Introduction, Description and Sales

Colorful, graphically bold, with photographs of adolescent girls laughing and sharing secrets, with titles that play on words and sayings of popular culture like, Best Friends for Never and Because I’m Worth It, these books are an example of marketing brilliance. A trip down the teen aisle in any major bookstore will find these books displayed, covers facing forward, among rows of indistinguishable spines. Eight books in The Clique series and twelve Gossip Girl titles holding #1 positions on the New York Times best sellers list make it apparent these series are a phenomenon with traction. Sales of the Gossip Girl books are in excess of 4.5 million since debuting in 2002.¹ The Clique had sold over 90,000 copies before the third title was released.² Though declaring age appropriateness as twelve and up for The Clique, and fifteen and up for Gossip Girls, many pre-teens are joining in as well.³ Given their overwhelming popularity, examining these books offers an opportunity to understand one dimension of this complex time in a young person’s development. Answering questions regarding the reasons for the attraction to this material may provide insight into the minds of these young readers. Looking into whether the appeal is inspiration, aspiration, or just plain fantasy, and how the material suggests fulfilling these desires, offers entry into a world that is often off-limits to outsiders.

The early teen years are a time of enormous transition and, in current society, a juncture that is often without rituals or specific guidelines for these changes. Young adults frequently

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³ Ibid.
choose their peers for guidance and, notwithstanding a supportive home base, prefer to go to friends when dealing with new challenges. The pages of these books allow the adult reader to see the many faces of a teen-ager, sometimes a clear picture of how these young people see themselves, and sometimes as they are seen by others. Traditionally referred to as the *Bildungsroman*, this genre follows a central character's coming-of-age. A psychological as well as literal journey into adulthood, the purpose is to achieve maturity and reach “reconciliation between the desire for individuation (self-fulfillment) and the demands of socialization (adaptation to a given social reality).”

Taking into account the influence of marketing and media, these ‘tween books will be examined for insight into the voice these particular books give young people at this complex stage in their lives.

**Content Analysis**

The first book of *The Clique* and *Gossip Girl* series finds beautiful girls living a privileged life in which they are given everything needed and everything desired. The girls of *The Clique* live in Westchester. “I heard West Chester is like the Beverly Hills of New York,” and with opulent homes and an expensive private high school, this location is as much a character in the book as any of the girls.

The girls of *Gossip Girl* live on the Upper East Side, a section of Manhattan housing the rich and powerful. “We all live in huge apartments with our own bedrooms and bathrooms and phone lines. We have unlimited access to money and booze and whatever else we want, and our parents are rarely home, so we have tons of privacy. We’re smart, we’ve inherited classic good looks, we wear fantastic clothes, and we know how to

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party.”6 There are the primary personalities in each book. The Clique has Massie and Alicia ruling; for Gossip Girls, Blaire and Serena dominate, with hangers–on Dylan and Kristen, and Kati and Isabel, respectively. These girls want what they can’t have and, since what they can’t have is not material, they struggle for popularity and absolute influence over their peers. These are the girls “born to it—those of us who have everything anyone could possibly wish for and who take it all completely for granted.”7 The boys in both books serve to advance the plot of the girl’s story lines, but carry few plot lines of their own. The parents, rarely present, throw out one-line platitudes that offer little life guidance, and their answers often lie in money, “His voice was firm and fatherly. ‘I’ll buy you another skirt’” is the answer to a fashion mishap.8 The protagonists of the stories have their foils. In The Clique, Massie faces off against Claire, the daughter of her father’s college friend, who does not belong to their social class and who threatens Massie’s ruling status. Gossip Girl pits Blair against Serena, elite against elite, in a fight to the end for the ruling crown of the U.E.S. Gossip Girl feels like the older sister, or maybe cousin, to the younger-feeling Clique. The unofficial and unrelated prequel to Gossip Girl, The Clique, is the book that ‘grows up’ the girls that will sit at the helm of the Gossip Girl novels. They have learned to dress, accessorize, and rule in school, and are ready to take these skills into the adult world where their money and status buffer them from the hard elements of reality.

There are common plotlines. There is the most popular and feared girl who dictates the accepted behaviors to the rest in her group. The narrator of Gossip Girl warns, “If we aren’t careful, S is going to win over our teachers, wear that dress we couldn’t fit into, eat the last olive,

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7 Ibid. 3.
have sex in our parents beds, spill Campari on our rugs, steal our brothers’ and our boyfriends’ hearts, and basically ruin our lives.”⁹ There are the two or three followers who will do, wear, or say anything to keep favor: “Massie clicked her phone shut and smiled. She knew her friends would do most of the dirty work, which was exactly what she wanted.”¹⁰ There is the underdog, usually one who threatens the status quo and is subjected to ruthless backstabbing and game playing by the primary players, who chip away at her self-esteem and social standing. “‘I don’t understand why you hate me so much.’ Claire’s voice was shaking. ‘Claire, this isn’t Clueless, okay?’ Massie snapped. ‘Why don’t you just make your own friends and worship me from afar like everyone else?’”¹¹ Not that the impact on their target is given any consideration by those involved. Peripheral crowds of admirers dress and act as mirrors to this popular group, following every move. Claire, illicitly using Massie’s phone to IM the rest of Massie’s group, tells them to wear colored tights to school which they do, believing the order has come from Massie. In the days following, “bright-colored tights began popping up on legs around school...Claire could not believe she was responsible for this trend...If they only knew.”¹²

Alternate teenagers in the books, like Vanessa of Gossip Girl, are “an anomaly at Constance, the only girl in the school who had a nearly shaved head, wore black turtlenecks everyday, read Tolstoy’s War and Peace...She had no friends at all at Constance.”¹³ Those who don’t fall victim to the pressure of the select few are represented as weird losers rather than

⁹ Ziegesar 4.  
¹⁰ Harrison 56.  
¹¹ Harrison 55.  
¹² Ibid. 150.  
¹³ Ziegesar 54.
positive alternatives. Destined to social exile for the rest of their existence they are, as Massie and her gang has labeled them, “LBR’s” or, losers beyond repair.14

The Clique

Massie Block, the leader of The Clique, is smart and out-spoken and indulged, sporting a brunette bob and designer clothing that is test-run on the mannequin she keeps in her room for just such a purpose. On the first day of school, “It wore a lavender Moschino mini, a grey wide-neck slouchy t-shirt, and silver Jimmy Choo sandals.”15 Her circle of BFF’s is a tight knit and elite group of the richest, prettiest, and most popular group in their fictional school, Octavian Country Day School, where “the parking lot was filled with Mercedes, Lexus SUV’s, BMW convertibles, and even a few limos.”16 Known as “the Pretty Committee,” these girls are the ruling influence at OCD and their time consists of collecting ‘gossip points’ for the juiciest tidbits re everyone else at school, and making everyone aware of their superior status. When Massie’s parents invite the Lyons, old family friends, to stay in their guesthouse while relocating to Westchester, Massie’s life is thrown into a tailspin as her parents assign her the task of helping their daughter, Claire, acclimate to her new surroundings. She asks Isaac, her driver, “‘What’s so hard about buying a house?’ Massie asked. ‘Are they poor?’ She said ‘poor’ the same way her mother said ‘fat.’ ‘No,’ Isaac said. ‘But not everyone can afford everything they want, exactly when they want it.’”17 Massie is not happy to have this interloper around her social circle and spends the rest of the book making sure that Claire holds no doubts about her infinitely inferior position, both at home and at school. Massie’s friends are only too pleased to help

14 Harrison Best Friends, 44.
15 Harrison 22
16 Ibid. 47.
17 Ibid. 15-16.
bludgeon Claire’s confidence. Claire desperately wants to fit in and be liked, and she is willing to do whatever it takes, even if it means sacrificing her self-respect.

Gossip Girl

The cover of the first Gossip Girl features three girls laughing. In a nod to the power of marketing, one of the girls pictured is African-American, but the text contains only one reference to a minority who makes only the briefest appearance, never to be mentioned again. This omission seems a minor technicality to Cecily von Ziegesar, author of the popular series. Zeigesar is writing a story of growing up privileged in a world where most are not. The discrepancy between the cover of the book and the characters of her story is no greater than the discrepancy between the girls featured in her books and her readers. “Ever wondered what the lives of the chosen are really like,” teases the opening page.18 The story begins with Blair’s family throwing a dinner party with the surprise guest of honor, Blair’s former best friend, Serena van der Woodsen, to whom she has not spoken in over a year; she is returning to NY after being expelled from an elite boarding school. Rumors abound as to the reasons for Serena’s dismissal but, more than anything else, Blair is just plain bummed that she is back. After missing her initially, Blair, in time, felt the advantages of her absence. It was easier to shine without Serena and, having fashioned an existence that did not include her, Blair is reluctant to reestablish an alliance with her old friend. Serena “was gifted with the kind of coolness you can’t acquire by buying the right handbag or the right pair of jeans. She was the girl every boy wants and every girl wants to be.”19 The fact that Blair’s boyfriend, Nate, cannot form a coherent sentence with Serena in the room does not help the situation either. The book follows

18 Zeigesar 3.
19 Ibid. 17.
the struggle between the two girls as they try to find equilibrium within their relationship, negotiate college admissions, and understand the young men in their lives.

Blueprint for ‘Tween

Children’s literature is accessible as a blueprint of youth in any particular era. Whether the blueprint depicts the child or the adult’s perception of the child is the mystery to be unraveled. What is clear is that the books in a given time period reflect a pattern of development, both socially and interpersonally, and are worth examining for clues as to what society designates as acceptable for its youth. Reflecting on the series discussed, one sees evidence of a culture that no longer knows how to define childhood. These are girls who have grown up with the “quasi-European idea that the more access kids have to alcohol, the less likely they are to abuse it.”20 Gossip Girls’ Blair, complaining about her mother’s new boyfriend, would seem standard fodder for a teen book, but the method used to handle her displeasure is stated in a precipitately adult manner, as “Blair took another gulp of her drink. The only way to tolerate the thought of her mother sleeping with that man was to get drunk—very drunk.”21 Age twelve finds the girls in The Clique dieting, “There’s a Zone lunch in my backpack...My mom and my sister’s are doing it too. We all want to lose fifteen pounds by Halloween,”22 shopping, “Massie slid open one of her closet doors and Claire saw at least fifty pairs of shoes tucked away in different cubby-holes”23 and dressing, “she stood back, crossed her arms, and appraised her weapons, wondering which was suited best for tonight’s battle: Jimmy Choo high-heel mules,

20 Ibid. 6.
21 Ibid. 5.
22 Harrison 39.
23 Ibid. 14.
Miu Miu wedges, Calvin flats, Jimmy Choo sandals, DKNY stiletto boots, or the Marc Jacob pumps?" This behavior belies their young age.

In trying to define children’s literature as a medium, publisher and author Clifton Fadiman examines many of the components by which literary genres are defined. He studies the history of writing for children, and great children’s authors, such as C.S. Lewis, who used the format “because a children’s story is the best art from for something you have to say,” referring to the child’s straightforwardness in absorbing information. Clifton, to a large extent, focuses on the idea of scope, stating his belief that “it is clear that traditionally the child’s literature has been closed (nowadays there are narrow apertures) to certain broad areas of human experience: mature sexual relationships” being one. These two series demonstrate the dramatic increase in this opening, and whether this reflects the candidness of today or a contrived version of reality is the issue.

Defining Childhood

The story of childhood in Western culture reveals the connection between the lack of ritual to indicate the transition from childhood into adulthood, and a cultural ambivalence about when adulthood begins. The journey from adolescence to teenager is one from a more innocent state of consciousness to one of higher understanding. When the journey is well traveled, the road leads to an emotionally equipped adult. Events in these current commercially viable ‘tween books makes the passage seem abridged and this age of exploration are represented as mini-

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24 Ibid. 201.
26 Ibid
adulthood without emotional preparation. Walking a tightrope from teen to adult is a part of growing up, but these girls seem to favor the side of adulthood; they “have cocktails at the Tribeca Star Hotel again, which always turn into sleepover parties because they would get too drunk to get home, so they’d spend the night in the suite Chuck Bass’s family kept there. They would sit on Blair’s four-poster bed and watch Audrey Hepburn movies, wearing vintage lingerie and drinking gin and lime juice.”27

Argued by Neil Postman in The Disappearance of Childhood, the current trend towards negating the line that differentiates knowledge appropriate for children from that reserved for adults is eradicating adolescence. One irony in Postman’s book is that the children’s literature he spotlights as contributing to this phenomenon, written by authors like Judy Blume, seem tame compared to the offerings of today. Postman attributes to Blume, and authors like her, adult-like characters that are dealing with adult-type situations.28 One could argue that while the situations found in Blume’s novels are of mature content, the subject matter is dealt with in a way that requires thoughtful consideration of the reader. When Jill, the protagonist of Blume’s Blubber, asks her mother about a girl in her class who is getting teased, her mother reminds her to “try putting yourself in her place.”29 Jill is convinced she could never find herself in Linda’s, a.k.a. Blubber’s, position and remains a part of the group that torments Linda relentlessly. Here Blume diverges from the patterns found in the series discussed. Through a series of events the tables do turn, and Jill finds herself on the receiving end of the taunting. The end of the story finds Jill coming to terms with the pain she has caused and, while there is no happy ending and Jill’s ‘friends’ do not take her back, she finds some peace in knowing who she is, and reaches out to

27 Zeigesar 18.
one of the less popular girls in class to begin a new friendship. In a note to the reader, Blume addresses that the fear of becoming the victim of the bully is often what keeps children silent when they witness this kind of teasing. She stresses the need “to start talking and working together.”

The Clique and Gossip Girl series place adolescents and teens in similar predicaments with no consequence or weight behind their decision-making. Unlike Blume’s books, there is no venue created in these series to discuss or address problematic issues that arise. One example in Gossip Girl is evidenced when Blaire throws up on three separate occasions: “She had already devoured her crème brulée and was working on her mother’s. It was full of chicken abortions, but she didn’t care—she was going to throw it all up in a minute anyway.”

Ziegesar never chooses to deal with Blaire’s eating disorder in any more substantial way than a cursory reference, leaving the young readers without a framework for understanding Blair’s actions and, perhaps, unintentionally rendering them cool.

How the ‘Tween is Portrayed

In Gossip Girl and The Clique, these young teens exist in a world of mini-adulthood and are confronted by situations when not emotionally equipped to cope and, therefore, are left to muddle through on their own while trying to maintain a polished a veneer. The goal for these girls is not to be smart, or generous, or kind. Raising money for a charity is not about the merits of the cause, but how it will upgrade their college applications. Kati has to ask after months of planning, “‘What is a peregrine falcon anyway?...Is it like a woodpecker?’ ‘No, I think they’re bigger...and they eat other animals, you know, like rabbits and mice and stuff.’ ‘Gross,’ Kati said. ‘I just read a definition of what one was the other day,’ Isabel mused. ‘I can’t remember

30 Ibid. 154.
31 Ziegesar 159.
The point is made that what makes you who you are is who you hang out with and what you wear. Claire understands this when she finds the ‘Pretty Committee’ boxing up clothing for charity, “‘Looks like you’re getting rid of a lot,’ Claire said. ‘Well, of course we are. All of this is last season,’ Alicia said... Claire felt a rush of panic rip through her body... She had been wearing the same pair of Gap jeans for a year and a half... No one had told her clothes were like milk or cheese, with a “best before” date and a shelf life.” Bullying is not addressed with any emphasis on conscience, but regarded as an art form. The ability to verbally decimate an opponent in two sentences or less is the arsenal of choice. When Massie’s driver, Isaac, admonishes her for her rudeness to Claire, Massie retorts with, “‘Isaac, did I ask you to take my temperature?... Then why are you all up in my butt?’” which elicits high fives and howls from her friend. The underdog, Claire, is given no sense of self. Desperate to be accepted, she acts in ways contrary to what her internal dialogue leads the reader to believe she wants for herself. The issue is that this contradiction is never treated as an in-depth look at the perils of peer pressure, but as Claire mastering the techniques of the clique. Rather than Claire finding herself betraying her own standards and making a decision true to herself, Harrison has Claire spend the entire book finding ways to get these girls to like her. Even out of desperation “Claire couldn’t believe she had stooped so low. In a billion years she never thought she’d be the kind of person who would go out of their way to make someone feel bad about their weight. But then again, she’d never imagined she’d be in any of the situations she’d been in as of late.” Claire resorts to behaviors contradicting her belief system. In other words, she betrays herself.

32 Ibid. 93.
33 Harrison 94.
34 Ibid. 50.
The girls in these books live in a world far from the world of the average reader. They have unlimited access to money, their own credit cards, multiple homes, cell phones and designer clothing. These girls have their own drivers and horses and the schools they attend have Starbucks on the premises: seemingly a portrayal of a teen-age Disneyland. The outside world appears to be more of an intrusion than part of their lives. People at school and even their parents seem to be props in a production they are constructing, rather than an integral part of their growing-up experience. The popularity of these books speaks to the fascination in our culture with all things unobtainable to the majority: money, celebrity, and material goodies. These girls are untouchable socio-economically, and live in a manner that eludes the majority. This is not about finding a hero whose character one can relate to, but wanting to emulate a lifestyle to make one popular. These young girls are exploring extremely vulnerable situations, yet are being exposed to them not in ways that evoke a sense of caution, but in ways that suggest a sense of clout.

Brief History of Childhood

In viewing the perception of childhood over an extended period of time, it is clear that the labeling of phases of growth are dynamic and mutable. The idea of childhood as a separate stage of development germinated in western culture in the thirteenth century, and became more central within the family in the seventeenth century.36 As education developed as an ideal, religious orders became teaching orders,37 and the parent became the religious and educational custodians of their children. As children were placed in the role of intellectually and spiritually protected, they were subjected to a new era of sheltered and segregated care before being introduced to the

37 Ibid. 412.
world of adulthood.\textsuperscript{38} As school became a greater part of early childhood, along with family obligations, there was a more distinct developmental period between baby and adult. This distinction was illustrated by the growing acceptance of the dependence of a child, the belief in coddling, the need to protect, the impulse to improve, i.e., to educate and to discipline and, as a result, being removed from the workforce, which deferred responsibility.\textsuperscript{39} In all aspects, the development of the child becomes, for the first time, an element of critical concern: the child “has taken a central place in the family.”\textsuperscript{40}

In America, childhood has taken on a particularly elite status. Kay S. Hymowitz theorizes, in her book \textit{Ready or Not}, that the birth rate has fallen substantially over the last two centuries as the rigors of raising children in a child-centric atmosphere became more intense and exhausting.\textsuperscript{41} While perhaps oversimplifying the reasons for the decrease in family size, the fact is that raising a child to be intellectually astute, emotionally sound, physically fit, and prepared for adulthood in today’s challenging environment is no easy feat. While most would argue the changes in childrearing an improvement, Hymowitz firmly sits in the same camp as Aries, in which she questions the validity of such thinking. She examines what she feels is a misunderstanding of Aries’ work, i.e., that children are fully capable and should be left to guide themselves and make their own decisions. She refers to the current culture in America as the ‘republican childhood,’ which she marks as emerging around the turn of the nineteenth century with the defined mission of generating independent youth. Influenced by John Locke and Jean-

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid. 412.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid. 132-133.
\textsuperscript{40} Ibid. 133.
Jacques Rousseau, this is a childhood based on self-regulation, wherein children are taught to think for themselves rather than obey with blind resolution.42

The idea of teenage years as an extension of childhood, delaying the need to identify as an adult, became widespread after the 1940’s. An age group that would have, until a couple of generations before, been pursuing their own lives as parents and workers, are now being told to stay in school and avoid these “adult” activities.43 A further categorization and partition between the ages is the relatively recent phenomenon of ‘tween.44 Whether the emergence of a ‘tween culture is a further development responding to a direct need of this age group based on shifts in society, or a contrived label intended to serve an outside influence, i.e., to provide a more specific market from which the producers of media can profit, is debatable.45

Brief History of Children’s Literature

Like the concept of childhood as a separate entity requiring special consideration, children’s literature as an independent medium is a relatively recent phenomenon. While Aesop has transitioned into the category of popular children’s stories, they were originally oral stories intended as moral instruction for an adult audience. Works for children were those they appropriated from the offerings for adults, i.e., the poems of Homer, full of the adventure and monstrous creatures to which children are drawn. During the Middle Ages the majority of the population was unable to read and the transition from childhood freedoms to adult responsibilities a short one. The oral stories for adults were the same ones that fascinated children. Epics such as Beowulf and romance/adventures such as King Arthur and Robin Hood

42 Ibid. 25-26.
43 Ibid. 36.
44 Ibid. 36.
45 Professor David McKay, e-mail message to author, February 19 and 21.
equally captivated the young and old. The invention of the printing press in the 15th Century brought increasing access to printed material, therefore, an increase in literacy and an expansion of wealth and education among a growing middle class. Reading became more common among all ages and walks of life and yielded a new genre of educational and instructional books primarily aimed at adults. This exposure provided fertile ground for an emerging market of literature for children.46

The 17th Century saw the beginnings of childhood as a separate and specialized time in development. As discussed earlier, this time saw children and childhood as requiring distinctive attention for emotional, spiritual and educational guidance. Children continued to pull from adult literature those stories that they could call their own, including Robinson Crusoe and Gulliver’s Travels. It is in 1744 that the tide was forever turned, as John Newbery established the first press dedicated to publications for children.47 While this was an indication of these books’ financial viability, it also speaks to childhood being considered an important and separate entity. The Victorian era is often referred to as the Golden Age of Children’s literature, as authors such as Lewis Carroll, Mark Twain and Louise Alcott began to write for a younger audience, transitioning the purpose of reading from predominately educational to entertainment. Books became less expensive to produce, creating new genres such as the dime store novel, and the diversity of what was available in literature for young people expanded.48 That children’s literature tends towards the didactic seems a given when one looks at the audience and the offerings over the centuries. Books are able to offer insight into a broad range of topics from the most banal issues, i.e., manners and behavior, to more complex understanding of social mores

47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
and existential questions about life. The literature of the 20th and 21st centuries pulls into the equation the increasing technological and global ways in which children interact and accrue knowledge and, as Fadiman points out, “bears witness to the flexibility of children’s literature, its power to enlarge its range, to experiment with new forms and themes.”

Theme of Privilege in Literature

The idea of the privileged girl as antagonist is an old one. In young adult literature the heroine, portrayed as a poor underdog, is often in direct conflict with the rich debutante. Confronted with her own values, the heroine is victorious in standing true to her beliefs. In literature through the 1900’s, the young woman was often placed in a compromising position that endangered her moral fortitude, and participating in her internal struggle was the reader’s journey as well. The heroine’s progression from insecure to assured is, in essence, her coming of age journey, and was often accomplished by victory over the upper class. Naomi Wolf, in an article about these new series published in the New York Times, refers to their structure as “inverting Austen (and Alcott)” where “the rich are right and good simply by virtue of their wealth.” Claire, of The Clique, spends two hundred pages trying to fit in, though she has a substantial intellect, parents that are most present in a book of absent ones, and a host of what are portrayed as true friends back in her home town. The draw of fitting in becomes so strong that, after being at the receiving end of numerous pranks, Claire reaches out to Massie at a time when Massie is in need. Later that evening, Claire reminds herself that even this turn of events does not necessarily mean that she and Massie are friends. Yet, instead of rising up against Massie and her tyrannical rule over the girls at OCD, Claire’s last thought as the book closes is to question whether or

49 Fadiman 18.
51 Ibid.
not the evenings events disprove her theory that she and Massie could never be friends. “Of course Claire wouldn’t know for sure until Monday,” once again puts the power firmly in Massie’s hands and relinquishes Claire’s responsibility for providing her own happiness.

Wolf discusses the book *Little Women* pointing to the plotline involving Meg’s physical transformation orchestrated by her wealthy neighbors as a pivotal moment “not meant to reveal her victory as a character but her weakness.”52 In these books, moral fortitude is preferable to material status. The passage of these characters into young adulthood, considered racy at the time they were published, now seem old-fashioned, but somehow enduring. The question becomes whether these themes can be updated for today’s more savvy reader without rendering them inconsequential. The girls that reign in *The Clique* and *Gossip Girls* have no consequence for their actions, and are not awakened to the pain incited by their cavalier ways. They live in an atmosphere of mean and their message is that belonging is the great victory.53

The Disappearing Transition

If one follows Postman’s argument that the primary separating factor between childhood and adulthood is the access to and understanding of information,54 then the ritual of distributing knowledge from the older generation to the younger generation would mark a rite of passage into this new phase of life. If there are factors, external to this ritual, that demystifies the adult world, then the transition becomes meaningless and the two distinct periods meld into one. For Postman, this exterior stimulus is television and points to 1950 as the year TV began to permeate the American household; it is in this access that one can pinpoint “the historic basis for a

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52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Postman 85-86.
dividing line between childhood and adulthood...being unmistakably eroded.”55 Television removes from the adult the ability to monitor and filter information as it is disseminated from the adult world to the child’s. In reading the current fare for the adolescent age group, it can be argued that these new books contribute to erasing the need for a formal transition period, as they assume that the free discourse of information leaves little to be learned from the elders. In an interview, Cecily von Ziegesar admits she needed no research to portray the inner life of teens accurately, saying “I don’t know what that says about me—that I didn’t mature?...It just says that teenagers aren’t that different from adults.”56 Postman refers to this as the “adult-child...defined as a grown-up whose intellectual and emotional capacities are unrealized and, in particular, not significantly different form those associated with children.”57 He goes on to explain that this was a common state in the Middle Ages, but that as the shift toward a protracted childhood occurred, this adult-child state inversely decreased. Now Postman sees a resurgence of this condition almost to a point of becoming viewed as “normal” within modern societal constructs.58

One begins to wonder if the responsibility to educate our adolescence regarding the issues that will confront them in the teen years is now falling onto these ‘tween books. Rather than an introduction, however, the books assume the knowledge already exists and, in a boundary-less society, it probably does. As an example, in children’s television one finds that cartoons have ratings to distinguish those with more mature content from those intended for younger audiences. This goes to Postman’s point about the blurred line between adult and child.

There was a time when a cartoon, simply by virtue of being a cartoon, was perceived as

55 Ibid. 75.
57 Postman 99.
58 Ibid. 99.
children’s fare. Postman would attribute the “evidence of the hard variety--figures about alcoholism, drug use, sexual activity, crime, etc.,” an indication of this disappearance of the delineation between children and adults.

The developmental psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, originated the idea for what he termed the Zone of Proximal Development, which he defined as the space to provide guidance for a child before he/she has the capabilities to master an allocated task alone. The child’s level of development determines the amount of guidance, and the facilitator is an adult or a more knowledgeable peer. Looking at the way parents, teachers, and other adults are represented in these books, it is clear that these characters lack guidance, leaving them to rely on friends whose life skills are equally deficient.

Author’s Response

While the authors, one imagines, do not see the message they are sending as negative, it brings into question whether at this age children perceive very subtle irony or whether they just see these characters as those they should aspire to be. On her website, Lisi Harrison is asked by a reader to explain why she portrays these girls in such a shallow and superficial way, when the pain of adolescence is real and a struggle for so many. Harrison responds,

I am not saying “Snobby mean pretty rich girls” are what we should strive for. I am saying the exact opposite. By using extreme characters and extreme situations I’m hoping you’ll realize how crazy our behavior can be. And come awn. We all do it. After all, I write what I see.

Harrison’s response assumes a maturity that will understand the irony or sarcasm of the messenger. Reading the responses on her blog, they range from, “Well, now that I’m older I

60 Lisi Harrison, Lisi Harrison, http://www.lisiharrison.net.
know not to. But in sixth grade my whole school tried to act like the, umm, “Pretty Committee” and it was really obnoxious. P.S.: So did I…”\textsuperscript{61} and “I mean, I know that’s not the message you’re TRYING to send, but it’s the message you ARE sending… I mean, the girls in your books have picturesque, perfect, great lives–and the LBR [loser beyond repair] girls seem to NOT have as good lives. Hmm… subconsciously, NO DUHHH, girls are going to be upset that they cannot match up to the beauty and popularity of ‘Massie Block.’ The books are pointless,”\textsuperscript{62} to “I am in middle school right now and the same age as Massie and the other PC girls. I know what it feels like to see all the popular girls get the cute guys and have LBR’s worship at their feet and reading the clique made me realize that being one of those ‘popular snobby rich girls’ must be really hard.”\textsuperscript{63} That the message is to point out the ridiculousness of the situation is to ignore the lure of having a personal driver and unlimited access to credit cards. That these wealthy girls feel the same growing pains as other girls is a relevant point, but would seem in relation to the demographics of the reader’s, a minor one.

Marketing and Media

The producers of this material have an endless loop of marketing possibilities available as this younger generation has been raised on a steady exposure to this marketing media. They are willing to accept and are receptive to products that have a life beyond one medium. Thus, the book they read, that is within the year in the theaters as a feature film with corresponding sound track and web blog, are all a part of their worldview. Currently, \textit{Gossip Girl} is a prime time television series and \textit{The Clique} will soon be released in straight-to-DVD movies; both maintain active web and blog sites.

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.
When looking to media experts for an explanation as to the development of this trend, a gloomy message of marketing and money over content is the consensus. Mark Crispin Miller, a media critic and author, points to Bantam Books with their new series Barfarama (titles include *The Great Puke-off*, among others), aimed at teen boys. These types of books, he reports, are “going deliberately and systematically for the lowest common denominator, and the logic there is purely commercial.”\(^\text{64}\) The rhetoric around the importance of getting teens to read, and, therefore, reading anything, he calls “disingenuous.” He feels that as corporations connect the dollar signs to this rapidly rising consumer group, they are forced to stay ahead of the trend by predicting and, perhaps, influencing their next want. Miller states the obvious: “the MTV machine doesn’t listen to the young so that it can make the young happier,”\(^\text{65}\) but rather appeals to their unformed sense of self and provides them with an outline of “all there is to be, or you could be, if you bought what we have to sell.”\(^\text{66}\)

A recent New York Times article asked if YA literature has become just another way for advertisers to promote their merchandise in a market already flooded with images and hard sell. It seems there is a rise in guerilla-advertising techniques in a forum that had, until recently, been held to a higher standard by the publishing industry and the consumer; this may indicate a deteriorating regard for the young adult reader, or a growing regard for the bottom financial line or, perhaps, a growing awareness by young people of the power they hold in the consumer hierarchy. When Massie tells the girls that she has been sick over the weekend, they bring her a ‘cheer up’ present: a $780 Alberta Ferretti halter. Massie gushes over the gift, and then promptly

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\(^\text{65}\) Ibid.

\(^\text{66}\) Ibid.
moves on to other issues never mentioning the blouse again. The question remains as to whether ‘tweens are seen as a reflection of what they consume, or if they are seen as developing young adults requiring guidance and nurturing.

Publishers make the case that advertising within the context of a book aimed at young teens serves as an opportunity to elevate a story’s relevance and legitimacy. In her interview with the New York Times, Susan Katz, publisher of Harper Collins Children’s Books, said,

she was not concerned about a possible backlash against corporate sponsorship in books aimed at such a young audience. ‘If you look at Web sites, general media or television, corporate sponsorship or some sort of advertising is totally embedded in the world that tweens live in. It gives us another opportunity for authenticity’68

The argument is unconvincing. The fiscal bottom line should not take precedence over the emotional well being of young readers. Another media critic, Robert McChesney, points to studies from the American Psychological Association that show “being awash in a sort of commercial marination as American children and teenagers are today, does not make happier people.”69 In this world of material conquest, it is hard to imagine getting back to anything as simple as the “Golden Rule.” The voice of commercialism is so penetrating and invasive that it becomes hard to escape; a message so much a part of the internal dialogue of the young they are not conscious of the invasion. By one reviewer’s estimation there are 1.8 brand names mentioned per 160-word page in the first of The Clique series. The popularity of these books is spawning new series that offer product-placement opportunities to companies before the writing

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67 Harrison 42.
69 PBS Frontline
has been finalized. A growing perception by the publishers would seem that this is a market ready to conspire in the consumption of these “must have” items. Miller sums it up neatly when he says, “advertising has always sold anxiety and it certainly sells anxiety to the young. It’s always telling them that they are not thin enough, they’re not pretty enough, they don’t have the right friends...unless they’re cool.” These books serve as another way to substantiate these dark fears of children.

The ability of children’s literature to adapt to changing markets is a sign of its strength, but also an indication of where its weaknesses may lie. As this form of literature stakes a claim to the shelves of the major bookstores, expanding to demand its own portion of the landscape known as the children’s department, it still struggles to “establish such topography and boundaries.” The introduction of college courses and critical journals devoted to this literature demonstrate the desire for understanding. In the history of literature, these books represent a young and new voice now struggling to find parameters around a growing exposure to subject matter that previous generations did not encounter.

In Summary

Harrison and Ziegesar handle the issue of peer pressure and of wanting to fit in with a strong sense of identification. Both observe with clarity the drive these girls have to behave in such a cruel way, but without judgment of the consequences. That children are highly susceptible to pressure from their peers is not a new theme in literature, but lack of an alternative mode of conduct and no reward for persevering in spite of the pressures leaves these books

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71 PBS Frontline
72 Fadiman 19.
feeling empty. The *Gossip Girl* series was second on the American Library Association’s “Ten Most Challenged Books of 2006” for being unsuitable for its targeted age group. Perhaps more significant than the sexual references or the uninhibited use of alcohol and drugs are the values represented regarding friendship and class. Value is placed on accumulating material goods; value is placed on status that is endowed by birthright and not accomplishment; value is given to being in the right crowd even if those people treat you disrespectfully.

In her book *The Poetics of Childhood*, Roni Natov explores the purpose and forms of children’s literature through the centuries. She looks at childhood remembered from the adult’s perspective as well as childhood shared by those growing up. She brings into focus the adult’s pain of childhood trauma as well as a deep understanding of the child’s unique perspective as it occurs, “the shared area where adult and child come together.”73 She proposes that it is in this common terrain “where all great children’s books are located.”74 Thus, one comes across those stories with which children identify and seek out of their own volition, and those constructed by adults from memories of their own childhood experience. The best writing provides clues to help adults understand childhood, and children to learn of the adult world. If the best of literature for children should be, as Natov suggests, a way for children to find their own “moral code” and ways to apply this to the world, then these books provide an unstable example at best.75 As easy as it might be to follow the lead of the publicists for these books, who impress upon young readers that these books are just fantasy and light fluff, one only has to look at recent studies on social aggression. Studies find that this type of social bullying is most prevalent in the upper social class and among those who qualify as popular. Exposure to mean behavior incited

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74 Ibid. 3.
75 Ibid. 259.
more aggressive response behavior from the viewers immediately following their exposure, perhaps calling for further studies to decide if this type of social behavior is aggravated by exposure to “mean chick-lit.” 76 Natov captures the essence of literature when she says;
“literature of childhood can serve as a refuge from disappointment with the world.” 77 Literature is a way to open and expand a child’s view of the good, bad and in-between. Young adult literature has an obligation to portray childhood in all of its many layers. This paper is not about erasing or ignoring the negative aspects of growing up, but about pondering the author’s responsibility to represent the negative in ways that facilitate substantive reflection of her/his young readers. The best reading is that which invites contemplation without appearing to be outwardly moralistic or didactic. After reading the final page, the reader is changed having used “the potential of even our darkest moments of dislocation to metamorphose into a rejuvenating and creative energy.” 78 Thus, childhood literature becomes a source of hope and inspiration, a road map that allows the child to “create a poetics, an imagined but tangible state, inspired and illuminated by the child, to return to.” 79

Speaking of the social ramifications of a culture steeped in acquisition and status, Fadiman contemplates the changes and challenges facing the literature that embodies these times. “Lately the human race has become aware of the fatality lying at the heart of unchecked growth,” and he goes on to wonder if, “it is possible to argue that a similar fatality inheres in the

77 Natov 261.
78 Ibid. 7.
79 Ibid. 7.
unchecked growth of any art form. We may... be witnessing such a wild cancerous proliferation in the body we are now exploring.”\textsuperscript{80}

Young adult literature, when well constructed, allows a child to form a framework within which they are able to make sense of complex issues such as class, sexuality and peer pressure. In their finest form, books provide a space for children to hold the scary and new feelings that adolescence brings to the forefront, and offers a refuge within which these feelings can be explored safely. Presenting these issues without providing support to help navigate them leaves young people without a context within which to process a deeper understanding of life’s complexity. To represent these books as escapist fantasy is irresponsible. Betrayal, cruelty-as-sport, sex, drugs, and alcohol: these are realities of the teen experience. The ability to inform and educate while entertaining is one of the hallmarks of the young adult literature genre, and a quality apparent in the books that sell generation after generation.

\textsuperscript{80} Fadiman 19.
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Bibliography: Books


