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Is This My Childhood.

My first book I remember loving is *Honey My Bunny*. It is still my favorite childhood book; I can even remember the song the three little honeys sang. “We are the little honeys, a little honey is sweet, quack-quack squeak-squeak, thump your great big feet” (Jeram)... Anyway, I can remember my favorite stories with alacrity, I reread them so much. I can name my favorite books for nearly every stage of my childhood. *Nancy Drew* when I was eight or nine, *Harry Potter* (for always and all time) the *W.I.T.C.H.* series for my entire preteen years, and I can remember with incredible clarity my favorite book when I was eleven, *Chase the Lightening*. I even remember the inside flap cover art, a deeply-tanned, rather brawny, shirtless man holding a tousled, half-dressed woman in his arms, her head thrown back in ecstasy.

Oh, I forgot to mention, *Chase the Lightening* is a paper-back, soft porn romance novel. Does that strike you as odd that an eleven year old had read that? It didn't strike me as out of the ordinary, at least not until much later. It seemed natural that I should be reading this; I have always been advanced in my reading level and I just thought it was the next in progression of material. Little kids read picture books, bigger kids read short stories, teens read YA, and adults read smut and the newspapers. Since I had already delved into teen-lit, why not try the ones my mother took to the beach? She is actually the one who bought it for me, told me to pick out something that I would like. There is always that wall of romance novels in grocery stores, and on that day it caught my interest. I remember her asking me if I was sure this is what I wanted,

and after nodding my head,

she said “fine, just let me borrow it when you are done.”

This nonchalant exchange only lasts in my memory because one, I really did love that book (it was full of magic and intrigue and the old West) and two, another memory later in life cemented it into place. One time in eighth grade, what was I then- thirteen, I brought a book to read for study hall. I think it was something like *Seduce me at Sunrise* or *Mine till Morning*, something gaudy and audacious and most assuredly by Harlequin. My one friend was leaning over my shoulder at a particularly steamy part and had asked,

“You’re allowed to read this stuff?”

My first reaction upon hearing this was surprise, was I not supposed to, and then incredulousness, I had been reading novels like this for years. I explained my nonplussed look by stating my theory on book evolution, and she just laughed.

“Makenshi, these are for older women and they’re like guilty pleasures, sexual fantasies. Not everyone reads them.”

Well color me stunned, I had had no idea. Unaware, I had been deep in the realm of late-late-night reads and hidden, hurried messages. Now, at eighteen, I realize it is no big deal to read *50 shades of Grey* or anything else I want (including material with more depth) but looking back, it unsettles me how young I started and how little anyone cared. At eleven, I am pretty sure I hadn’t even hit puberty yet. At eleven, I am pretty sure I was a little scared to. Besides the fact that my sexual knowledge was levels above my sexual and physical maturity, it was how much my mom’s indifference encouraged me to believe that what I was doing was okay. Not saying I was neglected in any way, it is just because she also didn’t see what was wrong with me reading ahead of my years. Honestly, it didn’t affect me in any unsavory way- maybe I have read the

phrase ‘bodice ripping’ a tad too many times, but what worries me more is that it *could* have influenced my behavior. I was young, I was impressionable, what if instead of thinking ‘This is for when you are older’ I had thought “This is what you should be doing now”?

Am I alone in being unsettled? *Is it normal for a child to read such things?* If that is the mindset I am entering into, then this anecdote is well deserved. This is just a small, practically quaint example, with no lasting effects, of how kids these days are exposed to too much adult content. Children, and honestly anyone who doesn’t do their own taxes or bills is still a child, are being exposed to material beyond their understanding. We, and I include myself in this, are being shown a world we are not ready for. Some may even think they want it, but only because constant and social media misleads them into that thought. I only regaled with a tale mentioning the lack of concern with *books*, not everyone reads that much, but I was also exposed to T.V. and movies that were rated way above PG as well. Mixed in with *Disney’s Beauty and the Beast* was *Dirty Dancing*. I know I cannot be alone in this way of selective safe-guarding. I wasn’t allowed to swear, taught to be polite, keep your hands to yourself, don’t talk to strangers, yet there was very little parental-blocking on what content I was exposed to. I am sure my unlimited access didn’t even cross my parent’s minds, ‘there’s no harm to it and it is not like we raised our kids to think that everything they see is acceptable’. Exactly so, but I don’t remember any clear talks about what is *unacceptable*.

I believe I got off lucky, maybe even with the norm having very little to say about explicit-content restriction, I still know what is and is not appropriate in social settings. Yet risky behavior and classified as ‘mature’ actions, glorified by social media, seem like what is considered appropriate for me and my generation. The media portrays youth as a wild, fast thing, and many would be hard pressed to disagree, but it is only because they have been conditioned to

believe that the representations are real. More movies and T.V. shows come out depicting the ‘crazy teenage years’ than you could shake a stick at, and the depictions are so much more virile than reality. This over-stimulation though leads to real-life simulation. To be told, shown, and described as little hellions with loose morals and lunatic nights leads to a lot of emulation. I think, therefore I am. I think this is how I should be acting, therefore I am. Our fantasy is becoming our reality is morphing into our surreality, and it is just starting younger and younger.

Media is spoon feeding us our own addictions and diseases just so they have something later to talk about, and no one notices. For example, teen pregnancy. Generally believed to be on the rise due to shows such as *Teen Mom*, *Teen Mom Two*, and *The Pregnancy Pact*, but in all actuality the universal rate has decreased and the United States rate is at the lowest it has been since the 1940s (Park). Why the constant portrayal of knocked up ninth graders then? So kids will believe it and not care too badly that they become a statistic, since ‘everyone’ is doing it. And doing what exactly, having kids? Sex? The medial portrayal is that if you haven’t had sex yet (doesn’t even matter what age or gender you are) you are lacking. In this industry, sex sells, and if you don’t buy into it, they don’t invest in you. Kids only have pocket change and are still considered potential buyers. The countless insinuations, the multitude of subliminal messages, the point blank propoganda of rampant youth sexual activity is ridiculous in its enormity. It cannot be escaped, and the problem is, no one tells you to try and outrun it. Whether vocalized or not, there is encouragement from all spectrums to conform with societal norms, even if the norm hasn’t been explicitly defined. The invisible and not-so invisible pressure to do what is expected is dimming the bright-eyedness of youth. Everyone knows what sex is, every guy, girl, and child is aware where babies come from. What they are not aware of is the metaphysical importance of such an act. Sex changes you, adds a new element to your life and imbibes an experience

heretofore unknown.

The problem is, the unknown is becoming known far, far too early. At least, that is what I hear from the radio and MTV. *Skins*, *Awkward*, *Degrassi*, *Secret Life of the American Teenager*, all dramatize normal adolescent issues by blowing them out of proportion to real-life but keeping them in proportion to the assumed views of real-life. It is common thought that thirteen, fourteen, fifteen are acceptable ages to have sex by. If not by adults, then by young adults who thought that is what the adults expected. Statistics show that in general, less than 50% of high school students are not virgins, and that 58% consider sex at high school age unacceptable. Statistics then show that in younger age brackets, ten to fourteen, there is a rise in sexual activity (Manlove and Moore). Wait up, What? It is simple. My generation is exposed to sexually explicit content, simulated murder scenes, and glamorized drug use. A problem, yes, but the younger generation is doubly exposed because they are witness to that and to our perceived image of us. Children have better access to the internet now than we ever did, and the minority's lifestyles are spilling over into the newsfeed as the majority's consensus. We distort our view of ourselves based on what society says, and that distortion is seeping into the younger generation, making what society says true. It is a horrible loop, and not many step back and think 'there is something not right about all this.'

Sex is just one of the three main aspects of current youth culture; the other two are drugs and violence. At the age of eighteen, a U.S. youth will have seen 16,000 simulate murders and 200,000 acts of violence (APA). I even think I exceed that average due to my extensive obsession with TNT dramas and Chuck Norris. Witnessing that amount of violence, even if it is fake, leaves a toll. It can desensitize us and lead to a lack of empathy for human suffering, in fact, over 10% of youth violence is a direct result from television (Eron). I don't want to kill

anyone's dreams, but maybe *The Hunger Games* had poor timing. The violence and sex tie in with today's rape culture as well, which is just another demonstration that preconceived notions perpetuated by the media have the power to influence. They could use their powers for good, but they are too busy making deadlines. Yet, still, influence they do. Illicit marijuana use has risen 14.2% in the last few years for 12th graders, due mainly to the changing views that marijuana is not dangerous (NIH). All the media coverage of medical marijuana has encouraged youth to see it as a safe alternative. It doesn't deter use much either that the most popular artists are singing about hitting the kush a day and rolling up, riding out and what not. Hard drug use has gone down, but over the counter and prescription medicine is just as prevalent as earlier in this decade. Some influences can be lasting, and that's what the entertain-me entrepreneurs are aiming for. There are too many entities of considered authority of what's cool, of what you should do, on how you should act, on who you should be. There are too many image-makers and scene-qualifiers running amok and causing havoc for kids even to know which way is the 'right' way to grow up.

I think Social Media is numbing and distancing youth from their bodies and is using them as fodder for explicit entertainment. I feel that there is no one to stop it because the adults are just as brainwashed as we are. This is an appeal against sexualized, depersonalized, non-childhood. I don't feel that our current view of youth is right. The ever-devolving yet hyper-maturized 'scene' of childhood viewed through monitors is becoming the norm of formative years. The landscape of childhood is changing into a computer screen-scape that is straining the very foundations that make up innocence. We are losing our minds amidst their thoughts, and we don't even realize it.

Does that unsettle you? What can you do?

What can be done.

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