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The Desiring Girl in South African Young Adult Fiction

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ABSTRACT
Girls in South African young adult (YA) fiction typically represent a heteropatriarchal, sexually passive model of femininity that allows for neither sexual autonomy nor sexual desire. This article examines six prominent South African YA novels that are unusual in that the sexual desires of their teenage heroines play an important role in shaping plot or character: S. A. Partridge's *Dark Poppy's Demise* (2011); Adeline Radloff's *Sidekick* (2010); Sonwabiso Ngcowa's *In Search of Happiness* (2014); and Lily Herne's Mall Rats series of three books. The study finds that even in these rare examples of South African texts that treat girls' desires as significant, desire mostly remains ambivalent or is treated evasively, while violence, by contrast, is embedded in each novel's social context and routinely described at length, in explicit detail. South African girls live in a violent world, but the article argues that reducing their lives to a single violent dimension only perpetuates that violence. And in correlating girls' desire indissociably with violence, these texts normalize the violent punishment of girls whose femininity is not sexually passive.

KEYWORDS
Adeline Radloff; desire; girlhood; Lily Herne; S. A. Partridge; sexuality; Sonwabiso Ngcowa; South Africa; Stephenie Meyer; young adult literature

South Africa, unlike the USA and the UK, has no tradition of English-language young adult (YA) writing about sexuality, and there is thus little South African YA writing in which girls' desires significantly shape either plot or character. Girls in South African YA fiction are almost always cisgender and heterosexual and, as such, generally represent what Janet Holland, Caroline Ramazanoglu, Sue Sharpe and Rachel Thomson call a socially constructed 'model of sexual behaviour for young women which can be described as passive femininity,' and which 'has no concept of the autonomy of women's bodies or of female sexual desire' (23). In this model, a disembodied sexuality that resists female desire is required of what are seen as good, feminine girls (Holland et al. 24).

Yet passive femininity is a dangerous vulnerability. Michelle Fine associates girls 'who lack a sense of social entitlement' with a higher risk of pregnancy and dropping out of school (48). Holland et al. (23) show that passive femininity positions active responsibility for contraception as unfeminine, and gives girls no rehearsal for making sexual demands, including the demand for safer sex. Tamara Shefer and Don Foster note how multiple South African studies reveal 'women's inability to assert their needs, and the way in which men's sexuality is privileged in decisions regarding condoms' (268). Disembodied sexuality means that girls surrender control of their own sexuality to others. And, as

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Deborah L. Tolman argues, ‘When a girl does not know what her own feelings are, when she disconnects the apprehending psychic part of herself from what is happening in her own body, she then becomes especially vulnerable to the power of others’ feelings as well as to what others say she does and does not want or feel’ (21).

The rare YA novels that do engage with the sexual desires of South African girls commonly reify this psychic disconnection through the ambivalence or evasion of their approach to desire: it is hinted at, skirted around, touched on so lightly that a casual reader might miss it. But I would argue that the counterpoints to these light touches are typically genres or settings characterized by pervasive violence, in novels that routinely include lengthy, detailed descriptions of the violence their heroines either suffer or themselves inflict.

Judith Inggs demonstrates that the few South African YA books in English that focus on sexual activity emphasize its negative consequences and ‘serve as a warning to adolescent readers’ (69). The same preference for threat over desire has traditionally also been true of British and American YA books dealing with girls’ sexuality. Carole S. Vance argues influentially that sexuality, for women, reflects a tension between ‘pleasure and danger’ (xvi); Anglophone YA books have tended to deny sexual pleasure and overdetermine sexual danger, particularly for girls. Beth Younger observes that where boys’ desires in YA writing are represented as ‘normal and natural, if often out of control,’ girls’ desires are ‘more frequently portrayed as abnormal or dangerous’ (23). And, as Lydia Kokkola argues, books about sexually active teenagers are often intended to educate and warn girl readers (12), with even ‘very liberal writers’ seemingly ‘afraid of girls’ desire’ (165). The threat to girls in British and American YA texts is most often pregnancy or depression. In South African narratives, however, the danger to which pleasure and desire are most often subordinated is violence. South African YA fiction normalizes not only a heteropatriarchal passive femininity that has rendered girls’ desires invisible in all but a handful of texts, but often also the violent punishment of girls whose femininity is not sexually passive.

This normalization of violence in fiction reflects the lived experience of South African girls, which is permeated and shaped by both violence and realistic fears of violence. The 2023 Global Peace Index ranks South Africa lower on societal safety and security than Haiti and Palestine, and only just above Ukraine (Institute for Economics & Peace 88). Analyses of the 2005 National Youth Victimisation Survey are equally telling. In just the year before they were surveyed, 16.5 per cent of the participants had been assaulted (Leoschut 203), 4.2 per cent had been sexually assaulted (203), and more than one in five had seen ‘family members intentionally hurting one another,’ often with weapons (203). One in five did not feel safe in their communities; for approximately 28 per cent, the greatest fear was murder, for 21 per cent rape or sexual assault (Burton 5). The government’s 2022/2023 Governance, Public Safety, and Justice Survey found that 19.6 per cent of South African women feel unsafe walking alone in their own neighbourhood even during the day, and 65 per cent at night (Stats SA 58–59). In KwaZulu-Natal, when Kelly K. Hallman et al. asked children to classify, by safety, places that were accessible to them, not a single girl perceived any space in her world as extremely or very safe. Rural, urban, adolescent and pre-adolescent girls all ‘ranked at least 58% of accessible places as unsafe’ (287–88), and girls ‘systematically reported vulnerability to sexual assault and rape’ (288).

Circumstances are, unsurprisingly, no better for queer girls. Zanele Muholi draws attention to ‘hate crimes against lesbians living in townships’ (117), observing that ‘the rape of black lesbians is a weapon used to discipline [their] erotic and sexual autonomy' (123). Helen Wells and Louise Polders find that victimization – including physical and sexual abuse and rape – because of sexual orientation is common in Gauteng schools (4). And Eileen Rich finds that 86 per cent of Black lesbian and bisexual women and girls in the Western Cape live in fear of sexual abuse, and 76 per cent of physical abuse, because of their orientation (15; 29; 30).

Against this background, it may be seen as understandable that when I sought South African YA books in which teenage heroines' sexual desires play an important role in shaping plot or character, what I found repeatedly were texts steeped in violence. Girls' desire was rare, so there were few texts to choose from even though I decided not to limit my search by genre. From within a tiny pool, I chose texts based on prominence. My selection thus represents various genres, and heroines and writers of various races and classes.

Dark Poppy's Demise (2011), by S. A. Partridge, is noteworthy as it won the 2012 MER Prize for best youth novel, and because Partridge was named one of the *Mail & Guardian*'s 200 Young South Africans of 2011 for her contribution to South African literature. Her novel is a thriller about a cisgender, middle-class white girl. Adeline Radloff's *Sidekick* (2010), which won the 2009 Sanlam Prize for Youth Literature, is a superhero mystery with another straight, middle-class white heroine, the adopted daughter of a Coloured woman. Sonwabiso Ngcowa's *In Search of Happiness* (2014) is a realist story of an impoverished, rural, Black lesbian girl who moves to a large Western Cape township. A rarity in English South African YA fiction, it is authored by a Black writer and, notably, has been translated into German. And Lily Herne's Mall Rats series – *Deadlands* (2011), *Death of a Saint* (2012) and *Army of the Lost* (2013) – tells of a post-apocalyptic zombie war sequence with a racially ambiguous straight heroine who moves from a rural area to the urban ghetto of Cape Town, and then across the country to Gauteng. The series was very prominently marketed and has thus received a remarkable amount of critical attention.

These six texts account for around half of the South African YA fiction so far published since 2000 in which a teenage heroine's desire carries any narrative weight. What is striking is the unity – across genre, setting, race, class and sexual orientation – of the texts' message that girls' desire cannot be separated from violence. Also significant is that all the novels but one – not incidentally, that of the lesbian heroine – represent desire with ambiguity, evasion and confusion.

Desire as Invitation to Violence: *Dark Poppy's Demise*

In *Dark Poppy's Demise*, the heroine, Jenna, is unpopular at school, with a distant father and a mother who has deserted the family. As a result, her sexual desires are obfuscated by her social and psychological desires for affection and affirmation, and when she acquires a boyfriend, Robert, she thinks, 'Here was a real, honest-to-goodness stunner of a guy, and he was into me! It didn't really make sense, but then, who can argue with true love?' (37). Here – and elsewhere in the novel – it is impossible to tell whether Jenna's desire is rooted in the sexual appeal of Robert's looks; the flattery of being wanted by, or the cachet of being seen with, a 'stunner'; or her lonely yearning for 'love'. Regardless, Jenna is quite right that the relationship does not 'make sense,' because at this point in the story she has known Robert, who befriends her online, for only two days, and she has not yet met him in person. Confused as they are, her desires lead her to dismiss this non-sense, for which Partridge's punishment is extreme: Jenna is eventually trapped in an abandoned building by Robert and a friend, who turn out to be adult sociopaths who have selected and groomed her for rape, torture and long-term captivity or murder. She escapes only after three chapters of vivid brutality and a vicious attempt to drown her.

When Jenna first encounters Robert online, she thinks that he looks 'like one of those teen movie vampires' (13), alluding to the films based on Stephenie Meyer's Twilight saga. Partridge's novel has many parallels with *Twilight* (2005), including the similarity of the names of the two heroines, Jenna and Bella; their irresponsible absent mothers and the inept parenting of their fathers; their tendencies to blush and their boyfriends' tendencies to carry them around; and the glamorous cars and beautiful secret gardens in which the men romance the girls. Most importantly, the books parallel each other in their focus on their teenage heroines' obsessive desires: both Jenna and Bella desire preternaturally beautiful older men who pretend to be high school students, and both ignore the warnings of friends and family against these men.

The parallels between Meyer's and Partridge's novels therefore seem to suggest that Jenna's problem is unwise desire, or desire for the wrong person, and indeed Partridge's text reads as a response to Meyer's books, and a warning to Twilight fans about where desires such as Bella's may lead in the real world. Elana Levine argues convincingly that Bella's uncontrollable desire 'bends the notion of feminist empowerment so that it becomes equivalent to feminine devotion,' an argument that could easily be made of Jenna's desire for Robert (283). Renae Franiuk and Samantha Scherr observe that fiction such as the Twilight saga 'favorably portrays male suitors with characteristics that are predictive of relationship violence, and eroticizes sexual violence' (24); Partridge's novel portrays such a suitor to show readers the very unerotic violence that his behaviour portends.

Yet while being selected, groomed, captured and tortured by murderous sociopaths, unlike being killed by vampires, is perfectly possible, it is not commonplace. I would argue therefore that Partridge appears to be luxuriating in the wanton violence of her own writing more than making a credible point about everyday South African dangers. Any such point would, in any case, be a fundamentally hopeless one, in which there is no wise form of girls' desire that can exist independently of violence. Jenna's desire is indeed unwise, but it is not unreasonable of her to believe Robert when he says that he is seventeen years old: even her friend Anisa, who is very suspicious of Robert, never doubts his age. It is not unreasonable for Jenna to dismiss Anisa's dislike of Robert, since Anisa is usually critical of Jenna and her interests. It is not even unreasonable for Jenna to ignore the warnings of her father, who is so detached from his daughter that he fails to recognize Jenna after Robert dyes her hair. The excess and sensationalism of the violence that springs from Jenna's very ordinary desires, combined with an epilogue in which Robert begins grooming a new desiring girl, suggest that not only Jenna's, but any girl's, desires lack wisdom, imply danger and invite exploitation for violent ends.

Desire Silenced: *Sidekick*

Adeline Radloff's *Sidekick* attempts to discuss desire through the suspicious frequency with which Katie, its heroine, denies her interest in her superhero boss, Finn, and the unconvincing casualness with which she describes his attractiveness. Finn is another extraordinarily beautiful, dangerous older man with a flashy car, about whom Katie says, for example:

> I glance at him from the corner of my eye (something I've perfected over the years). He looks the way he always does: glossy and stunning and too sexy, like a movie star, but with something else, something darker seething underneath. Edward Cullen meets Captain Jack Sparrow – if that's conceivable – only even more psychotic and without the laughs.
>
> It's a good thing I'm not in love with him anymore. It really is. (37)

Katie's desire is evident in her lingering and detailed description of Finn's appearance, and is reinforced – like Jenna's desire in *Dark Poppy's Demise* – by the reference to Twilight, via its hero, Edward Cullen. Yet while Katie expresses her desire, implicitly if not directly, she also suffers for acting on it. When Katie kisses Finn, she is immediately punished with the coincidental but tragic (and likely violent) death of a beloved father figure, Simon. Later, when she tries to suppress her desire for Finn by cultivating a little lukewarm interest in a boy at school, the boy and his friends beat her unconscious and try to rape her.

This exposure to violence is not unique in Katie's life. As the cover art suggests with its outline of a fighting teenage girl executing a powerful sidekick, the title of the novel puns on Katie's job as Finn's assistant, or sidekick, and on the violent contexts inevitably associated with the job of a superhero's sidekick. Also, as the novel opens, Katie spends what she says 'feels like an hour' helping Finn to 'move bodies around, clean up some blood, wipe surfaces, remove the bullets from several guns and stash half a dozen AK47s' in Finn's Porsche (9–10). The careful detail of this description of the leavings of violence is matched in her account of her attempted rape, which includes specifics of what the boys do to her and how she experiences the physical pain of the attack: 'Willem is kicking at my ribs, viciously. Once. Twice. The pain is breathtaking … . Jamal comes closer, pulls Willem away from me, and for a second I'm grateful, but then he grabs my hair, starts dragging me … . Jamal is yanking at my jeans. Willem kicks me again. My shoulder goes numb, then starts hurting so much my eyes tear up' (138). The clarity, detail, directness and embodied physicality of this violence exposes by contrast how subdued are the hints of desire that we can infer from Katie's narration. The fact that these hints of desire are constrained to being read between the lines of her denials, and the punishments she suffers for them, suggest that her desire cannot but be dangerous and futile, and would be better silenced.

Desire and Violence: *In Search of Happiness*

One notable exception to the trope of silenced or evaded desire is Sonwabiso Ngcowa's *In Search of Happiness*. An afterword to the novel explains how Ngcowa's own community has been affected by violence against lesbians, and states that Ngcowa wrote the novel specifically to challenge 'injustice towards sexual minorities' (van Dijk 149). Like many contemporary YA novels about lesbian heroines, and unlike most novels of heterosexual desiring girls, *In Search of Happiness* celebrates the sexual desire of its heroine. And, where novels such as *Dark Poppy's Demise* and *Sidekick* use claims of love to obscure desire, Ngcowa – like the marriage equality campaign slogan 'Love is love' – instead uses love to validate it.

Ngcowa's heroine, Nana, is unambiguous about both her love and her desire for her Zimbabwean neighbour, Agnes. When Agnes applies Nana's makeup, for example, both Nana's spirit and her entire body respond to Agnes's nearness: 'She leans in close to my face. Then she stops. We look at each other. It is as if we can see into each other's souls. I can feel her warm breath. I feel a tingling all over' (Ngcowa 93). When Agnes pulls Nana to her, Nana meets her lovingly, physically, passionately:

> I hug her, and don't let go. Then I turn my face up to hers and kiss her on the lips. A little kiss. But it brings an inexplicable feeling of joy. I look deeply into her eyes. We move closer and then kiss again. This time for longer – deeply, beautifully.
>
> '*Ndiyakuthanda*, I love you, Nana,' she whispers in my ear.
>
> 'I love you too, Agnes.'
>
> We get up and, holding hands, we walk towards her bed. (100)

Nana and Agnes's romance is set in Masiphumelele in the Western Cape, a province where more than three quarters of Black lesbian and bisexual women and girls, as noted above, fear abuse because of their sexual orientation (Rich, 'Research Findings' 15; 29–30). In Masiphumelele, Rachel Bray, Imke Gooskens, Lauren Kahn, Sue Moses and Jeremy Seekings find that most adolescents 'have witnessed violence of various kinds,' with young adults and teenagers themselves the 'primary perpetrators' (120). In this setting, Nana and Agnes's lives are so saturated with violent menace – memories of the torture of Agnes's brother, Chino, in Zimbabwe, and threats in the present of both xenophobic and homophobic violence (including the threat of violence from Chino himself) – that it seems inevitable that Agnes is eventually a victim of hate rape, and that Nana and Chino are violently attacked when they rescue her. The novel ends optimistically, with an affirmation of Nana and Agnes's love and the happiness it can bring them even if it is hidden, but with a strong sense that the girls will always be at risk because of their desires: going to the beach they are careful not to walk 'too close' to one another (141), and Nana acknowledges the danger of the familiar world when she says that 'It feels safer to embrace here in the sea, this other element' (142–43).

Ngcowa's novel is remarkable among South African YA books for voicing a teenage girl's sexual desire with clarity, directness and physicality. It represents heterosexuality critically, which Younger argues is common in lesbian YA novels, especially in their portrayal of 'female sexual pleasure as cooperative and mutual' (51). And, like many other queer YA novels, it provides support for the idea that what Adrienne Rich calls 'compulsory heterosexuality' (632) – the political institution under which women are channelled into heterosexual romance and marriage through both socialization and overt cultural forces – is a powerful locus of opposition to girls' desire. Yet *In Search of Happiness* is typical of South African YA writing in linking its girls' desire inextricably to violence, perhaps even subordinating desire to violence.

Looking in greater detail at Lily Herne's Mall Rats series, I want to consider the implications of such a link.

Passive Sexuality for Active Violence: The Mall Rats Trade-off

Herne's series is set ten years after a zombie apocalypse. Lele, its heroine, is first a smuggler and then a would-be resistance fighter, and her life is centred on fighting and fight training. Her first relationship ends when her partner, Thabo, is shot. Her next partner, Ash, is a former child soldier. From the outset, violence is taken for granted in Lele's situation.

Desire, on the other hand, is troubling. With Ash, initially Lele feels guilty for being attracted to him and to Thabo simultaneously, and later she is furious to learn that he has signally betrayed her trust, manipulating and trapping her into the life of a smuggler. When he puts his arm around her one night after they and their friends Saint and Ginger make camp and drink champagne at an abandoned game lodge, she is angry, tipsy and ambivalent:

> Part of me wants to push him away from me – I want to stay angry at him – but I don't. Instead I relax, letting him hold my weight, and it feels good. I reach for the bottle again, but Ash tugs me back, and his other hand reaches for my face, turning it towards him. I find my neck tipping back, my eyes closing. His mouth settles on mine, firm and warm, and then I'm kissing him, wrapping my arms around his neck and pressing against him. I'm aware of Saint saying 'Get a room, you guys!', but her voice is coming from miles away.
>
> 'Let's get out of here,' Ash whispers. He takes my hand, pulls me up onto wobbly legs and leads me towards the lodge. (*Saint* 119)

Lele's behaviour here is passive, her role merely to allow Ash to touch and hold her, sometimes in ways that she is not sure she wants. Her only active contributions – kissing him, holding him and pressing against him – are responses to his determined prompting: tugging her, turning her and firmly kissing her. We might infer desire from how it 'feels good' to let him hold her. Yet (as with Jenna) it is difficult to disentangle this possibly sexual feeling from a social need, the need to repair her friendship with Ash. In any case, the possible desire to follow through on any sexual feeling she may have is weaker than her desire to reach for more champagne. And Lele is at pains to distance herself from her own body's potential signs of desire: it is not she who looks up, but her neck that tips back; it is not she who shuts out distraction, but her eyes that close; she does not kiss, but finds herself 'kissing' (119). Lele cedes control to various parts of her body to deny the autonomy of the whole, and her sexual subjectivity with it. Her disembodied passivity – like Jenna's confused and Katie's silenced desires – follows the model of passive femininity, with its failure to conceive of 'the autonomy of women's bodies or of female desire' (Holland et al. 23).

Passive femininity is evident not only in the detached but acquiescent way Lele performs sexual intimacy, but also in how she speaks about it. The next day she wonders if Ash regrets what she refers to as 'what happened between us,' and thinks, 'But you don't do what we did if you're not serious about someone, do you?' (163). Despite her passivity before the act, she is certain that neither of them wanted to stop, and claims that, 'I've never felt like that before – completely lost in the moment – and I know Ash felt the same. It was as if we couldn't get enough of each other' (164). Lele seems to need to excuse her sexuality through the context of being 'serious about someone' – her vague language and inability to name what she has done, even in the privacy of her mind, suggest this. As Jenna and Katie use love to obscure desire, so Lele uses emotional commitment.

To contextualize my readings of fictional girls' desires against the little that is known about the desires of real-world girls, I lean on the research of Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson, and of Deborah L. Tolman and of Sharon Thompson: three studies of teenage girls' own accounts of their sexual feelings and histories. Both

Tolman and Thompson describe stories of sex that girls say 'just happened,' as though involuntarily (Thompson 343; Tolman 2). One girl said this to Thompson, for example: 'I tell you, I don't know why or how I did it. Maybe I just did it unconsciously' (343). Part passive disembodiment, part disingenuous evasion, this calls to mind the way Lele inexplicably finds her neck and eyes moving towards Ash, apparently of their own volition. Lele's detached passivity is highlighted by its pitiful contrast with Nana's straightforward ownership of her desire. Lele's face that is turned by Ash, and her independent tipping neck, are reproached by Nana's active gestures: 'I turn my face up [to Agnes]' (Ngcowa 100); Lele's hand, taken by Ash, and her body, pulled up and led away by Ash, lack the mutuality of Nana and Agnes's intimacy: 'We get up and, holding hands, we walk towards her bed' (Ngcowa 100).

As if Lele's evasive focus on commitment and her distancing language are not sufficiently convincing – as perhaps they are not – she also hides her desire behind alcohol. Such an exploitation of alcohol to cover desire, as Tolman says in her discussion of an interviewee who does the same, 'muddies the question of responsibility' and 'excuses her from culpability' (140). It makes it unclear whether Lele describes Saint's voice as 'miles away' and her own legs as 'wobbly' because she is lost in pleasure, or because she needs to be drunk to avoid responsibility for what she wants and does (*Saint* 119). Lele's behaviour is strikingly similar when she later has sex with Lucien, yet another boy about whom she feels acutely ambivalent and whom she believes has betrayed her trust. In this case, as she sees it, Lucien has manipulated and trapped her into being sold for marriage and breeding.

Lucien visits her before the planned marriage, bringing a bottle of whisky. As in her attitudes towards Ash, Lele is angry, tipsy and ambivalent. When Lucien strokes her cheek, she pushes him away and says, '"Don't touch me,"' an apparently unequivocal rejection (*Army* 126). In a moment, however, she notes, more ambiguously, that it 'feels weird being so close to him' (126). Her ambivalence, and her insistence on distancing herself from her own desire rather than acknowledging it, becomes clear when she says, 'He's sitting far too close to me. I don't move away; decide not to question why I don't' (127). As a result, her earlier 'Don't touch me' becomes retrospectively more equivocal: it certainly reflects unfeigned anger, but it is perhaps also a careful forestalling of desire. Her ambivalence remains evident in the following exchange:

> He takes off his jacket, throws it onto the floor.
>
> 'Making yourself at home?'
>
> '*Oui*.' He smiles at me, holding my gaze and something sparks between us. 'You have a problem with this?' (128)

She is unable to tell Lucien directly that he should not make himself 'at home,' but her sarcasm when he does so is a rebuff. She acknowledges the spark between them, but is unable to name it as desire, or even attraction. Neither repulsing nor inviting him, neither denying nor admitting her desire, she avoids answering his question. This is partly because of the passive femininity of her sexual behaviour, and partly because of the genuine ambivalence of her desire. With Ash, the possibly sexual response that it 'feels good' (*Saint* 119) to let him hold her was undercut by the fact that the good feeling failed to draw her attention fully from the champagne bottle. With Lucien, similarly, the strength of the spark she feels is weakened by the fact that the tattoos on his arms are enough to distract her from Lucien himself; she then thinks about the tattoo on his back, and the troubling artist who created it. Lucien may spark desire in Lele but – ambivalent as she is about both her desires and Lucien himself – the spark is clearly nothing like a consuming fire.

Nevertheless, her passive femininity requires Lele to distance herself from even this mild spark of desire. She not only reminds Lucien that she is drunk, but also blames him for her intoxication, although in reality it is she who snatches the whiskey from his hand, who chooses to 'glug' and 'swig' and 'knock back' mouthfuls 'on an empty stomach' (*Army* 126–28). When Lucien slides his fingertips up her arm, she yet again reminds the reader that her sexual response, weak as it is, should be linked to, and thus absolved by, alcohol: 'I let him. A tingling sensation dances down into my belly, melding with the swirling alcohol' (128).

This bodily response is slight, but appears stronger than what Lele experienced with Ash. Perhaps this is why she is still more passive with Lucien than with Ash. As with Ash, her acquiescence is a matter of allowing things to be done to her and not moving away, but, unlike with Ash, she does not respond to Lucien's physical prompts. The chapter ends when she is at her most passive: 'His face is close to mine. Too close … . And then he pushes me down onto the bed' (128). This end pre-empts any account of what will, at some point, become Lele's responsive and responsible participation in sex: something Lele is at pains to avoid acknowledging.

Afterwards, Lele's attitudes and language recall the passive femininity of her thoughts after sex with Ash. She is once again unable to name her own sexual activity, even in her own mind, and instead she thinks vaguely about 'that night' and 'what happened between us' (177). As she did with Ash, she wonders, 'Does he regret what happened between us?' (177). And – without any way of hiding her desire behind a claim to emotional commitment, as she did with Ash – she thinks: 'I don't even know if *I* regret it' (177). Although this observation acknowledges the possibility that she might not regret it, and reveals that despite her passivity she has no feeling that she was coerced, it suggests, at best, a high degree of confusion or equivocation about her own sexual behaviour.

Sexually, therefore, Lele consistently performs an extremely passive femininity in which she allows herself little conception of bodily autonomy or her own sexual desire. In violent contexts, however, she is a different person, capable and responsible; in non-sexual violent circumstances, her performance of femininity is anything but passive; and far from allowing things to happen, as she does with Ash and Lucien, she is proactive about protecting the autonomy of her body, whether from villains, zombies, or state forces. For example, when she and a friend are trapped by Previn and Scott, two men who wish to rape and enslave them, Lele takes control and initiative despite being considerably more intoxicated than when Ash kisses or Lucien visits her. Caught in a stranglehold by Previn, who outweighs her by fifty kilograms and has a knife to her neck, she knows that 'I have to stop this. I can't let this happen' (*Saint* 220). So drunk she has just vomited, she nevertheless quickly devises and executes a neat feint that enables her to kick and immobilize him. Still in control and proactively planning, she then turns her attention to Scott, who tries to kick her: 'I brace myself, grab his foot, twist it and yank him towards me. He loses his balance, stumbles backwards, and, as I release my grip, he falls back, hitting his head with a clunk on the table behind him. I scramble to my feet, ready to drop-kick him if necessary, but he doesn't get back up' (221).

Even Lele's language is different when describing violence, far more specific and direct than when she describes sex. We are never entirely certain what Lele and Ash do sexually; we know that it does not involve penile-vaginal penetration, but that when they are interrupted Lele is no longer wearing her jeans. Lele is so vague about what she does with Ash that Inggs reads sex with Lucien as the 'only overtly sexual encounter' Lele experiences (131). However, the curtain is closed on Lele and Lucien after Lucien pushes her onto the bed; we infer that they have had intercourse only because Lele is subsequently punished with a pregnancy, as desiring girls in YA fiction often are. By contrast, when Lele fights we know precisely what she and her antagonists do and how they do it. And, after sex, both with Ash and with Lucien, she is concerned with questions of regret and is unable to name what she has done; yet after a fight, she thinks, 'The rush I felt when I floored those guys hasn't entirely gone,' and 'I can't deny that I enjoyed every second of beating the crap out of them' (*Army* 125). Far from her uncertainty about whether she regrets having had sex with Lucien, after the fight she thinks, simply, 'I shut my eyes, replay the scene over and over. Would I have done anything differently? No' (125).

Molly Brown argues convincingly that 'Lele is portrayed as an innocent fighting for survival in a hostile urban environment in which violence is an everyday occurrence,' and that to maintain her innocence Herne either has to kill her or to valorize aggression in her 'while condemning it in those ranged against' her (34). Thus, as Brown says, 'Lele's fighting skills may grant her … personal agency' but they also ensure that 'the books position violence as the only appropriate response to threats' (34). In addition, since one of the ways in which Lele, as a narrator, portrays herself as innocent is by distancing herself from her sexual desires and behaviour, the personal agency that she acquires through her violence must be sacrificed in her sexuality. Jessica Murray rightly criticizes the series for vacillating 'between challenging and perpetuating' stereotypes of gender and sexuality (9). One reason it does this might be Herne's apparent need to balance Lele's active violent femininity with a passive sexual one.

For Joan-Mari Barendse, the 'gratuitous violence' of the series is inherent in the 'zombie genre' (89). This is certainly true, but to dismiss the violence of the novels as a function of genre may be to miss how the series fits into a pattern in South African YA fiction of situating desire in inherently, and excessively, violent genres and social contexts – from psycho thriller, zombie war and superhero action to xenophobia and hate rape of lesbians. I have presented only six examples as evidence of this pattern, but since these six constitute roughly half of all English South African YA novels published this millennium in which a heroine's desires are a shaping force in the narrative, I would suggest that they establish a pattern sufficient to demand interrogation.

The Cost of a One-Dimensional Picture

This pattern presents South African girls' lives in a troublingly one-dimensional way. Violence and fear of violence do permeate these girls' lives, as they permeate the fictional lives of Jenna, Katie, Nana and Lele. But violence is not the only, or necessarily the primary, shaping force in South African lives, and there is nothing to be gained – and, as I have argued, much to be lost – from denying girls' sexual desires.

Caroline T. Clark and Mollie V. Blackburn highlight what is lost when YA novels reduce queer fictional lives to one violent dimension. They express a concern that if readers 'encounter scenes of violence but not of sex (and love), then they may come to understand that to be LGBTQQ is a lonely life, devoid of sex and love but full of violence' (883). They find that sex and love scenes present queer people and lives in more nuanced ways than violent scenes do, and they argue that without these more nuanced scenes, 'how people connect to and distance themselves from one another by knowing and loving themselves' is lost (882). It is a disquieting thought that the representation of desiring South African girls in YA fiction – lonely, lost to love but alive to violence, endangered and dangerous – so frequently mirrors the treatment of many queer American YA characters. South African YA writing such as that of Partridge, Radloff and Herne seems intent on imposing the hostility and alienation so often experienced by queer young people on all desiring South African girls.

In 2015 the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act was amended to decriminalize sex between teenagers from 12 to 16 years old. As Christina Nomdo (2015) reports, the amendment 'passed with no objections from any political party.' If there is tacit agreement, across the political and ideological spectrum and at the highest levels of representation of the country, that even the youngest of teenagers might choose to engage in sexual activity, then I would hope that at least some of these sexually active teenagers might also experience sexual desire – that they are not all, like Jenna, struggling to distinguish sexual from social and emotional desires or, like Lele, passively allowing sex when they feel at best ambivalent. And I would certainly hope that they do not all learn to associate sex indissociably with violence, as their YA fiction so regularly teaches them to do.

Radloff's *Sidekick* compares the object of its heroine's desire to the heartthrob of Stephenie Meyer's Twilight saga. *Dark Poppy's Demise* is an extended response to Twilight. Even the Mall Rats books namecheck Meyer's series, when Lele uses a stack of Twilight graphic novels in a bookstore as projectile weapons (*Deadlands* 308). These references are apt, not merely popular. The unwavering focus on Bella's desire for Edward that marks and shapes Twilight, and was distinctive within the YA genre when the series was first published, is reflected in the ways that desire marks and shapes the stories of the South African heroines, and remains eccentric within the genre in South Africa. Meyer's saga wallows in its heroine's desire while exploiting a lot of danger and a small amount of violence for conflict and tension. Radloff, Partridge and Herne reverse this formula, wallowing in danger and violence while exploiting a little uncertain desire for conflict and tension. In doing so, they narrow the range of the social and emotional experience of both their heroines and their girl readers with their obsessive focus on a single dimension of South African life.

Only Ngcowa, in *In Search of Happiness*, both admits to and criticizes the link between desire and violence that he portrays: that is, indeed, part of the explicit intention of his novel. Only Ngcowa seems to acknowledge that desire is a more age-appropriate experience for a teenage girl than violence, that a necessary acknowledgement and representation of a violent reality does not have to be accompanied by a gratuitous abandonment to it, that violence is not the only dimension of life even in a violent society. His story of lesbian desire deviates from the common pattern that couples desire with violence. In this deviation from the pattern, Ngcowa powerfully highlights how other South African authors writing for teenagers in English frequently seem determined to deny heterosexual girls' normal desires or to terrorize girls out of desire, perpetuating the violent danger in which their girl readers live by reducing their lives to this single dimension.

Notes on Contributor

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