

# Teen-Ager As Novelist

by Abigail Ann Hamblen

*The Midwest Quarterly, Summer 1966*

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Teen-agers are much in the public view these days. Their needs and wants, their virtues, and especially their misdeeds, make news. Parents are often made to feel, uneasily, that somehow the adolescent has moved into the driver's seat, is taking over, so to speak, and there is ample evidence that the adolescent responds with a kind of glee. He can sit in judgement of his elders and not be told that a model boy or girl is "seen and not heard."

Pamela Moore's judgment on the world of adults is not more gentle than that of *The Catcher In The Rye*. There is a difference: Miss Moore, writing *Chocolates For Breakfast* at eighteen, was very much in the midst of the adolescent world herself, looking at it with young (if astonishingly wise) eyes.

Novels by teen-agers (published novels, that is) are not plentiful. *Chocolates For Breakfast* is almost an oddity in America, and Newsweek had to go to France to find a comparison. Miss Moore, it said in its review, can be compared to Françoise Sagan; she has the "same young worldliness." Certainly *Chocolates For Breakfast* is a rather remarkable production for a girl of eighteen.

It has sold extensively, first in hardback, then in paperback, having gone through eight printings. The volume of sales may be partly accounted for by provocative publicity (the paperback cover is strident in its assertion that the book "shocked readers the world over," and there are claims of "brilliance and daring," of "appalling frankness.") Miss Moore has not been frugal in her use of elements that "sell" a book, and rather immature readers in quest of vicarious sensations may feel themselves rewarded by some of the scenes, by some of the dialogue, by what Newsweek calls so aptly the "young worldliness" on every page.

Actually *Chocolates For Breakfast* is more serious than might be supposed. The very preciousness of it is disturbingly serious; the message that cries out from between the lines is upsetting. For in spite of the writer's "sophistication," she has written a very romantic novel in the sense that she has projected herself into it, has used it as a means of telling the world - or society - that something is tremendously wrong. Although she has been clear-eyed and seemingly cool while doing so, sparing no details, the emotion governing those details is familiar to all who understand the urge of suffering or confused young people to unburden themselves.

*Chocolates For Breakfast* is, however, more than a simple unburdening of pent-up emotions. Because it is written by an adolescent about adolescents, it has significance for the serious reader. For it is a modern teen-ager's view of life, and as such, merits some study.

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In the very simple plot we discern a feminine version of *The Catcher In The Rye*; it is certainly the story of a young girl's quest for security and values, as J.D. Salinger's novel is the story of Holden Caulfield's search for them. Courtney Farrell, fifteen at the beginning of the story, is the daughter of a well-to-do publisher, living in New York, and a "has-been" movie actress, living in Hollywood. After a brief description of her life at Scaisbrooke School "founded sixty years ago on the pattern of British public schools," we see her going to Hollywood where she joins her desperately "charming" mother and has several new experiences, notably those of losing her virginity, taking a secret lover, becoming acquainted first hand with the fact of male homosexuality, and acquiring a taste for dry martinis. (It is interesting to note that Courtney's favorite authors seem to be Charles Baudelaire and Evelyn Waugh.)

The Hollywood phase ends finally with the girl's slashing her fingers at the joints in a kind of expiation of sin. "Living with her sin, living with herself in a state of sin, it was too much for her, and she had to punish herself." She adds the rather bitter statement that "she hadn't even enough courage to destroy herself." After this there is a hiatus of two months in a sanitarium.

Then the New York phase begins. Courtney and her mother move East, Courtney finds an old school chum, and life becomes one of hectic gaiety. The lazy days melt into feverish, alcoholic nights spent among the ne'er-do-well offspring of the very wealthy. (In the twenties they would have been referred to as "flaming youth" - here they seem singularly lacking in flame - and their youth is shown only in a frightening absence of direction, a lack of anything approaching a sense of responsibility.) Hazy with alcohol, sexually amoral, they drift from day to day, and Courtney drifts, too, until life shocks her into examining herself.

At this point she comes full stop in her downward course; she breaks with her current lover who is more than half homosexual anyhow, and she resolves to make something of herself. Her decision to do so is given encouragement by her friendship with Charles Cunningham, a young lawyer. His is a decidedly steadying influence, strengthened by his understanding. He, too, had once been going the way of these others until he suddenly pulled himself together.

Why do so-called "privileged" young people turn to alcohol and sex - turn to them at unbelievably early ages? This is one of the questions raised by *Chocolates For Breakfast*. In a world surely capable of great challenges - witness the advances in science, the increased popularity of art, the troubling problems of international relations - why, with all this before them, do certain boys and girls reject opportunities of education, spend their days in aimless party-going, drink until they "pass out," acquire attitudes toward sex that would confound an alley cat? (Beside Miss Moore's

adolescents, Scott Fitzgerald's lovely, tormented flappers have a curiously innocent look.) Why do so many find themselves eventually under the care of psychiatrists? Why, in short, are they desperately fleeing from boredom?

If the world (and they themselves) is all wrong, asks Miss Moore, whose fault is it? She gives a ready answer: The parents', of course. Here we see the triumph of modern theories of psychology: The whole novel is a rage against parents - mother, father - the guilt is evenly divided.

The relationship between parents and children is puzzling to everyone concerned. Courtney and Janet discuss it. Courtney wonders why they "have to pretend" to parents. Janet, even though wiser and harder than Courtney, gropes for an answer: "Hell, I don't know. Self-defense, I guess. I know that if my father knew that I made out with boys and occasionally got tight and all he'd kill me. I guess that we just get into the habit of pretending so we don't upset them. I don't know. You ask the damndest questions." Curiously, later, Janet, rejoicing in her freedom from supervision, tells Courtney, "There are some advantages to having an alcoholic father and a psycho mother."

But, of course, "an alcoholic father and a psycho mother" are in the end poor Janet's undoing. The scenes between Janet and her father are particularly appalling. It is true that David Parker, after making a fortune, has become a habitual drunkard; it is also true that he can be heavily pedantic, especially over his drinking at the dinner table:

"He had very little education, Samuel P. Insull, but he never forgot where he came from and how he got to where he was. That's the thing a great many people overlook....Janet with her debutante parties and her friends and her snobbery, she's forgotten the value of hard work. Hard work, and humility. That's why she can have all these things, because I worked so hard. Started as a messenger in the firm I worked with, just a clerk when her mother and I were married, worked my way up. My own hard work, humility and God's help."

As if this isn't enough, he goes on about God's help, and the ingratitude of young people. They forget to thank Him. "To thank God for what he has given them, to respect their parents, and fulfill their obligations. Ungrateful, the whole generation. Worthless." He weeps.

He is certainly not an attractive character, and yet it must be confessed that Janet is far from a model daughter. In a painfully ugly scene between them, she accuses her father of reading a letter written her by a boy; he defends his doing so, and calls her a "whore." Janet screams that of course she sleeps with boys - why shouldn't she - what she has is scarcely a home, what with the abuse from a drunken father. Previously she has nastily

informed him that the only reason she stays with her parents is that the food and bed are free. Now he tells her to leave if she likes:

"I'll be glad to see you go. How do you think I feel when I sit here alone at night and I know you're off sleeping with some drunken college boy?"

"Just the way I hope you feel. Just the way I want you to feel."

The ugliness goes on and on, culminating in the father's ordering the daughter from the house:

"'No,' Janet said quietly. 'No, I'm not going to leave. You owe me something as your daughter. You haven't given me anything but a family I'm ashamed of and a house I hate. I'm going to make you give me something. I'm not going to leave. That would be the easy way out for both of us. I'm going to stay, and you're going to support me until I'm through high school. I'm not going to let you off that easily.'"

Miss Moore describes all that quite calmly, explaining that Janet's "combativeness" is like her father's, that her father recognizes that he is beaten, for his "terrible loneliness" will never allow him to drive his daughter away. The mother, who has fled, weeping, to her bedroom, has locked herself in. She is terrified of the "fury and self-destruction" both her daughter and husband possess.

Thus to the whole blazing indictment of parents, the author adds the charge of heredity. Not only is the father an alcoholic and the mother a psycho - the former has bequeathed his own "fury and self-destruction" to his innocent offspring, and the mother has contributed instability of character. Miss Moore implies that it all adds up to more than enough provocation for a daughter's misdeeds: Certainly such conditions must drive a girl to sexual promiscuity, and excessive drinking - yes, and in the end, to suicide. (Good schools, two hundred dollars monthly allowance, a home replete with luxury, weigh never an ounce on the opposing side of the scale.) Critically, after Janet's spectacular death, the newspaper says, "her parents could not be reached for comment."

Courtney's parents fare a little better, but their lives are certainly far from ideal. The mother, a desperate has-been movie actress, is absorbed with keeping her beauty intact and trying to sell her charm and ability to directors. The estranged father, occupied with his own business, knows vague helpless regrets about his relationship with Courtney. When she is allowed to leave the sanitarium he calls for her and takes her to dinner, visualizing the kind of daughter he would like, the affectionate, clinging daughter who would understand him. Instead he finds a girl who is hard and triumphant

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and self-sufficient, and who is unwilling to believe anything he tells her. When he reminds her that he is paying for her sanitarium and her doctor, she tells him snappishly that he always talks about money "as though money means something."

After the blow of her friend's death, Courtney finds her parents unexpectedly understanding; the gulf between them narrows somewhat. They have realized, perhaps, the damage parents can do.

Parents are people! Still, even Charles Cunningham has broken with his father. Charles is the steady, attractive young lawyer who helps steer Courtney away from her disastrous course. When he pulled himself together and gave up being a reckless playboy, he tells her, he disregarded the stuffy admonitions of his parents, threw off his dependence on them, and worked his way through college and law school. Courtney admires his independence; he had had the courage to tell his father and his father's pompous ideas "to go to hell." And he had had the courage to make his own "straight arrow" way.

*Chocolates For Breakfast* does not blame adolescents for "living it up." It does not blame them for being "flaming youth," mid-century brand. This is, after all, a world they never made controlled by a crowd of neurotic and/or impossibly strait-laced mothers and fathers. One should, however, have strength of character enough to make something worth living out of one's life.

The moral is presented very vividly, if a little confusedly. Although at times slight gaucheries of style pop up, betraying the novice, the craftsmanship, for an eighteen-year-old, is astonishingly mature. Descriptions are evocative of mood: "Grass smelled hot and wet in the summer, but in the spring it smelled properly young." The terrible moment before Janet throws himself from her window is poignantly described: "She looked down at Park Avenue in the early evening. She watched the cabs travel down Park, the cabs that had carried her to mid-town bars and restaurants, each a world in which she found, for an evening, the illusion of companionship and warmth. This was the hour when the city stood up, brushed the soot from its shoulders and waited, tense and expectant, for the night. This was the loneliest hour in the day."

Not all of Miss Moore's descriptions are as subtle. At times she frankly writes trash, as when she tries to make the reader see her heroine: "Her breasts were firm and full, even at fifteen. She had a woman's body, curved, firm and sensual, and this did not pass without notice. The ease and assurance with which she used her body even in such simple actions as walking, her perpetual consciousness of her body, the vitality and challenge of her green eyes - all these things spoke clearly of passion. She was not yet sixteen, but she was ready for love."

Or she can be extravagant in her descriptions, as when Courtney is displeased to see the noisy young boys in the swimming pool: "They were intruders from the harshly bright, barbarian world of youth invading the soft untrodden sands of disappointment."

When Miss Moore published her second and third books, she was in her early twenties, no longer a teen-ager. Her style shows more polish, the gaucheries are less frequent, a surer hand is in evidence. The *Horsy Set* is, however, very much a teen-ager's story. In fact, Miss Moore has confessed that it makes use of people and experience from her own life. For her Brenda, the seventeen-year-old, is a very sympathetic character.

"Brenda's instincts are very moral," a publicity release quotes her as saying; "She and other young people today are finding their own morality in the face of the amorality of their parents." Thus, in *The Horsy Set* she carries on her rage against parents. They are admittedly rather dreadful here - and, as in *Chocolates For Breakfast*, provide good excuses for the goings-on of the young.

Brenda's mother, for example, is an ex-chorus girl whose pluck and Irish blue eyes have enslaved a still and very wealthy New Englander. At the beginning of the story she is madly in love with the coarse riding instructor at the fashionable stables nearby.

Brenda, thinking of her own dates with Larry, her clean-cut boy friend, says, "I guess in a way I have lived through a little of Mother's life. But not really! I'd kill myself if I ever thought I was just doing the same things she did." And yet in the next breath she asserts that she "likes" her mother - even "loves" her when she does a daring high jump on a horse: "Honestly, sometimes I loves her as if she were my own self." As for her father - she has never seen him, a homosexual gypsy dancer who vanished after begetting her.

Larry's parents are no real improvement. Mrs. Harfield is plump and white, serves rich, heavy food, feeds her Pekinese at the table, speaks plaintively, and makes a great point of protecting Brenda's virginity from her son. Her husband has long since hired his pleasures in hotel rooms.

As for the morals of the whole "horsy set" - a wealthy Westchester crowd - they might best be described as comparable to those of the Restoration Era in England. The young Harvard crowd which congregates at the Lionhearted Bar is not much better.

A rather disingenuous young girl at first, Brenda lives through a good many unpleasant situations, finally attaining adulthood through genuine sexual satisfaction with a fit male, as well as through some disturbing knowledge. The lesson of the novel, which is for Brenda, too, seems to be that some people are skilled at sexual intercourse and others are not, and that only experience (plus a bit of maturity) can show which are which.

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Minor observations to be gleaned are that the main interest of most well-to-do people (and those who are rougher, too) is sex; that the world's population is made up of self-servers (who often use sex to gain their ends), and, finally, honesty is to be cherished when found, for it is a rare and precious commodity.

This is a violent book, written apparently in the heat of some urgent emotion - though it is an emotion difficult to define. Perhaps it is merely adolescent surprise and dismay in the face of life, and in the face of its own sensations. As Brenda says, "I guess we all think we're awfully interesting and anyhow, I did. I've been thinking about myself for seventeen years now, and I'm still not bored with me. I'm still trying to figure me out." Poor Brenda has several other things "to figure out."

*Diana* is not quite so obviously adolescent in theme as Miss Moore's other books. Yet there are glimmerings of youthfulness beneath all the adult problems with which she comes to grips. These include slum living, the menace of juvenile street gangs, and the yearnings of a young artist husband whose wife does not understand him.

A young unmarried couple, Ralph, a beatnik painter, and the exquisite Diana, fugitive from Park Avenue and Radcliffe, are in accord when it comes to scorn for what is "nice" and respectable. Theirs is a world of high idealism: "Must it always be this way in America," muses the girl, "that the sort of consumer-dreams that my father on Madison Avenue spins out can be bought only at the expense of one's soul?" She is sure that those who finally rise above the slum where she chooses to live reject the best of themselves. When they leave they "become strangers to themselves." On the other hand, those who decide to stay "know who they are, and retain their integrity and charity." Diana will never leave, will never compromise her ideals; her baby will be born out of wedlock, despite the undoubtedly sincere pleas of Ralph. She will send him off to California, where he wants to go, and she will face the future she has made for herself. Beneath all this the reader discerns the lurking gleam of stubborn adolescence, the light that early nineteenth century English poets followed before they finally succumbed either to death or to the Anglican Church.

Diana's inherent immaturity flares up in her explanation to her neighbor: "I don't want to decide my life here and now, I don't want a wedding ring and a child! Ralph has freed me from all the things that for all my life have smothered the poet in me, Park Avenue and Radcliffe and my father. But now, it's exactly my love for Ralph that threatens to put me in chains again, with a wedding ring!"

The novel contains several interesting and vivid characters, and a few minor love stories, rather loosely strung together. The Poles and Jews who live in St. Mark's Place are beautifully drawn and are in colorful contrast with the men and women who inhabit

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Courtney Farrell's milieu, and Brenda Sitwell's.

Pamela Moore died while still in her twenties - hardly out of adolescence herself.

Accurate assessment of her accomplishment is a little difficult: Just what has she given us in these violent, almost brutal stories of sex and perversion and murder and defiance? Has she honestly portrayed the way the world looks to many young people?

Or has she merely showed an astoundingly precocious shrewdness as to what will sell - especially from a drugstore rack?

Contemplating these questions, one is conscious of a slow prickling along the spine.

For do not the answers reveal themselves as related? If the world contains such reckless evil as Miss Moore has described, would it not follow that even the ordinary citizen would be influenced by that evil? And, influenced by it, would he not seek for more of the same in his reading matter, his hunger growing as he is fed? Neither the student of American life nor the critic of popular fiction can ignore Pamela Moore's brief, confused cries in the market place.