

7a

SHE DECIDED SHE WOULD LIKE TO KISS HIM

Discourses of Sex and Romance in Children's Literature.

She found two members of the morning kindergarten especially interesting. One was a boy named Davy, who was small, thin, and eager. He was the only boy in the class in short pants, and Ramona liked him at once. She liked him so much she decided she would like to kiss him. *Ramona the Pest*¹

Double entendres apart, it might be thought that sex and romance would be confined to YA books, and these days there is of course stacks of it there, but surprisingly it turns up in one form or another and in perhaps the most unexpected places in children's books proper too. How about starting in kindergarten! As can be seen in the quote from *Ramona the Pest* above, on her first day in kindergarten five year old Ramona has set her sights on Davy, and she pursues him, you might say relentlessly, for most of the rest of the book. Her passion is spelt out in more detail when Davy comes to school wearing a cape. She watches him crossing the street:

The more Ramona saw of Davy the better she liked him. He was such a nice shy boy with blue eyes and soft brown hair. Ramona always tried to choose Davy for her partner in folk dancing, and when the class played Grey Duck Ramona always tagged Davy unless he was already in the mush pot.

(Grey Duck² requires that the person tagged has to chase the tagger around a circle formed by the other children, which means that tagging Davy requires that he now has to chase Ramona around the same said circle.) On the cape day Ramona wants to know who Davy is pretending to be. Is he Superman, or Batman? No, Davy delightedly tells her, he's Mighty Mouse.

"I'm going to kiss you, Mighty Mouse!" shrieked Ramona

Davy runs off with Ramona hot on his heels and:

Every morning afterwards when Ramona reached the playground she tried to catch Davy so that she could kiss him. . . . Once Ramona came near enough to grab Davy's clothes, but he jerked away popping the buttons off his shirt. For once Davy stopped running. "Now see what you did!" he accused. "My mother is going to be mad at you."³

As can be seen Ramona is nothing if not determined! Davy may try to keep as far away from her as he can in the playground, in class he is always interested in what she is doing and they find ways to get together. He comments on her Santa Claus picture⁴, and as we saw in an earlier

chapter, he takes her advice about how to form his *D*'s⁵, and even in the playground he keeps a weather eye on what she's doing, spotting a worm that she's picked up and absentmindedly wound round her finger.

"Look!" yelled Davy "Ramona's wearing a ring made out of a worm!"

When questioned by her teacher she says it's her engagement ring.

"Who are you engaged to?" asked Ann.

"I haven't decided," answered Ramona.

"Not me," Davy piped up.

"Not me," said Howie.

"Not me," said Eric.⁶

Ramona is clearly keeping her options open! Later when her new boots have got stuck in the mud and Henry Huggins retrieves them, she finds another worm, again winds it around her finger, and turns her attentions to Henry,

"I've got an engagement ring, and I'm going to marry you!" yelled Ramona after Henry, as the morning kindergarten laughed and cheered.⁷

But her first love remains Davy, and finally Halloween gives her the license she needs. Hiding behind the anonymity of her rubber witch's mask 'she pounced and kissed him'.⁸ She suddenly discovers that there's a problem, however. Given that a number of children are wearing witch's masks, will Davy have known it was her? Seemingly he doesn't, for when she asks him he tells her she's 'just another old witch' and Ramona becomes frightened by her own loss of identity and takes off her mask, but in the process becomes somewhat subdued. Now it's Davy who takes the initiative and Ramona, now playing hard to get, rebuffs him.

Davy raced up to her and yelled. "Yah! You can't catch me!"

"I don't want to catch you," Ramona informed him.

Davy looked surprised and a little disappointed.⁹

As I noted above, Davy is not entirely un-flattered by her attentions, but alas, as they say, the course of true love never did run smooth!

Ramona the Pest is somewhat episodic in narrative structure, and is informed more centrally by other discourses, discourses such as that of teaching and learning or that of the relationship between adults and children, but the discourse of romance that I have identified winds its way through the book to provide a little independent narrative of its own. In Michael Morpurgo's *The War of Jenkins' Ear*¹⁰, by contrast, it is more central, and the ages of two main players a bit more to be expected. The context: twelve/thirteen year old Toby Jenkins is a boarder at Redlands, an English prep school.¹¹ At the commencement of the story he sets eyes on Wanda,

the cook's 14 yr. old daughter, who helps her mother in the kitchen. When, on the first day of term, he goes through to the kitchen to get some bread she smiles at him.

Her eyes held his for a moment, and Toby found he could not look away.¹²

The next day Wanda, recognising him from the night before, sees him and calls him over. We see her from Toby's perspective:

She was taller than he thought and even more beautiful. Her hair was a sunburst of curls around her face. Toby found it difficult not to stare at her. He had to force himself to look down at his hands.¹³

They do not meet again face to face for a couple of weeks or so, though Toby always has his eye out for her, hoping to catch a glimpse of her in the distance, and giving her a wave whenever he has the chance. Then after a rugby match in which Toby has distinguished himself and which Wanda has been watching, he engineers a chance to see her again in the kitchen, and she kisses him.

"Toby, have you ever had a girlfriend?"

"No," he muttered.

"Well you have now." And she bent over and kissed him on the cheek.¹⁴

Later in the story they have a much longer encounter by the small river that marks one of the boundaries of the school grounds. Toby has been given a day off school because his gran has died, the headmaster has somewhat reluctantly lent him his fishing rod, and Toby ends up by the river thinking about his Gran, in heaven he presumes, finally cured of the Parkinson's disease that had blighted her later years. Wanda finds him there and they get talking. Seeing his tears and sensing what is wrong she is sympathetic and shares with him her experience of recently losing her own grandmother:

"My Nan died . . . last Christmas. Christmas day it was . . . I never liked her much and she didn't like me, but it don't matter do it? I still miss her."¹⁵

He tells her about a fish he has been trying to catch, and she tells him that he will have a much better chance from the other bank of the river. To cross the river is to break school rules. One bank is the school's, the other belongs to the village and is out-of-bounds . However across she goes and Toby watches then follows her.

Toby watched her skipping and splashing through the shallows. Just being with her had made him forget everything else. All thoughts of his grandmother had gone, all worries about breaking the out-of-bounds rule were of no consequence. He followed her across the river.

They talk about the divide between the village boys and the Redland's boys, the former known as 'oiks' to the latter, and the latter known as 'toffs' to the former. Toby has to reluctantly admit that because she is a village girl she must be an oik. But for her it doesn't matter.

“Like I told Benjie (her older brother), there's nice toffs and nasty toffs. You're a nice toff, and anyway, you're my toff aren't you? You're my toff and I'm your oik.”

Between them they catch a fish, though not before Toby has fallen in and taken off his top clothes and put them out to dry. They light a little fire and cook the fish – the domestic sealing their relationship. Then they go on to discuss religion, specifically will their respective grandmothers meet in heaven; then Toby moves the debate into more general doctrinal areas: is Jesus real, and will, as it suggests in the bible, he come back one day? Toby thinks he will.

Wanda raised herself up on to her elbows and looked down at him. “You don't half say some funny things,” she said, and then she leant over and kissed him on the cheek. “My little Toff,” she said, and brushed the hair out of his eyes.

The school bell rings out and Wanda has to go. He calls after her.

“Wanda,” he called out. He was going to say that he loved her . .

. . but he can't quite bring himself to do so, but he watches her until she is out of sight.

Toby watched her until he could see her no more, until he was quite sure she could not hear. “I love you,” he shouted. “I love you.”

The encounter has left Toby on the wrong side of the river, and it is this fact that will lead to the central action of the book, the war between the Redlands' boys and the village boys, the latter led by Wanda's brother Benjie. The war starts when the village boys find Toby still fishing, but from the wrong bank – he's trespassing. They set on him, take his drying clothes, break the fishing rod, and hurt his ear badly – hence *The War of Jenkins' Ear*; though Benjie himself, knowing of Wanda's fondness for Toby, manages to protect Toby from the worst. The village boys dress a scarecrow in Toby's stolen clothes, an act which eventually leads to a retaliatory raid across the river from the Redlands' boys, who capture Benjie, strip him down to his underclothes, lock him in a shed, and mount his clothes onto an answering scarecrow. Though Toby has nothing to do with it, it is he who releases Benjie from the shed, so he, Benjie, assumes that he, Toby is one of the Redlands' attackers. More importantly Wanda herself makes the same assumption, particularly after the headmaster has visited her and her mother in the kitchen, blaming Benjie for initiating the incident. She turns on Toby.

“You said you loved me, didn't you? Well you couldn't have, 'cos if you did you wouldn't have let that happen to Benjie. What he done to you – that was a mistake. What you done to him. That was

meant, planned that was. So don't you come around me no more with your fancy words, you hear me?" Every word she spoke was like a knife in Toby's heart, draining him, numbing him.¹⁶

The rift is healed after a further plot development in which Benjie and the village boys deliberately leave a gate open allowing a fearsome bull onto the school grounds. When it looks as if it might charge at Swann, a younger boy, Toby himself walks, quaking but calm, up to the bull and scratches it between its horns on its forehead. His act of bravery is witnessed with considerable admiration by both Benjie and Wanda, and indeed by their father whose bull it is. Wanda comes to realise that Toby was telling the truth about his role in the earlier capture of Benjie, and the next time they meet they are reconciled.

"I love you little Toff, you know that?"

"Me too," said Toby, and she kissed him and put her head on his shoulder.¹⁷

In *Ramona the Pest* the discourse of romance is not integral to the development of any real overarching plot, not least because there isn't one; in *The War of Jenkins' Ear* it is an inextricable part of the whole plot. As we have seen Toby's and Wanda's first encounter ends with Toby on the wrong side of the river, trespassing on the villagers' territory, and it is that trespass that initiates their attack on him, and it is that attack which then precipitates the war. And the progress of the romance is inextricably intertwined with Wanda's perception of Toby's role in that war.

Toby and Wanda are in their early teens, a fact that might make one wonder if the book doesn't therefore come into the category of YA literature proper. I would suggest that if there was ever an example of the absurdity of these categories, then *The War of Jenkins' Ear* would be it. I very much suspect that Morpurgo, if asked, would argue that he didn't give a damn, and that he wrote it for anyone who wanted to read it.

My third example comes from a time when, thank goodness, 'young adults' didn't exist, and where, from the publishers' perspective, there was only an all-inclusive category called 'juvenile literature'. I talk of *Anne of Green Gables*¹⁸, published in 1908, and of the romance in that book between Anne and Gilbert Blythe, who is a couple of years older than her. Anne first encounters him on her second day at school, when she is still only eleven.¹⁹ His reputation precedes him – here's Anne's best friend, Diana, telling her all about him.

"He's awf'ly handsome, Anne. And he teases the girls something terrible. He just torments our lives out."

The truth of the latter comment is demonstrated when the first thing he does when he arrives next day is pin the hair of the girl in front of him to her seat. After the expected shriek when she tries to stand up Gilbert unpins the girl's hair and winks at Anne.

4. 'She Decided She Would Like to Kiss Him' The Discourse of Romance in Children's Literature

"I think your Gilbert Blythe *is* handsome," confided Anne to Diana, "but I think he's very bold. It isn't good manners to wink at a strange girl."

Having thus made contact with Anne, he is piqued when she doesn't look at him:

Gilbert Blythe wasn't used to putting himself out to make a girl look at him and meeting with failure.

And so to get her attention he pulls *her* hair.

Gilbert reached across the aisle, picked up the end of Anne's long red braid, held it out at arm's length, and said in a piercing whisper: "Carrots! Carrots!"

To suggest that Anne is not pleased would be a considerable understatement. She springs to her feet.

"You mean hateful boy!" she exclaimed passionately. "How dare you!"

And then – Thwack! Anne had brought her slate down on Gilbert's head and cracked it – slate not head – clear across.

Having her hair pulled would have been bad enough, but Anne, who has red hair, hates to have attention drawn to it, so it is a double humiliation. (It is also to be noted that Gilbert himself also has red hair which, it is suggested later in the book, perhaps accounts for his interest in her.) Anne is made to stand in front to the class for the rest of the afternoon even though Gilbert confesses that it was his fault. By the end of the day she has sworn that,

She would *never* look at him again! She would never speak to him!!

And when, after school, he tries to apologise to her, it is unsurprisingly to no avail

"I'm awfully sorry I made fun of your hair, Anne," he whispered contritely. "Honest I am. Don't be mad for keeps, now."

Anne swept by disdainfully, without look or sign of hearing.

It is clear, however, that Gilbert is not deterred, and the next day, when Anne, to her utter humiliation has been made to sit next to him as a punishment for failing to be back in into class as soon as she should have been after lunch break, he passes a little pink candy heart across to her with 'You are sweet' written on it.

Whereupon Anne arose, took the pink heart gingerly between the tips of her fingers, dropped it on the floor, ground it to powder beneath her heel, and resumed her position without deigning to bestow a glance on Gilbert.²⁰

The conflict thus established then informs the rest of the book. Initially it takes the form of a competition between the two of them to outdo each other in their school work. Despite the difference in their ages they end up in the same class²¹ doing the same work, and each wants to be top of the class. Gilbert himself remains good-natured about it but Anne . . .

. . . flung herself into her studies heart and soul, determined not to be out-done in any class by Gilbert Blythe. . . .

She was as intense in her hatreds as in her loves. She would not stoop to admit that she meant to rival Gilbert in school work, because that would have been to acknowledge his existence . . .²²

Of course there is little that Anne is more aware of than his existence, since in order to compete with him she has to watch him like a hawk, and many a time when she is telling Marilla about her school work she will start talking about what he has done, only to hastily switch to making 'the other children' the subject of her observations. Time passes and other things happen in the book, but Gilbert remains constant, and even two years later he is still sweet on her, as she learns from her friend, Diana. The occasion is the school concert in which both Anne and Gilbert have distinguished themselves.

"Wasn't the boys' dialogue fine?" said Diana. "Gilbert Blythe was just splendid. Anne, I do think it's awful mean the way you treat Gil. Wait till I tell you. When you ran off the platform after the fairy dialogue one of your roses fell out of your hair. I saw Gil pick it up and put it in his breast pocket."

But Anne's attitude hasn't changed, she still feigns indifference.

"It's nothing to me what that person does," said Anne loftily. "I simply never waste a thought on him, Diana."²³

The next encounter occurs when Anne and her friends are down by a local pool with a bridge over it, named by Anne in her younger fanciful days as the Lake of the Shining Waters, re-enacting the story of Elaine and her unrequited love for Lancelot – they had studied Tennyson's poem²⁴ in school. The re-enactment requires that Anne should lie in the bottom of a dory, a little flat bottomed fishing boat, clutching a lily to her breast and looking as if she is dying tragically of a broken heart. To her dismay the boat is holed and, as she drifts downstream, begins to fill with water, and she finds herself clutching one of the bridge piles as the boat sinks beneath her. To her immense chagrin her rescuer turns out to be, you've guessed it, Gilbert Blythe, who appears rowing another dory.

There was no help for it; Anne, clinging to Gilbert Blythe's hand, scrambled down into the dory, where she sat, drabbled and furious, in the stern with her arms full of dripping shawl . . .

Despite her rescue Anne remains haughty, but Gilbert makes one further attempt to make amends.

“Anne,” he said hurriedly, “look here. Can't we be good friends? I'm awfully sorry I made fun of your hair that time. I didn't mean to vex you and I only meant it as a joke. Besides, it's so long ago. I think your hair is awfully pretty now – honest I do. Let's be friends.”²⁵

His appeal almost finally softens Anne's heart.

For a moment Anne hesitated, She had an odd, newly awakened consciousness under all her outraged dignity that the half-shy, half-eager expression in Gilbert's hazel eyes was something that was very good to see.

But still she can't bring herself to relent, and Gilbert, tired of being spurned, responds with spirit.

“No,” she said coldly, “I shall never be friends with you, Gilbert Blythe; and I don't want to be.”

“All right!” Gilbert sprang into his skiff with an angry colour in his cheeks. “I'll never ask you to be friends again, Anne Shirley. And I don't care either!”

And from this point onwards Gilbert himself starts taking the rivalry between the two of them seriously, even more so when they enter the 'Queen's class', designed to prepare them for the exam that will get them into Queen's Academy which will in its turn qualify them to be teachers. Furthermore he otherwise takes to ignoring Anne completely.

. . . and Anne found out it was not pleasant to be ignored. It was in vain that she told herself with a toss of the head that she did not care. Deep down in her wayward, feminine little heart she knew that she did care, and if she had that chance of the Lake of the Shining Waters again, she would answer very differently.²⁶

He ignores her as they compete for the exam, though when they get to Queens itself she is pleased to find herself in the same class as Gilbert, 'the tall brown haired boy across the room', and discovers that she admires his 'splendid chin'.²⁷ He, however, befriends another girl, Ruby Gillis, though as Anne's new found friend, Jane, tells her,

“I shouldn't think she was the sort of girl Gilbert would like.”²⁸

And Anne agrees,

She could not help thinking, too, that it would very pleasant to have such a friend as Gilbert to jest and chatter with and exchange ideas about books and studies and ambitions.

Her rivalry with Gilbert continues, 'but the bitterness had gone out of it' and she regards him rather as a 'worthy foeman'.²⁹ Finally, and at last, as the book draws to its close, they both find themselves as seventeen year olds employed as teachers in local schools. In fact Gilbert has been given the local school in Avonlea itself, and Anne one that involves travelling, but he sacrifices the post so that Anne may have it, and himself takes one further away. Despite everything, there can be no doubting his depth of feeling for her. And Anne herself cannot but thank him. She meets him in the lane and holds out her hand to him.

"Gilbert," she said, with scarlet cheeks, "I want to thank you for giving up the school for me. It was very good of you – and I want you to know that I appreciate it."

Gilbert took the offered hand eagerly.

. . . "Are we going to be friends after this? Have you really forgiven me my old fault?"

Anne laughed, and tried unsuccessfully to withdraw her hand.

"I forgave you that day by the pond landing, although I didn't know it. . . I've been sorry ever since."³⁰

And so the book ends, with, to Marilla's wry amusement, them chatting at the gate for half an hour on end. The book is about many other things too, but the relationship between the two of them has been an integral part of the narrative throughout. It has been a spur to Anne to work hard in order to compete with him, and despite her many protestations he is never far from her mind, and from the first page to the last it is clear that she finds him attractive. The importance of the discourse in the structure of this book is further indicated by the fact that it is the focus of its very last pages. (Those of you who know the books will know that they do finally get married, but it is only at the end of the third book in the series, *Anne of the Island*, that he finally proposes and she finally accepts, and in the course of his proposal he even recalls the slate incident. "I've loved you ever since that day you broke your slate over my head in school."³¹)

To sum up, in all three cases that I have examined here the discourse of romance is one of the discourses around which the structure of each of the books is built. Note that I say 'one of' for it is not the main discourse in any of them. *Ramona the Pest* is about Ramona's first term at school generally, and the developing relationship between her and Davy is only part of that overarching discourse. However it runs like a thread through the whole structural weave of the book, and is one of the threads that serves to unite the ostensibly episodic nature of the book into a more coherent whole. Similarly in *The War of Jenkins' Ear* the romance between Toby and Wanda is but part of the larger plot about the socioeconomic class antagonisms between the world of the private school toffs and the world of the village oiks, but the vicissitudes of romance are an integral part of the developing plot of the book as a whole, and constitute an important structural element within that plot. *Anne of Green Gables* is about all sorts of things, about the developing relationship between her and her adoptive parents and between her and the village at large, about her friendships, about her unfettered fantasising about the natural world around her, and about

her first days at school; and the developing romance between her and Gilbert is only part of that latter discourse. But nonetheless it too has an important structural role in the development of the plot. I have discussed three examples in detail, but they will not be the only ones I am sure. Immediately I can think of the relationship between Moomintroll and the Snork Maiden in Tove Jansson's Moomintroll books for instance, and then there is the 14 year old Harry Potter and the putative romance between him and the Chinese girl, Cho in *Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix*, followed, in *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by the developing affair between the now 16 year old Harry and Ron's sister, Ginny, and between Ron himself and Hermione. By the end of the final volume both couples are married and have children of their own setting out for their first term at Hogwarts. But again, as with some of the examples above, we are straying into the field of YA literature, though the Harry Potter series itself is gloriously defiant of such glib categorisations.

And those double entendres? Well Blyton is often the target of such accusations to the glee of many, with Noddy and Big Ears in bed together, for instance in *Hurrah for Little Noddy*³² when Big Ears takes him into bed with him for a reassuring cuddle after he, Noddy, has crashed his car, but it does strike me that that is pushing it a bit. Big Ears just comes across as a comforting parent, a role he plays in various of the books. A more notorious sequence occurs in *Noddy and the Seaside*³³ where the milkman will let Noddy have free milk if he, Noddy, will allow the milkman to nod his head as fast as he can, and if he wants cream Noddy has to pay him with more nods still(!). If such 'slips' are unconscious on Blyton's part, in *Five Have Plenty of Fun* a sexual reading, and a queer one at that, is more overt. In it a girl, Berta, for various plot reasons, has to cut off her hair to disguise herself as a boy, and having done so both Dick and Julian comment on how jolly attractive he/she is as a boy.

More seriously though, as I say, in 'children's literature' romance is only ever going to be a part of developing plots with other focuses, and it is to YA literature you would have to turn if you wanted to find it playing a central role. So, for example, Beverley Cleary's 1956 *Fifteen* is an early example of a full blown romance aimed squarely at what was then called the teenage market, and come 1975 Judy Blume broke new ground with the sexually explicit *Forever*. As far as homosexuality is concerned, 1982 saw the publication of David Rees's heartfelt coming out story, *The Milkman's On His Way*, and the same year saw the publication of Aidan Chambers' similarly themed *Dance on My Grave*. Now sexually explicit content is routinely to be found in YA literature, the omnisexuality of Francesca Lia Block's work, for instance, her *Dangerous Angels* a.k.a *Weetzie Bat* series and the ostensibly adult novel *Nymph*³⁴ providing some wonderful examples.³⁵ But as I say, YA literature is not my focus here.

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4. 'She Decided She Would Like to Kiss Him' The Discourse of Romance in Children's Literature

¹ Cleary 1968 p.18

² Grey Duck is explained in more detail earlier in the book (p.28): the children have to stand in a circle and whoever is tagged has to chase the person who tagged them around the circle – the loser ends up in the mush pot in the middle.

³ *ibid.* pp. 64-66

⁴ *ibid.* p.70

⁵ *ibid.* pp 75-77

⁶ *ibid.* pp. 103/104

⁷ *ibid.* pp 122/3

⁸ *ibid.* p.134

⁹ *ibid.* p.139

¹⁰ Morpurgo 1993

¹¹ For non-English readers or those not familiar with the independent education sector in England, preparatory schools, a.k.a 'prep' schools, are fee paying schools taking pupils from as young seven years old whose job is to prepare children for an exam which they take when they are thirteen to get them into 'public' schools, another misnomer, since they are also fee paying schools only available to those who can afford them, and as far from being publically funded state schools as you can possibly get. Prep schools generally have a mix of pupils who board for the duration of the school term and of more locally based children who go home every night – 'day-bugs'. (Oops!, there's a giveaway!)

¹² *ibid.* p.6

¹³ *ibid.* p.21

¹⁴ *ibid.* p.55

¹⁵ This, and the successive related quotes: *ibid.* pp. 69-74

¹⁶ *ibid.* p.127

¹⁷ *ibid.* p.158

¹⁸ Montgomery 1908

¹⁹ The encounter plays out over several pages (*ibid.* pp.130 – 135)

²⁰ *ibid.* p.138

²¹ Our modern usage of the term 'class' differs from that used by Montgomery, which presumably reflected classroom organisation at the time. One has to think of the word having a meaning which would be better understood these days by a term such as 'academic group', i.e. a group of children doing work at the same academic level irrespective of age. Though having once got them into the same academic group, the term then becomes subject related – 'spelling class', 'arithmetic class', etc.

²² *ibid.* p163 / 164

²³ Both quotes *ibid.* pp 245 / 246

²⁴ *Lancelot and Elaine*, one of the sequence of poems that make up Tennyson's reworking of the Arthur legend, *Idylls of the King*.

²⁵ This, and the following quotes from the same episode, *ibid.* pp 271 / 272

²⁶ *ibid.* p 295 – pardon what we would now see as the sexism of Montgomery's 'wayward feminine little heart'.

²⁷ *ibid.* 333 / 334

²⁸ This, and the following quote, *ibid.* pp 339 / 340

²⁹ *ibid.* p.342

³⁰ *ibid.* p.368

³¹ Montgomery 1915 (Loc 12313)

³² Blyton 1950

³³ Blyton 1953 Indeed read the wrong way, or some might say the right way!, the whole exchange is positively pornographic.

³⁴ Block 2000. *Nymph* is not marketed as a YA book though it clearly should be, and, along with the *Dangerous Angels* series and the films of Greg Araki, should be on the compulsory school syllabus across the English speaking world!

³⁵ Any serious exploration of homosexuality in juvenile literature could not afford to ignore Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* (1858), where Ballantyne is explicit about the love that holds the three boys together. Here's Ralph, the first person narrator, the middle boy of the three age-wise, speculating about why it was that they worked so well together: 'I am now persuaded that this was owing to our having been all tuned to the same key, namely that of *love*. Yes, we loved one another with such fervency, while we loved on that island.'(p.167) He had already commented earlier in the book that he felt that Jack, the oldest boy 'had a peculiar fondness for me'(p.17). At a more symbolic level, at the point in the novel at which the boys have decided they need weapons for hunting, Peterkin, the youngest, makes a spear, and the others congratulate him on the length of it and the phallic power it brings with it, 'Well if length constitutes power,' said Jack, 'you'll certainly be invincible.' '(p.97) And if one is looking for more outrageous 'slips' one has only to look at the account of their initial survival as they wash up on the shore of the island where Ralph's telescope, which he had grabbed as they jumped into the sea as the ship foundered, gets into places that it perhaps never should have gotten into. Ralph had been stunned, had unknowingly clung onto Peterkin for support, and had in so doing, as Jack explained to him, "'pushed the telescope . . . against Peterkin's mouth – "' "Pushed it against his mouth!" interrupted Peterkin; "say crammed it down his throat.'" In all seriousness, a gay reading could not afford to ignore such an outrageous interpretation, but it perhaps has no place in the body of my text here, not least because the boys are thirteen, fifteen, and seventeen years old, and as such, hardly 'children' as such.