Christian shames himself for his sexual tastes by saying he is “fifty shades of [expletive] up”; after he accepts Ana’s offer and whips her, she calls him a “[expletive] up son of a bitch,” to which he responds, ““You didn’t tell me anything I didn’t already know””

(Janes 269, 508). Both Campbell and Julia in *My Sister’s Keeper* shame themselves for their casual affairs – Julia denigrates herself by thinking “If you want Superman to show up, there’s got to be someone worth saving,” while Campbell calls himself a “coward” (Picoult 158, 288). Clearly, society places a great deal of shame on females for being sexual. But while both genders have internalized societal standards and learned to shame themselves, males in these books seem to have done so to a slightly greater extent.

“Sex was used as a coping mechanism” was placed in the “negative emotional consequence” category. That was a challenging determination to make. However, the prevalence of this behavior in the books makes it notable – characters in seven books use sex to cope in some way. On the tapes that she makes to explain her suicide, Hannah explains why she allowed Bryce to touch her: “I was using you. I needed you so I could let go of me” (Asher 263). After her painful break-up with Campbell, Julia “[expletive] [a stranger] in the backseat of his Honda... I did it because if there was someone else, I wouldn’t feel Campbell on my skin” (Picoult 370). After the attack on Karen, Buddy in *We All Fall Down* uses both drinking and sex to deal with his shame: ““You’re the reason I’m happy. You make the rotten things go away’... Like the gin, [Jane] realized. I’m like liquor to him” (*All Fall*, Cormier 151). After Brad breaks up with him, Patrick “took [Charlie] to a place men go to find each other... sometimes he would talk about Brad... he

ran out of things to keep himself numb” (Chobsky 161, 163). It also continues the trend of giving negative connotations to sex.

The gravest emotional consequence, “trauma” occurred in only two books – *Fifty Shades of Grey* and *Perks of Being a Wallflower*. In both, the trauma was a result of sexual assault. While Ana doesn’t use the word trauma, her feelings and reactions after Christian’s first assault are typical of a victim dealing with trauma: “I feel lonely and uncomfortable here...unhappy in my own company...lurking under my rather numb exterior is a well of tears...’Since [Ana] met [Christian] she cries all the time!’ ....’I felt demeaned, debased, and abused’” (James 278, 285, 293). A consensual encounter with Sam in *Perks of Being a Wallflower* leaves Charlie “in the hospital for the past two months,” after it triggers his memories of being molested by his aunt (Chobsky 208).

Two books contained a unique type of negative consequences – consequences that were not directly related to the sex, but could easily be perceived to be. In *Looking for Alaska*, Alaska commits suicide after cheating on her beloved boyfriend Jake by kissing Pudge. Alaska was shown even before then to be slightly emotionally disturbed, and that same night she was distraught at forgetting the death of her mother. Alaska’s suicide is not a direct result of her cheating; her condition is much more complex. However, that conclusion could easily present itself. Similarly, Hannah in *13 Reasons Why* commits suicide at the end of the book, after having several unpleasant or nonconsensual sexual encounters. Once again, several other aspects of Hannah’s life were causing her distress, and so the suicide cannot be linked solely to these encounters. Teen suicide is such a serious problem that it is important to look carefully at messages that might be sent, as they may cause particularly acute reactions that result in book challenges.

Overall, the consequences present in the books show that people may feel happy and have a stronger relationship after sex, which connects sex to love. However, they are slightly more likely to experience negative feelings and to argue or break up. Sex makes characters vulnerable to a wider variety of negative experiences and consequences than positive ones, conveying the message that sex should not be taken lightly.

### **Significance**

Most often, the sexual content was significant; rarely was it incidental. Notably, little to no sexual behavior had to occur for sex to be significant in the text; the significance could come from the meaning these sexual encounters held. This is consistent with the results of other categories which show sexual content is disproportionate to sexual behavior. However, the role sex plays in the novels also gave significance in several instances. As discussed above, sexual contact keeps the characters in *The Hunger Games* alive, as it pleases their audience. In other books, characters' thoughts and discussions about their developing sexualities are given a great deal of focus and significance. *TTYL* is structured as a series of instant messages, so the entire story consists of characters talking about sex. While they occasionally discuss acts, the girls more often discuss feeling and beliefs they have – “I’m glad you went on two whole dates before making this life changing decision’...’if it’s just biology, it’s not necessarily ick’...’I’m a growing girl. I have needs’” (Myracle 34, 10, 121). In *The Earth, My Butt, And Other Round Things*, Virginia’s attitudes about sex are shown to evolve a great deal, until she finally realizes that she does not need to her obey her self-inflicted “Fat Girl Code of Conduct” (Mackler 14, 244). In *Patiently Alice*, sex is a major topic of

discussion for Alice and her friends. Throughout the book they share thoughts on contraception (“I’ll have condoms for anyone who needs them”), losing virginity (“If I had to do it over again, I wouldn’t make the same mistake”), abstinence (““I don’t think I’m going to have sex until I get married’...it was something to think about”), and wonder about the experience of having sex (“It was supposed to feel good, wasn’t it? Isn’t that what sex was about?”) (*Patiently*, Naylor 8, 218, 220, 221). This may be done to give verisimilitude, since teenagers develop their sexualities slowly and think a great deal about sex even when they are not engaging in sexual behaviors. It also creates, once again, the sense of sex and sexuality as serious and as influenced by society.

## Detail

No level of detail – “little”, “some”, “or great” – dominates in either the “feelings” or the “acts” category. There are slightly more instances of “acts” described overall. Each level of detail is contained in roughly eight books in the “feelings” category and ten in the “acts” category. Most books contain multiple levels of detail, which may account for the balance among the levels.

Strong language is used to describe feelings in a third of the books. The strong language used is almost exclusively sensual. Ana describes sex in *Fifty Shades of Grey* with phrases like “I fall apart in his hands, my body convulsing and shattering into a thousand pieces” (James 116). During sex with Michael, Katherine, “got so carried away I grabbed his backside with both hands, trying to push him deeper and deeper into me” (Blume 140).

Strong language is used more often to describe acts; eleven books have at least one instance of either “graphic” or “sensual” language, and four contain “both”. “Graphic” is much more common, being present in a total of nine books, and here a disturbing pattern emerges. In seven of these nine instances, the graphic language is describing a non-consensual or dubiously consensual act. Hannah bluntly says that Bryce “finger[s] her...sliding his fingers in and out” (Asher 265). As discussed above, this act was framed as consensual, but may not have been. Charlie acknowledges that his description of a rape is blunt and unpleasant: “I wish I could describe this a little more nicely without using words like ‘penis’...after a while the boy pushed the girl’s head down...finally, she stopped crying because he put his penis in her mouth” (Chobsky 31).



Acts with “sensual language” are typically framed as romantic. They often contain the same level of explicit content (including references to anatomy) and may be even longer and more detailed than acts with “graphic language. What separates them is tone and the presence of consent. In *Intensely Alice*, Patrick “gently slid his hand into [Alice]’s underwear and touched [her]. [Her] throat filled with excitement. [She] guided his fingers just where she wanted them, showing him how hard to press...a few minutes later, [she came]” (*Intensely*, Naylor 114). Patrick touches Alice the same way Bryce touches Hannah; however, Patrick is not described as “fingering” Alice. The act receives more description, contains more emotion, and yet is not “graphic” but tender and romantic. This constructs a dichotomy: either the act can be sensual and consensual or graphic and nonconsensual, but not both.

After comparing the same act described with different language in different books, we can also compare different acts described differently in the same book. *We All Fall Down* contains both kinds of language, allowing for easy comparison. Buddy and Jane’s consensual, loving encounters are described thus: “cupping her breasts drove him wild, thick juices in his mouth, the threat of a sudden, embarrassing eruption” (*All Fall*, Cormier 130). In stark contrast, when Harry and his gang attempt to gang rape Karen, “they [hold] her arms to the wall while Harry screwed her.... his ass gleaming in the light” (*All Fall*, Cormier 10). The author clearly has no difficulty describing sexual acts sensually and graphically. However, he chooses to write the consensual one as romantic and sensual, and the nonconsensual one as graphic and violent.

Of course, we would not expect nonconsensual acts to be described in romantic and sensual terms. (When sensual language is used to describe nonconsensual acts in

*Blood and Chocolate* and *Fifty Shades of Grey*, it is because the characters and the narrative believe those acts are consensual, as discussed in “sexual crimes”). It is also not surprising that sexual crimes are often graphic; however, using graphic language almost exclusively for nonconsensual acts creates a disturbing link between the two. This provides continued evidence of both problems with consent and a negative/aggressive framing of sexuality in these books.

## Discussion

The inconsistencies and mixed messages present in these books make it impossible to create a simple definition for the “sexually explicit” label. However, there are twelve themes that appear fairly consistently in these books, and which librarians may fairly expect to see in a book that received this challenge: the negative/aggressive framing of sex and sexuality; a flawed understanding of consent; a burden on female sexuality; vague physical descriptions of sex, especially for women; a sexualized/ erotic tone; homophobia combined with a lack of LGBT representation; society influencing sexuality; sex as serious; the significance of sex as disproportionate to the quantity of sexual behavior; and mixed/contradictory messages within a book.

Most of these books frame sex in a negative, aggressive or violent way. This may be the most pervasive theme present, and it is certainly the subtlest. Van R. Newkirk II commented that today, “We don’t teach [teens] the sex-positive meaning of consent, as a joyful, fluid, rational entrance into an enriching relationship. We don’t teach them that ‘yes means yes’ and that sex isn’t a dominion or a reward for power, but an ultimate expression of agency” (fivefifths, 2017). This goes beyond the issue of consent specifically and into a larger cultural understanding of sex. That does not mean that the books denounce sex. Characters have positive experiences and express positive attitudes. Rather, it is shown that the nature of sex is (at least partly) negative, and that sexual interactions frequently involve an imbalance of power. Sexual crimes are only the most obvious example. This framing is present in “sexual language”, where types of language,

including gossip, allow some characters to assert power over others. It is present in a number of attitudes and stereotypes about sex that establish sex as shameful and as part of a power exchange. It is present in the number and variety of negative consequences that sexually active teens face. In these books, sex is accompanied by aggression and domination, and can cause (or threatens to cause) a great deal of pain and damage.

Newkirk's quote also applies to consent issues more specifically. The portrayal on consent in these books is deeply problematic. Violent assault occurs in most of the books, sometimes repeatedly. Perpetrators go unpunished. Yet the consent issues go deeper than that, and reflect a basic misunderstanding of consent for all parties. A number of books make statements about how non-consensual sexual activity is wrong, and asking for consent is important. Yet these characters do not know how to ask, or how to handle the response. Scenes are portrayed as consensual that are not, either because larger forces make consent impossible in the situation or because the characters send contradictory signals. Characters who advocate for consent at some points dismiss it at other points, particularly when they are confronted with a real-world situation. The narrative and the characters "allow" a certain level of nonconsensual activity to occur; if an assault is not violent, it is likely to be viewed as insignificant. And in most books, a passive attitude prevails that "this is just how it is". Adults express these attitudes as well as teens, which is troubling. These attitudes, which reflect real life, are intergenerational, and as such are deeply entrenched.

These issues lead to a third: sexuality as a burden on females. As recent events have made clearer than ever, this also mirrors the real world (Blinder, Farrow). The ultimate responsibility, for good or ill, falls to females. They must obtain contraception;

they must prevent assault; they must be the ones to set boundaries. They must have sex, but not too much sex, or too often, or with the wrong people. When they make mistakes, they will be the ones attacked, judged, and shamed. When there are negative consequences, they are more likely than their male partners to feel the impact, particularly if those consequences are physical. When sexual crimes occur, they will be the victims. (Sexual assault is particularly feminized because no men experience it; only pre-pubescent boys).

When female sexuality is not a burden, it is often treated as indecent, and a topic to be obscured. Sexuality in general is portrayed this way, although it is more prominent for females. The descriptions of sexuality are typically vague, and little information is offered. This may be due to pressure from young adult publishers. However, it does create a stumbling block for teens' sexual development. Teenagers learn from media. Without realistic portrayals of sex and sexuality, teens may not receive the information they need to enjoy safe, consensual sexual encounters.

While authors avoid explicit sex (especially sexual behavior), they do try to appeal to teens' developing sexuality. To do that, they give the books a sexualized or erotic tone. Sexual behavior is often framed romantically, especially by females. A great number of books use sensual language. They also employ rhetorical sleights, such as including kinky sexual acts or having sexual activity be interrupted, that allow authors to avoid portraying intercourse without forcing authors to exclude sexual content entirely or require their characters to abstain.

Sex and sexuality in these books is strictly hetero-centric. *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* aside, these books do not acknowledge LGBT teens, and same-sex content is

nearly absent. This, combined with subtle and overt displays of homophobia (which even *The Perks of Being a Wallflower* contains), shows a disregard for the developing sexuality of LGBT teens. These books ignore that subset of the population. Given the recent efforts to diversify YA literature, and the recent trend toward acceptance of LGBT people, this is a surprising finding.

Sexuality is a key part of one's identity, and ideally, a teen's sexuality should belong only to themselves (and perhaps shared with their partners). While the books acknowledge that this should be the case, it also shows that it is not. In these books, sex is socially embedded. Sex is a means by which people build and sever bonds, a means by which society write large judges teens, and a means by which society teaches teens to judge themselves and each other. The dominance of social norms related to sex often trumps the individual sexual agency of the teenage characters. Their choices are influenced by a sense of what they "should" do. Social norms also cause teens to experience a great deal of shame related to their sexuality, and to inflict that shame on themselves as well as others.

One theme slightly more positive than the rest emerges as well: that sex is serious and important. Encouraging teens to take sex seriously discourages them from engaging in reckless and risky behaviors. Taking the decision to engage in sexual behavior seriously, and only doing so when ready, also makes it more likely that teens' sexual encounters will be mutually satisfying and have positive consequences. But this emphasis comes with a negative side as well. Sexual experience, or lack thereof, becomes a status marker, and teens are judged by society and their peers accordingly. This emphasis also

makes sex – not just the activity, but concerns and fears about it – into source of distress and a drain on mental and emotional energy.

This discussion makes the results sound clear; but in fact, this is not the case. Mixed and contradictory messages are so omnipresent that their existence is its own emergent theme. It is possible that challenges are more often due to the messages present in the book than the content.

Nearly all eleven components that form the “sexually explicit” definition are negative. This cannot be the basis for excluding these books from our collections. Nevertheless, this information is critical. Knowing this, we may treat the challenges with more understanding. We cannot remove books, but these results show that adults may reasonably be concerned about some of this content, and so we can address their concerns more fully. When we receive challenges of books that we have not read, or that are not on the ALA list, we may use this information to gain a sense of what sexual content is present. Most importantly, this information can serve us in selecting materials. Clearly, we as librarians need to make an active effort to acquire books that present sex positively; that provide clear messages on consent; that are supportive of teen sexual development and especially girls’ sexual development; that represent our LGBT teens; that clarify rather than confuse; and that provide at least some clear information on sexuality. This is the best thing that we can do to account for the shortcomings in the sexual content of these books.

## **Limitations**

This study faced a few unavoidable limitations. Since 85% of book challenges go unreported to the ALA, the population of titles is incomplete and the sample size is small. Furthermore, self-censorship by librarians means that many potentially controversial titles are simply not selected, which further impedes the ability to determine the entire population of books that have been the subject of censorship for reasons of sexual content. Finally, I was the only coder of these books, and so the results rely on my interpretations.



## Conclusion

Sexuality is complicated, even for adults. The challenge of navigating developing sexuality for teenagers can be stressful and frightening, not just for the teens but for adults who care about them. And while sexually explicit reading material can provide teens with valuable information and insight regarding sex and sexuality, it can also send negative or even toxic messages. Librarians who develop collections for young adults must engage in a careful balancing act. They cannot act *in loco parentis* and should not accede to pressure to censor materials, whether that comes from external sources or the desire to self-censor. At the same time, they do have to show care and respect for their vulnerable, easily influenced teenager patrons. From the data available on challenged books, we cannot draw one simple definition of “sexually explicit”. However, the set of sexually-related themes that emerges from these books may provide librarians with valuable guidance as they select materials for young adults and process patron challenges to “sexually explicit” material.

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## Appendix: Sample Titles

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