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Over the wall ...

Alan Maley
recommends reading
for teachers who
teach teens.

The aim of this series is, as I explained in the opening article in Issue 62 of *ETP*, to review a number of books relating to a given theme. My theme in this issue is adolescence and the 'teen thing'. This is relevant for many, if not most, teachers since it is a phenomenon they have to deal with on a daily basis. But I must emphasise that my intention is not to offer pedagogical advice as such, but rather to open up the topic, raise awareness and suggest some interesting reading.



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Being an adolescent is indeed an awkward age, both for teenagers and for those they come in contact with. As Quentin Crisp remarked, '*The young always have the same problem – how to rebel and conform at the same time. They have now solved this problem by defying their parents and copying one another.*'

I will be looking principally at four novels about growing up in the awkward age, and one practical handbook of advice to parents on the issue.

The novels

One of the earliest fictional treatments of adolescence, now a classic, is *The Catcher in the Rye* by J D Salinger. Set in the New York area, it takes us through an action-packed period of about 24 hours in the company of the arch 'anti-phony', Holden Caulfield. Holden is about to be expelled from his latest boarding school. He hates school, and the whole adult world of 'phonies'. Holden is a confusion of self-doubt, unkept resolutions, internal

conversations about what he would have said or done, fantasies, mood swings between exhilaration and despair, erratic behaviour, an obsession with – and fear of – sex, loneliness, intolerance combined with moments of extreme generosity, haphazard trains of thought, wild exaggeration, bravado and, above all, a contempt for the world of adult 'phonies', of whom his own parents are the archetypes. He hates the idea of belonging to the adult world, yet has no idea of an alternative future for himself, except through his fantasies. The novel is

very funny, yet profoundly and disturbingly sad. Holden makes damningly perceptive observations about the adult world, yet he is aware of his own faults while incapable of changing them. It is incredible that a book first published in 1945–6 should still offer such an accurate picture of the adolescent mind and such a strong individual narrative voice.

My second novel is an even more picaresque treatment of adolescence, telling the story of a rather strange Thai boy growing up in the household of his extended family of rich, upper-class Thais in Bangkok without the company of his parents. S P Somtow's *Jasmine Nights* is a truly original treatment of the passage from childhood to adolescence. It is set in 1963 at the outset of the Vietnam war and coincides with Kennedy's assassination. Justin, aka Little Frog, aka Somsonthorn, is an extremely precocious, anglicised 12 year old, steeped in Shakespeare, Euripides and the classics, but fundamentally innocent of the ways of the world. He is in denial of his own ethnicity, refusing to speak Thai or eat Thai food. He lives partly in a spirit world evoked by his dead pet chameleon, Homer, partly in the confusing world of the adults who surround him: his three maiden aunts, his grandfather and uncle, his ancient,

Over the wall ...



beloved great grandmother, the randy English Dr Richardson and his family, and the family of black Americans renting the house next door. The story proceeds in a series of extravagantly outrageous and funny incidents as Little Frog resolves his need for intercultural friendship, his growing interest in girls and his awareness of himself as a Thai. His parents, who turn out to be CIA agents, are briefly returned to him at the end. And on the night of his 13th birthday, he is

A recurrent theme in all these titles is the important role adults who are not their parents can play in the development of teenagers

fully initiated into sexual intercourse with not one, but all three of his 'women'. This is a rewarding read, not only for its stylish language and comic incidents but for the insights it gives into the boy's mind.

Black Swan Green by David Mitchell is the story of 13-year-old Jason trying to cope simultaneously with the pressures of school, bullying, sex, finding his place in a confusing and frightening world, coping with his older sister and coming to terms with his parents' fracturing marriage. To cap it all, he is a stutterer. It is 1982 and the Falklands war is raging. Jason lives in a new middle-class area of a semi-rural part of Worcestershire, whereas all his classmates are from working-class homes. He is an outsider from the beginning and is mercilessly victimised, mocked and bullied. Mitchell is expert at conveying the underworld of school with its rituals and tortures. Jason lives in perpetual fear and uncertainty as he tries to conceal his stuttering and to find his way in this labyrinth of tribal behaviour. Interestingly, he draws comfort and learns from encounters with a number of adults from outside his family

circle: the eccentric old Belgian woman who encourages him to express himself through his poetry, the American antique seller who shows him that his nightmarish fears of parental punishment are unreal, and a group of gypsies who show him a completely different lifestyle. Jason does eventually learn to stand up to the bullies, discovers that he is attractive to girls and can even cope with his stutter and the break-up of his parents' marriage. But his problems are not over. Life will go on hurting.

In *Submarine*, by Joe Dunthorne, we enter the world of 15-year-old Oliver Tate, living near Swansea and preparing for his GCSE exams. There are two main strands to the story. The first concerns Oliver's first sexual relationship with a girl, the manipulative Jordana. He loses her partly through neglect and partly through his own preoccupation with the problems of his parents' marriage. It is true that they have a strained relationship and there is reason to think that his mother may be having an affair with a former lover. But Oliver's hilarious attempts to thwart them



are both misjudged and pointless. There was no affair. In the last part of the book, his attempts to come to terms with breaking up with Jordana and to reconcile himself to the fact of his parents' imperfect yet stable relationship is both sad and very moving.

The manual

Get Out of My Life – But First Take Me and Alex Into Town is a first-rate manual for parents of teenagers, and anyone else dealing with them. It combines perceptive analysis with hard-nosed and practical advice. Part 1 describes adolescence, and explains why adolescents behave as they do, offering advice on being a parent with this age group. Part 2 is a more detailed treatment of relationships between parents and teenagers. Part 3 deals with serious life issues such as divorce, school, sex, drugs and drink and suicide.

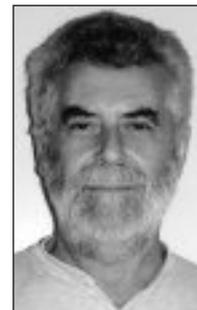
The authors point out that teenagers are growing up in a world that is both more permissive and more uncertain than ever before. 'They will confront a future where you no longer simply grow up, get a job, bring up a family and grow old. Now you leave school and see what happens ...' 'Teenagers battle to dismantle their parents' authority but can find themselves adrift if too successful.'

They examine the common adolescent syndromes: self-deception (and deceiving others), allergy to parents, living in a bubble of the here and now, seeing adults as flawed, viewing parents as an embarrassment, the need to be popular with peers, being in love with the world and finding their love unrequited: 'they have great longing but are never quite fulfilled'. The authors' advice can be summarised as: set rules and stick to them (even if teenagers will certainly break them); don't get drawn into wrangles; love them unconditionally but un sentimentally; learn to let go; have confidence that this is a stage of development which will, thank God, pass! 'The unabated nastiness does run its course and fade away.'



A parting thought: a recurrent theme in all these titles is the important role adults who are not their parents can play in the development of teenagers. As teachers, we will often find ourselves playing this role. Let's do it well! 

Salinger, J D *The Catcher in the Rye* Penguin Books 1994
Somtow, S P *Jasmine Nights* Penguin Books 1995
Mitchell, D *Black Swan Green* Sceptre Books: Hodder and Stoughton 2002
Dunthorne, J *Submarine* Penguin Books 2008
Wolf, T and Franks, S *Get Out of My Life – But First Take Me and Alex Into Town* Profile Books 2002



Alan Maley has worked in the area of ELT for over 40 years in Yugoslavia, Ghana, Italy, France, China, India, the UK, Singapore and Thailand. Since 2003 he has been a freelance writer and consultant. He has published over 30 books and numerous articles, and was, until recently, Series Editor of the *Oxford Resource Books for Teachers*.

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