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Teen pregnancy in young adult literature

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Teen pregnancy in young adult literature

by

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Literature matters. People read for many different reasons: some want to escape into the worlds in books; some are looking for information, even as they read fiction; and some want to expand their minds with new ideas, opinions, and beliefs. No matter what the reason is for reading, people will be impacted in some way by literature. Tom Romano, author of the article “Relationships with Literature,” believes literature can change people’s worlds and the way they perceive life (9). In *The Call of Stories: Teaching and the Moral Imagination*, Robert Coles agrees that literature can change lives because it has the capacity to “work its way well into our thinking life as well as our reveries or idle thoughts, even our moods and dreams” (294). Literature has the potential to impact any age of reader, but if adults are influenced by literature, adolescents certainly are. The major task of adolescence is the “formulation, or reformulation, of personal identity,” according to John Bushman and Kay Parks Bushman, co-authors of the book *Using Young Adult Literature in the English Classroom* (7). As adolescents are determining who they are, they are influenced by friends, the media, family, and literature.

Because literature can be so influential, readers of all ages should have literature available. In *Literature as Exploration*, Louise Rosenblatt says, “Certainly for the majority of readers, the human value, the human experience that literature presents, is primary” (8). This “human experience that literature presents” can be best understood by the reader if the literature relates in some way to the reader’s own experiences (Rosenblatt 8). Children’s literature does this for children, and adults have a plethora of literature from which to choose. Adolescents also need literature written for them, and they can find this in young adult literature.
Adolescents today have many options when choosing literature to which they can connect because young adult literature is a very large market. According to Kenneth Donelson and Alleen Pace Nilsen, co-authors of the text *Literature for Today's Young Adults*, approximately five hundred young adult novels are published every year (5). Since adolescents have so many novels from which to choose, and since so many young adult novels are published every year, these novels must be current with slang, fashions, and pop culture to be relevant.

One current issue in young adult literature is teen pregnancy. Young adult novels about teen pregnancy can be very influential because teens “want to read about things that are interesting and true” (Donelson and Nilsen 87). Teens get much of their information about sex and related matters from the media, but, as the author of *Teen Parenting* states, “Television and other media fail to tell the whole story” (Stewart 17). For a teen who is dating, is considering dating, is pregnant, or whose friend is pregnant, young adult literature can be a way both to get information and to connect with the experience. Therefore, young adult literature should portray teen pregnancy realistically.

Because young adult literature should be current to be relevant and because of the impact it has on its readers, this study focuses on the following question: How realistic is the portrayal of pregnant teens, specifically from the perspective of the pregnant and/or parenting teen, in young adult literature from 1990-2004?
Chapter 2. Literature Review

Defining Young Adult Literature

To define young adult literature, it is helpful to know why the title “young adult” is used and to which age group “young adult” refers. Many adjectives have been used to label literature for young adults. It has been called any of the following: adolescent literature, adolescent fiction, junior teen novels, juvenile fiction, teenage books, and teen fiction (Bushman and Bushman 2; Christenbury 153; Donelson and Nilsen 2; Frey and Rollin 2). It is still sometimes referred to as “adolescent literature,” but that term and others have generally been dropped because of their negative connotations for young adults, who would often rather not read something labeled “juvenile” or “adolescent” (Christenbury 153).

What is a “young adult,” then? While “young adult” in the general sense often refers to people in their late teens and early twenties, the audience for young adult literature could be ages eleven through eighteen (Stover 5), ages thirteen through twenty (Frey and Rollin 2), ages twelve to eighteen (Donelson and Nilsen 1), ages ten to twenty-five (Cart 95), or grades seven through twelve (Crowe 121). Though the age ranges vary slightly, the authors agree that “young adult” includes students in middle school and high school.

Young adult literature itself is defined loosely as literature written for young adults and with a young adult protagonist (Bushman and Bushman 2; Christenbury 153; Milner and Milner 192). Donelson and Nilsen define young adult literature as “anything that readers between the approximate ages of 12 and 18 choose to read (as opposed to what they may be coerced to read for class assignments)” (1). In Young Adult Literature: The Heart of the Middle School Curriculum, Lois Thomas Stover adds to Donelson and Nilsen’s definition of young adult literature: “Contemporary young adult literature is written for and about young
people from the age of eleven, when most students enter sixth grade (the grade that frequently marks the first year of middle school), through the age of eighteen, when the majority of students graduate from high school” (5). Arthea Reed, author of *Reaching Adolescents: The Young Adult Book and the School*, agrees with Donelson and Nilsen that young adult literature is that which young adults read, and she includes “books written for children, adults, or a general audience that relate to the young adult’s needs and interests” (61). Chris Crowe, editor of the *English Journal*, writes, “I consider a ‘young adult’ to be a person old enough to be in junior high or high school, usually grades seven through twelve. I define literature for young adults as all genres of literature published since 1967 that are written for and marketed to young adults” (121). Crowe chooses 1967 as the starting point of young adult literature because that is the year *The Outsiders* by S. E. Hinton (considered by many to be the beginning of realistic young adult fiction) was published. The editors of *Classics of Young Adult Literature*, Charles Frey and Lucy Rollin, do not include a specific date in their definition, but they believe young adult literature is “written or published with an audience of young readers [age thirteen to twenty] in mind”; they would also include literature “young readers choose to read” in their definition (2). Patty Campbell, a critic of young adult literature, provides a more specific explanation for young adult fiction:

The central theme of most YA fiction is becoming an adult, finding the answer to the question, “Who am I and what am I going to do about it?” No matter what events are going on in the book, accomplishing the task is really what the book is about, and in the climactic moment the resolution of the external conflict is linked to a realization for the protagonist that helps shape an adult identity. (quoted in Donelson and Nilsen 3)
Based on these definitions, young adults are interested in reading about characters like themselves, going through situations and experiences similar to their own.

A Brief History of Young Adult Literature

The earliest young adult literature featured young protagonists making “morally right” decisions and getting rewarded for them or making “morally wrong” decisions and getting punished for the wrongdoing. Adults used this type of literature to “guide young people in their behavior” (Bushman and Bushman 181). As “religion loosened its hold on education and reading,” pleasure reading became an option, and William Taylor Adams (pseudonym Oliver Optic) provided this type of reading for young readers in the 1850s (Frey and Rollin 3). Optic’s novels were written primarily for boys, and, “as a result of the popularity of Optic’s books, a competing publisher urged Louisa May Alcott to write a book (Little Women) especially for young girls” (Bushman and Bushman 185). Before Little Women was in print, Horatio Alger, Jr. published his first novel. Alger typically wrote about poor young boys who, through honesty, hard work, and a little bit of luck, were able to rise above poverty. Though novels by Alcott and Alger were written for young people as pleasure reading, “the literature still held values and morals high and came down on the side of what was considered ‘right’” (Bushman and Bushman 185).

Domestic and dime novels followed the novels by Alcott and Alger. Dime novels, described as offering action and excitement, were “often set in the Old West where lawlessness ruled and rough brave men shot it out in saloons, though by the end of the century their most popular stories concerned hard-boiled private detectives” (Frey and Rollin 3). By the late 1800s, formula fiction, primarily developed by Edward Stratemeyer, dominated literature for young adults (Bushman and Bushman 186). To meet the demand for
his novels, Stratemeyer developed a syndicate system in which he provided plot and character outlines to anonymous authors who would then write the stories. His series included Tom Swift, the Bobbsey Twins, the Hardy Boys, and Nancy Drew, which “supplied what teens wanted to read: short novels about teenage protagonists enjoying independence, action, and adventure, in an easy-to-read style and a predictable format” (Frey and Rollin 4).

Though Stratemeyer’s series, and other authors’ novels published before Stratemeyer’s, were obviously written for a young audience, it was not until the early 1930s that “junior” or “juvenile” were terms used to label young adult literature (Donelson and Nilsen 67). Novels that fell into this category in the 1940s and 1950s included “genre fiction – romance, adventure, sports, science fiction, cars, and careers” (Cart 96). It was not until the 1960s and “the appearance of hard-edged realism” that young adult literature began to resemble the young adult literature of the early twenty-first century (Cart 96).

The start of young adult literature “in modern form” is argued by many to be S. E. Hinton’s The Outsiders, which was published in 1967 (Christenbury 153). Hinton was one of the first authors to write a realistic novel for young adults, which portrayed real and difficult situations for characters. According to Richard Beach and James Marshall in Teaching Literature in the Secondary School, the characters in The Outsiders are “realistically portrayed, with all of their flaws made visible” (340). Ponyboy, the protagonist, is not only from a low socioeconomic class (“instead of from a safe, serene, middle-class world”), but he is in a gang (Beach and Marshall 340). The story includes the death of Ponyboy’s friend, but there is a hopeful ending for the protagonist. Hinton’s novel acknowledged that “many young people lived lives far removed from the happy-go-lucky images shown in television commercials and sitcoms” (Donelson and Nilsen 118).
Therefore, young adult literature changed from being moralistic to being realistic, and this current young adult literature acknowledges the reality of adolescents by portraying young people as they really are.

**Characteristics of Young Adult Literature**

Most authors and critics of young adult literature would agree on the following characteristics: “a young adult main character from twelve to twenty years old; one major plot, with few subplots, taking place within a fairly short time span; a limited number of characters; one major setting; and an approximate length of 125-250 pages” (Stover 5). Donelson and Nilsen would add the following characteristics for the “best of modern young adult literature”: a first person narration; a lack of parents; an optimistic outlook presented with characters making worthy accomplishments; and a focus on emotions that are important to young adults (28-35). There are exceptions, but most young adult novels include some, if not all, of the listed characteristics. In addition, modern young adult literature includes a variety of genres and subjects, and it includes stories about characters from many different ethnic and cultural groups.

**Benefits of Young Adult Literature**

Though some educators have mixed views concerning young adult literature, primarily because of formula fiction and the poor writing that is often the result, there are many benefits of young adult literature. According to Arthea Reed, young adult literature helps “bridge the gap between their [students’] complete dependency on us [teachers] and their emerging independence” (5). She explains it in this way: “We’re forcing our students to move directly from Dick and Jane, or whatever they are reading in the latest basal series, to Dickens, Shakespeare, Plato, and the history text. We expect them to jump directly from
childhood into adulthood" (5). Yet, developmentally, adolescents are neither children nor adults, so neither children’s literature nor adult literature is ideal for this age group.

The developmental stage of adolescence determines the stage of reading development. In Piaget’s stages of cognitive development, young adults are moving from the concrete operational period to the formal operational period (Bushman and Bushman 4). This means adolescents are able to think abstractly, and they become very concerned with personal identity. They want to determine who they are as individuals while trying to fit into their peer groups. Adolescents’ egocentrism corresponds to Margaret Early’s second stage of reading development. This stage occurs when, according to Reed, “the reader enjoys the book vicariously, becoming a part of the story” (10). Reed explains that adolescents have moved beyond the first stage of reading development (unconscious enjoyment), but they are not yet ready for the third stage (aesthetic enjoyment) (9-10).

Since adolescents are in the second stage of reading development, they want to become part of the story, and young adult literature allows them to do so. Because young adult literature is written specifically for young adults and because the protagonists are young adults, young adult literature becomes relevant to teens. Beach and Marshall explain,

During early adolescence (12-15), students going through a landslide of physical and emotional changes can, through their reading of novels, get a close-up glimpse of other young adults going through the same experiences. Living through such characters allows students to see successes and failures and ways of coping with both. This vicarious experience can provide both enjoyment and information about the complexities of their own lives. (331)
Furthermore, adolescents can read about many issues in young adult literature, such as sexuality, family problems, drug and alcohol addiction, abuse, surviving middle school and high school, suicide, depression, teen pregnancy, and many others. According to the authors of *Bridging English*, these young adult novels have a “strong appeal for the individual personally or vicariously caught up in similar traumas and tensions. In addition, the egocentrism so characteristic of adolescents . . . can be challenged to include others” (Milner and Milner 193). If adolescents are not personally experiencing that which they are reading, they will vicariously experience it, thereby gaining empathy for others in similar situations. In his article “Lessons and Lives: Why Young Adult Literature Matters,” Gary Salvner shares anecdotes of students who have connected personally to various young adult novels, and he concludes that literature has the power to change people (7). Young adult literature has the power to change young adults because “contemporary young adult literature reflects the complexity of the society out of which it is produced; its themes are of importance to young adults, and the issues with which the characters wrestle are of significance in our ever-changing world” (Stover 6). Thus, young adults are able to live vicariously through young adult literature because it relates directly to them, and this literature can have a profound impact on them because of the issues presented.

Another benefit of young adult literature is that it keeps students reading (Christenbury 156). In “It’s the THAT, Teacher,” Ted Hipple explains the THAT to be more important than the WHAT of reading (15). He believes THAT it is more important to produce lifelong readers than it is to be concerned about WHAT they are reading. He maintains that since young adults will read young adult literature, this is what they should be encouraged to read. Bushman and Bushman agree: “One of the most important goals for
any public school at any level is to foster reading so that students develop into lifelong readers” (123).

If young adult literature can be used to produce lifelong readers, it can also be used to teach the more traditional “classics.” Though developmentally young adults are not yet ready to fully appreciate the classics, young adult literature can help them with the transition from children’s literature to adult literature. Chris Crowe suggests that “selected works of YAL might serve as warm-ups or bridges to classic works” (121). Young adult literature can be used to teach the same pedagogical tools, such as analyses of character, theme, and language, that are often taught using classic literature (Hipple 16); but the techniques used are often less complex, allowing students to successfully analyze them (Beach and Marshall 344). Likewise, “in responding to novels in high school, students may recall young-adult novels employing similar techniques, intertextual links that help them to evoke their knowledge of literary conventions” (Beach and Marshall 345). Many authors suggest pairings of young adult literature and the classics (Herz and Gallo 24; Kaywell 1). Bushman and Bushman recommend pairing the “classics with selected young adult literature that is similar in theme or focus to the classics. In this way, students can succeed at discovering meaning and understanding the literary craft in literature at their developmental level before undertaking the analysis of literature at a higher level” (130). For example, *The Giver* by Louis Lowry can be introduced before *Brave New World* by Aldous Huxley, or *The True Confessions of Charlotte Doyle* (AVI) can be used in conjunction with Homer’s *The Odyssey*.

Young adult literature also can be used to teach the classics because it is just as varied as adult literature in terms of genres. Adolescents can find books written for them in the
areas of romance, fantasy, science fiction, adventure, mystery, and many others. Young adult literature also varies in genres of writing, such as short stories, plays, poems, novels written in verse form, and graphic novels. Many of these genres, according to Milner and Milner, "attract a cult of devoted readers who haunt bookstores and libraries for new titles" (193).

As young adult literature is varied in genre, it also varies in writing quality. The series novels are often looked down upon, although they can be used to encourage struggling readers to read. However, in terms of quality of writing, young adult literature offers many other options. Patty Campbell states, "In the thirty years that I have been having fun being a critic of young adult literature, I’ve seen an amazing thing happen: Most YA fiction has become better than most adult fiction" (Donelson and Nilsen 4). This is because there is a discipline involved in writing YA fiction that comes from the need to grab those kids’ short-lived attention from the first paragraph and keep them turning those pages, a discipline that requires a rigorous economy of words and a taut structure that moves the story with compelling directness to a conclusion that matters. To add subtlety of expression, richness of character development and setting, intricacy of voice and plot, integrity of moral thought, without losing this necessary spareness requires literary art of the highest caliber. (Patty Campbell in Donelson and Nilsen 4)

Leila Christenbury agrees with Campbell’s comments on the quality of young adult literature: "YA literature, though certainly written on a smaller scale than adult literature . . . can be judged using the same literary standards we would apply to any piece of writing" (154). Because of the quality of writing as well as the fact that it is written for young adults,
young adult literature serves as a necessary step for adolescents from children’s literature to literature for adults.

**Problem Novels in Young Adult Literature**

Problem novels in young adult literature fall under the category of contemporary realism, the category of which the most popular young adult novels are a part. A problem novel is one in which the protagonist is faced with a problem (ranging “from physical characteristics of puberty to sexuality, from pregnancy to parenthood, from rape to drugs”) that he/she usually confronts on his/her own (Reed 64). Though some problem novels end in tragedy, many are given a hopeful, but perhaps unrealistic, ending for the benefit of the audience.

Donelson and Nilsen credit *The Outsiders* as the first young adult problem novel, and they explain four characteristics that differentiate the problem novel from other young adult novels (117). First, the characters in the problem novel “come from a variety of social and economic levels” as opposed to being primarily middle class (Donelson and Nilsen 117). Second, since the characters are from various backgrounds, the settings in the novels reflect this difference, including settings in the inner cities and other difficult places to live. Third, the authors use colloquial language to reflect how people talk, incorporating “dialogue filled with profanity and ungrammatical constructions” (Donelson and Nilsen 117). Finally, the mode of the problem novel includes irony and tragedy instead of primarily comedy and romance.

Young adult novels about teen pregnancy are considered to be problem novels. The pregnant teens face problems, such as deciding what to do about the pregnancy and then, if abortion is not chosen, whether or not to keep the baby. More recent novels depict teen
parenthood. These teens face a different set of problems than pregnant teens, such as financial problems, parenting problems, or relationship problems with the baby’s father or mother. Young adult novels about pregnant and parenting teens reflect the characteristics explained by Donelson and Nilsen. The protagonists are somewhat varied in class and ethnicity, thereby affecting the settings and economic realities of the novels; the dialogue often reflects the way young adults talk; and, though many of the novels have hopeful endings, tragedy is a key mode in these novels. Though there is no real “solution” to the problems pregnant and parenting teens face, the novels usually illustrate personal growth for the protagonist no matter what the outcome.

Teen Pregnancy

The issue of teen pregnancy has been written about for centuries. Before the advent of young adult literature as it is today, the issue was not called teen pregnancy; instead, it focused on young unwed mothers. With “Charlotte: A Tale of Truth,” a short story written by Susanna Rowson in the 1700s, and *The Scarlet Letter*, a novel by Nathaniel Hawthorne written in the 1800s, the issue was that the young women had behaved immorally by getting pregnant while being unwed, and, therefore, they must be punished. In *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, also written in the 1800s, Willoughby’s lover is to be pitied since she became pregnant and was then abandoned by him. However, the situation is resolved when Willoughby marries her. In this situation the focus is on Willoughby’s dishonor in abandoning a woman after he had fathered her child. Whether the focus of the literature was on the unwed mother or on the father of the child and his situation, marriage was the desired course of action.
Starting with young adult novels in the 1960s, many stories about teen pregnancy were written to warn young women against having sex or allowing themselves to get pregnant. *Mr. And Mrs. Bo Jo Jones* by Ann Head does not follow the stereotypical moralistic presentation of the topic, but the protagonists get married so their child will be legitimate. In fact, getting married was one of two options for a pregnant teen before the 1970s. The other option was to go to a relative's home or a home for unwed mothers to have the baby, give the child up for adoption, and then go home and pretend that nothing had happened. Pregnant teens were often not even allowed to attend school when their condition was discovered. However, Kristin Luker, author of *Dubious Conceptions: The Politics of Teenage Pregnancy*, explains a case where, in 1971, Fay Ordway sued her school in East Pepperell, Massachusetts, for the right to attend school while pregnant (97). She was granted the right to attend but “was excluded from the Honor Society, despite her high grades” (quoted in Luker 98). Generally, in the 1960s and early 1970s, it was considered better for all concerned if the pregnant teen could keep her pregnancy a secret.

Though society's views did not change overnight, it became more common in the 1970s for women to keep their children without getting married (Stewart, *Teen Parenting* 12). Another change that took place in the 1970s that opened up more options for pregnant teens was the legalization of abortion: "In 1972, before abortion was legalized nationwide, an estimated 75 percent of pregnant teenagers gave birth. After *Roe v. Wade*, the rate dropped to approximately 50 percent" (Luker 155). In 1996, approximately forty percent of pregnant teens chose abortion (Luker 155).

After the legalization of abortion, and as more women decided to keep their babies and raise them on their own, adoption became a less common choice. When marriage or
adoption were a woman’s only options, maternity homes were necessary so women could have the babies without many people knowing about the situation. But in the 1970s, maternity homes were closing because women were not utilizing them for the private pregnancies and secret adoptions for which they had been used (Luker 99). According to Kathy Stolley, author of the article “Statistics on Adoption in the United States,” before 1972, approximately nine percent of premarital births were placed for adoption (32). By 2000, only around three percent of pregnant teens who gave birth placed their babies in adoption (Stewart 8).

The remaining teens, then, decided to keep their babies and raise them alone or with help from family and/or friends. Novels about teen pregnancy reflect society’s changing views because those written in the last fifteen years generally show teens that they have the options of abortion, adoption, or parenting. They also show that sometimes the teen father chooses to raise the child. However, because they do not request welfare benefits, “no one really has an accurate estimate of how many teen fathers there are in the United States” (Stewart, Teen Parenting 53). The authors of the article “Books about Teen Parents: Messages and Omissions” found that “young women are expected to face the consequences of an unplanned pregnancy, and young men are unique if they choose to do so” (Davis and MacGillivray 94). Though “more and more states are making blood testing mandatory so that a child’s true paternity can be established” and the father can then be “held accountable for child support,” responsibility is still left primarily to the mother (Stewart, Teen Parenting 58).
Who, then, is the “typical” teen parent? Can this “typical” teen be characterized by socioeconomic class or ethnicity? And does the “typical” teen parent continue his/her education at the high school and/or college level?

The socioeconomic class of the teen mother and father affects their chances of getting pregnant and their decision about the child. According to Luker, eighty percent of pregnant teens are of low socioeconomic class before pregnancy (107). Luker states that poor teens are more likely than teens of middle and upper socioeconomic status to have sex early in life, to fail to use contraception, to not have abortions if they become pregnant, and to not get married because of a pregnancy (116). Poor teens are more likely to get pregnant and keep their children because they see fewer ramifications for life changes (Luker 182-183). They may not have goals for education and career, and they may be comfortable with the idea of staying at home and getting help raising their children from other family members. By contrast, teens of higher socioeconomic status are less likely to get pregnant, but if they do, they are more likely to have abortions (Luker 116), and they are more likely to give their babies up for adoption (Stolley 32). Therefore, a majority of teen parents are of low socioeconomic status.

Though it would be difficult to claim one ethnic background for the “typical” parenting teen, he/she would most likely not be Caucasian. The pregnancy rates for African American and Hispanic teenagers in 1999 were more than twice the rate of non-Hispanic white teens (Ventura, et al 4). In fact, the teen birthrate for Hispanics was sixty-nine percent higher than the national average (“Crisis”). Also, the number of teen pregnancies for African Americans was slightly higher than the number of teen pregnancies for Hispanics (Ventura,
et al 4). Based on these statistics, the “typical” teen parent would be either African American or Hispanic.

In terms of education, teen parents usually have the choices of finishing at their current high school, attending alternative high school, or completing a GED; if they complete high school, they could attend trade school, community college, or a university. However, some students decide to drop out of school and not return. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy reports that forty-one percent of teens who begin families before age eighteen never go back to high school, and only 1.5 percent of teen mothers have a college degree by age thirty (“Fact Sheet”).

According to research, then, the “typical” teen parent would be a poor, African American or Hispanic female. Though she would have the options and, generally, society’s approval, to either abort the fetus or give the child up for adoption, she would keep her child and raise the child in poverty. Also, she might finish high school, but she would be unlikely to attend college.

**Previous Research in Teen Pregnancy/Parenthood Novels**

Little research has focused on the issue of teen pregnancy in young adult novels. The studies available tend to focus on stereotypes, social messages, character strength, and choices portrayed in young adult literature.

In her 2002 study of six young adult novels, three featuring teen mothers and three featuring pregnant teens, Cynthia Coffel was looking for stereotypes, identifying the intended audience, and critiquing the message. Coffel paid particular attention to “images of voice and silencing in the protagonists’ lives” (16). In “Strong Portraits and Stereotypes: Pregnant and Mothering Teens in YA Fiction,” Coffel expresses her belief that pregnant and
mothering teens can benefit from reading “old and new young adult literature about young women in situations similar to theirs,” and she encourages them to do so “with a feminist and culturally critical critique” (15). Coffel’s intent is for students and teachers to use these novels for discussing sexuality, gender stereotypes, and teen pregnancy (19).

In their 2001 study of fifteen pieces of literature (thirteen novels, one short story, and one creative non-fiction), Davis and McGillavray also examine messages related to teen sex and pregnancy. In “Books About Teen Parents: Messages and Omissions,” they use the eight messages they found as the following subheadings:

- Don’t have unprotected sex even once.
- Most mothers keep their babies.
- Having a baby may put your education on hold, but you can still achieve your goals.
- When you are pregnant, you are on your own.
- For guys, sex is about fun. For girls, sex is about . . . [a variety of complicated reasons].
- Young women have to live with consequences, young men don’t.
- Teen pregnancies do not mandate marriage.
- Teens from “troubled homes,” or their partners, are more likely to become pregnant. (90-95)

As for omissions, Davis and McGillivray identify three concerns: the lack of discussions of race and class, a limited number of references to prenatal care, and little, if any, discussion of how to prevent pregnancy (96).
In addition to the messages presented by Davis and McGillavray, Lynn Cockett and Sarah Knetzer believe young adult literature is perpetuating the idea that young women are to blame for teen pregnancy (51). In “Teenage Pregnancy as Moral Panic: Reflections on the Marginalization of Girls’ Feelings,” Cockett and Knetzer conclude that, in the four novels they examine, the “problem belongs to the girls” (53). Instead of being on their own, pregnant teens should have “a caring and supportive home and social environment,” and Cockett and Knetzer believe young adult literature should reflect this positive environment (54).

Rather than looking at stereotypes, messages, or exclusions, Caroline McKinney examines young adult novels in which the female protagonists exhibit strength of character. Of the fifteen novels she discusses in her article “Finding the Words that Fit: The Second Story for Females in Young Adult Literature,” two of the novels are about a teen who becomes pregnant. July (Mr and Mrs Bo Jo Jones) and Helen (Dear Nobody) both “create a stronger self” as they make decisions regarding their pregnancies (McKinney 3). McKinney believes that, because of their portrayal of strong female characters, these novels provide “illumination and discovery” for the adolescents who read them (6).

While the previous four articles examine stereotypes, messages, and character strength in young adult literature about teen pregnancy, an article by Denise Banker focuses solely on examining books which in some way address the abortion issue. In “Too Real for Fiction: Abortion Themes in YA Literature,” Banker analyzes eleven young adult novels written between 1972 and 1991, but she is disappointed in what is available in young adult fiction on the issue of abortion (6). Banker believes more young adult literature should focus
on abortion "to educate the students . . . [and] to allow them to expand their attitudes and to help them develop a sense of empathy and tolerance toward others" (2).

These five studies examine a variety of novels to discuss the stereotypes, social messages, strength of character, and choices represented in young adult literature, but the information the authors of the articles present only touches on the topic of teen pregnancy in young adult literature. Because little research focuses on the portrayal of teen pregnancy in young adult literature, and because the research available is quickly dated, given the market for young adult literature, this study focuses on the portrayal of teen pregnancy in current young adult novels.
Chapter 3. Methodology

In preparing for this study on teen pregnancy in young adult novels, it was necessary to narrow the study and determine how to analyze the novels. This chapter describes the process of novel selection and the methods used for analysis.

Novel Selection

To begin my search, I read novels about teen pregnancy that a few of my former high school students had previously suggested to me. Other sources included bibliographies of related journal articles, Internet search sites, and novels suggested by teachers and professors. With these many avenues, I have read more than forty young adult novels on the topic of teen pregnancy.

Narrowing the selections to the specific novels discussed in the next chapter included a focus on the copyright date, the perspective from which the story was told, and the level of reader engagement the story encouraged. I chose to limit my selections to novels published since 1990 because the novels are in print and because the presentation of the topic is often more relevant if it is kept current. Also, I limited the novels examined to only those from the perspective of the pregnant and/or parenting teen because I wanted to look at that story as opposed to the story of the friend, parent, relative, or sibling. With approximately five hundred young adult novels published every year, several hundred novels published since 1990 include mention of teen pregnancy (Donelson and Nilsen 5). By focusing my search on young adult novels written from the perspective of the pregnant and/or parenting teen, I was able to limit my search and assure that the issue of teen pregnancy would be a primary focus of the novel instead of a subplot. Finally, I ruled out any novel that met the other two qualifications but was not likely to gain the reader’s interest, because of implausible
characters, an undeveloped or unrealistic plot, and/or a didactic or moralistic tone. After eliminating the novels that did not meet these qualifications, I compiled a list of twenty novels listed below in chronological order:

- *Don’t Think Twice* by Ruth Pennebaker (1996).
- *Borrowed Light* by Anna Fienberg (2000).
- *Perfect Family* by Jerrie Oughton (2000).
Novel Analysis

For this study, I analyzed these twenty novels for their representations of the following three areas: choices available to a pregnant or fathering teen and the decision she/he makes; gender in terms of how the story changes when the protagonist is male; and the education of the pregnant teen or of the teen parent. All three of these areas are affected by socioeconomic class and ethnicity, so the class and race of the protagonists were also considered. To determine whether or not the novels portray teen pregnancy realistically, the novels were examined individually and compared to research on the realities of teen pregnancy, which include current statistics, facts, and nonfiction accounts of teens' experiences.

In terms of choice, when a teen finds out that she is pregnant, she can either abort the fetus or have the baby. If she chooses to have the baby, she can either give the baby up for adoption or raise the child on her own or with help from the father, family, and/or friends. Research shows that almost half of all pregnant teens have abortions, and of the remaining teens who have the babies, few (three percent) give their babies up for adoption (Stewart, *Teen Parenting* 8). Given the research, I noted why the teens in the novels made the choices they did and if those choices correspond with teens' real life experiences.

Second, gender of the narrator is an important consideration because a pregnant teen's choice is affected by the presence or absence of the father. One option represented in young adult novels more commonly today than in the past is for the teen father to choose to
raise the baby on his own. Given the research, I examined if this is statistically consistent with teen fathers’ real life decisions. While novels in which the teen father chooses to raise his child on his own are often told from only the male’s perspective, other novels include the father’s perspective even when he is not the one choosing to raise the child. Two novels discussed in the next chapter include both parents’ perspectives, and some novels conclude with both the teen father and the teen mother sharing responsibilities for the child. Again, I examined if this situation corresponds with the data on teens’ real life experiences.

Finally, the novels were categorized for the protagonists’ choices in education. I examined if the teen mother chooses to stay in school, drop out of school, or attend an alternative high school; if the teen mother or father has plans to go to college before the pregnancy and/or after the pregnancy; and, if she/he plans on attending college while parenting, how likely it is that she/he can succeed. These situations presented in the novels were compared to statistics and teens’ real life experiences regarding education.

Since a teen’s socioeconomic class and ethnicity affect his or her decision as it relates to choice and education, I also analyzed the novels for the portrayal of the protagonist’s class and race and the resulting effect on the situations and options presented in the novel. A majority of the protagonists in the included novels examined here are Caucasians from middle to upper-middle class families. However, research shows that the majority of pregnant teens in the United States are African Americans (Luker 114) and from lower class families (Luker 107). Given this information, I considered how the portrayal of the protagonist as white and middle class affected his/her decisions. I also examined how this representation of the statistical minority impacts whether or not teen pregnancy is realistically portrayed in young adult literature.
The novels were considered collectively to determine if, in general, an adolescent could obtain a realistic view of teen pregnancy from reading a selection of novels on the topic. Obviously, it would be difficult to cover the realities of teen pregnancy in one novel, and most teens will not read all young adult novels about teen pregnancy. Therefore, I looked at the twenty novels together to see if they portray a realistic view of teen pregnancy.

As I analyzed the novels for their portrayal of teen pregnancy, I compared the situations presented to facts, current statistics, and nonfiction accounts of teens’ experiences. These young adult novels published since 1990 and written from the perspective of the pregnant and/or parenting teen were analyzed for how they represent choice, gender, and education, which are influenced by socioeconomic class and ethnicity.
Chapter 4. Analysis

Teen pregnancy is a complex topic to represent in young adult fiction. Because of the complexity of the topic, this study explores the following question: How realistic is the portrayal of pregnant teens, specifically from the perspective of the pregnant and/or parenting teen, in young adult literature from 1990-2004? Though many different areas can by analyzed to determine whether or not the authors of young adult fiction represent teen pregnancy realistically, this study of twenty young adult novels involving teen pregnancy and teen parenthood includes an analysis of choice (abortion, adoption, or parenting), gender (a focus on novels written from the perspective of the teen father), and education (high school and college). The analysis also includes discussion of socioeconomic class and ethnicity, which primarily affect choice and education.

Choice

A pregnant teen has three options. She can decide to have an abortion, or she can carry the baby to term and either keep the baby or give the child up for adoption. The novels included in this analysis present all three options. Some of the novels begin and end with the pregnant teen, some begin with the pregnant teen and end with the birth of the infant, and some begin with the teen already parenting. The teens' experiences vary in terms of which decision was made, how and why, and whether or not the situation presented is realistic, given nonfiction accounts and statistics of pregnant and parenting teens.

Abortion

While forty percent of pregnant teens have abortions, young adult novels about teen pregnancy do not focus on this issue ("Facts in Brief"; Luker 155). In her article "Too Real for Fiction: Abortion Themes in YA Literature," published in 1995, Denise Banker discusses
the few novels that touch on the issue. She was disappointed in the selection she found and is “convinced of the need for some good YA fiction that focuses on the abortion issue, not only to educate students but also to allow them to expand their attitudes and to help them develop a sense of empathy and tolerance toward others” (Banker 2). Of the eleven novels Banker discusses in her article, few of the protagonists have abortions. Of the twenty novels included in this analysis, only two protagonists have abortions.

Two novels published since 1990 that portray a protagonist who has an abortion are *Like Sisters on the Homefront* by Rita Williams-Garcia and *Borrowed Light* by Anna Fienberg. The protagonist in *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, Gayle, is a fourteen-year-old mother forced by her own mother to have an abortion during her second pregnancy. In seven pages, the author describes Gayle waiting in a room at the clinic, experiencing the procedure for the abortion, and meeting with a counselor after the abortion (Williams-Garcia 3-9). The remainder of the book illustrates Gayle’s experience moving south with her son to live with relatives.

Though Gayle’s experience with abortion is discussed in only one chapter of *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, the information presented reveals Gayle’s situation to be unusual. While teens who seek abortions “tend to be affluent and white, [and] to have more ambitious educational and career goals” (Luker 114), Gayle is an African American from the projects who does not seem to be interested in school. Given her situation, it is not likely that Gayle would choose to have an abortion, and she does not. Gayle’s mom “‘gave [her] one mistake [her son]’” and does not want to support another, and so she decides Gayle will have the abortion (Williams-Garcia 3). Since Gayle’s mom was from an affluent family and since she
has goals for Gayle’s life, her decision is statistically supported. However, the author does not explain why Gayle’s mom would allow her to have the first baby but not the second.

Though it is common for women to be depressed after having an abortion, the pain Gayle experiences because of the abortion appears to be more physical than emotional. However, Gayle is portrayed as a tough girl who believes she and her boyfriend Troy “can make another baby” (Williams-Garcia 62). According to Arthur, desiring another child is a common response for girls who regret having an abortion (77). Gayle does not seem to regret the abortion, but it was definitely not her choice, and her letter to Troy in which she tells him they “can make another baby” shows that she experiences some sense of loss (Williams-Garcia 62).

While Gayle’s abortion and subsequent response is discussed for only a chapter of *Like Sisters on the Homefront*, Callisto’s abortion in *Borrowed Light* is a significant part of the story. When Callisto gets pregnant, her boyfriend Tim says he will take care of her. Cally envisions them living in a flat together as a family, but Tim tells her he will take her to “an expert in herbs and plants” who can “give [her] something to make [her] period come on” (Fienberg 84). The herbs do not work, and as Tim spends less and less time with her, Cally decides on her own to have an abortion. Fienberg describes Cally’s experience at the clinic, but she focuses more on Cally’s discussion with the counselor before the abortion than she does on the procedure. After the abortion, Cally experiences both physical and emotional pain but does not regret her decision.

Given her socioeconomic class and race as a middle class Caucasian, Callisto is statistically more likely than Gayle to have an abortion. According to Luker, young women who have abortions often have goals in life, such as going to college and having a career, that
they feel would be interrupted by pregnancy (115). Callisto is still in school when she gets pregnant, but other than mentioning that she wants a “second chance” and feels too young to have a child, she does not discuss specific future goals (Fienberg 277). Instead, she justifies her decision to the reader in a conversational tone, providing reasons why abortion is her best option. She explains that if she were older and married, she would be excited about the pregnancy, but she is sixteen and not “ready to have a baby alone” (Fienberg 143). Cally wants to grow up before she has children, and though she is sometimes saddened by the loss, she does not regret her decision to have the abortion. Cally believes it was the best decision she could make for herself at the time, and she attempts to persuade the reader to agree with her.

*Like Sisters on the Homefront* and *Borrowed Light* are two of the limited number of young adult novels that include a protagonist who has an abortion. However, many of the protagonists in novels about teen pregnancy consider abortion before either finding out they are too far along in the pregnancy to have an abortion or deciding it is not the right decision for them.

Some teens cannot have an abortion because they do not realize they are pregnant until it is too late for a safe abortion (Bode 68; Stewart, *Teen Parenting* 34). In *What Kind of Love? The Diary of a Pregnant Teenager* by Sheila Cole, Peter, Val’s boyfriend, encourages her to have an abortion. She agrees to have the abortion, but when Peter takes her to the clinic, she finds out that because she is four months pregnant, the procedure will cost them much more than they had anticipated. They rule out abortion as an option because of the increase in cost due to the advanced pregnancy. Abortion is also mentioned in *Imani All Mine* by Connie Porter. Tasha suspects her pregnancy for some time, but she does not want
to admit it to anyone. She finally tells her friend Eboni and Eboni suggests, “It might not be too late to get rid of it,” but Tasha decides she does not want to “get rid of it” (Porter 5). Deciding against abortion is the more common response in young adult novels about teen pregnancy that mention abortion.

Of the teens who have the option of choosing abortion, because they are aware of the pregnancy in the early stages and have the means to do so, some decide against it for religious or emotional reasons. Others have “every intention of having an abortion, but back out at the last minute because the idea makes them uncomfortable” (Stewart, Teen Parenting 34). In this study, some protagonists in the young adult novels consider abortion and then change their minds at the last minute, and others, like Tasha in Imani All Mine, decide fairly quickly that abortion is not an option for them.

Two teen protagonists from the young adult novels in this study decide to have abortions and then change their minds at the last minute. Helen, the protagonist in Dear Nobody by Berlie Doherty, walks out of the hospital instead of staying for her scheduled abortion (107). Helen has plans to go to college and does not want a pregnancy to interrupt her plans. First, she tries to end the pregnancy by riding a horse. When that does not work, she tells her mom about the pregnancy, and her mom schedules her to have an abortion. She is in the hospital room lying on the bed when she feels “as if [she] ha[s] become two people,” and she cannot go through with the abortion (Doherty 107). A similar situation is presented in Perfect Family by Jerrie Oughton. Neither Welcome, the protagonist in Perfect Family, nor Helen goes through with her scheduled abortion, even though both thought that would be the best solution to their dilemma.
In a few other young adult novels about teen pregnancy, abortion is mentioned, usually briefly, and then dismissed for one reason or another. In *Detour for Emmy* by Marilyn Reynolds, Emmy thinks about getting an abortion, but she tells her brother she “waited too long” because she has “already felt those little butterfly moves inside [her]” (90). She already feels attached to her unborn baby and decides she cannot have an abortion. Likewise, the protagonist in *Annie’s Baby: The Diary of Anonymous, A Pregnant Teenager*, edited by Beatrice Sparks, briefly considers having an abortion but then decides against it. She believes the fetus is a baby and is concerned about the religious implications of having an abortion.

Though almost half of all pregnant teens choose abortion, this fact is not well represented in young adult literature (“Facts in Brief”; Luker 155). The situations in the novels surrounding the decision to not have an abortion are true to actual teen experiences, but the overall message sent to teens through this literature is that most teens choose not to have abortions. Other young adult novels mention abortion, but the characters who have abortions are often very minor characters and the issue is not given much time or substance in these novels. Fienberg’s *Borrowed Light* is an exception. While *Borrowed Light* presents the issue of abortion appropriately, the discussion of abortion in young adult literature does not seem to have improved since the publication of Banker’s “Too Real for Fiction: Abortion Themes in YA Literature.”

*Adoption*

A teen who does not have an abortion but does not want to parent does have the option of giving the child up for adoption. While only about three percent of pregnant teens choose adoption, this is a somewhat popular conclusion to young adult novels about teen
pregnancy (Stewart, Teen Parenting 8). In fact, seven of the twenty novels included in this analysis end in adoption. The story of the teen who decides to give the baby up for adoption is focused in one of three ways: making the decision at the beginning of the pregnancy, near the end of the pregnancy, or after a short term of parenting.

Two novels in which the pregnant teen knows early in the pregnancy that she will give the baby up for adoption are Don’t Think Twice by Ruth Pennebaker and Someone Else’s Baby by Geraldine Kaye. Even though Don’t Think Twice is set in 1967, critics Cockett and Knetzer refer to the book’s theme as “timeless” (52). When Anne’s parents find out about her pregnancy, they send her to an unwed mother’s home to have her baby so no one will know she was even pregnant. Anne knows that she will have to give the baby up for adoption, and so she thinks of the fetus as “a growth inside [her]” that will be gone in a few months (Pennebaker 25). However, the further she gets into her pregnancy, the more she thinks of the fetus as a child. After labor and birth, Anne wants to see her baby even though her doctor and social worker advise against it. She signs the adoption papers because she must, but after her experience, Anne believes that “being pregnant and giving up your baby . . . isn’t normal” (Pennebaker 254).

Though Anne knew early in her pregnancy that she would give her baby up for adoption, she really was not given much choice in the matter. She was from a white, middle class family and had plans for further education, and the social stigma of being an unwed mother was more than she and her family wanted to overcome. Her experience is similar to Terry’s experience in Someone Else’s Baby even though this novel is set in the 1990s. Terry also feels from early in her pregnancy that she must give her baby up for adoption because her parents will not support her child, and she does not know how she could support a baby
on her own. Terry also regrets giving up her baby, but she does not know what else she could have done, given the position of her family.

While some teen protagonists in young adult novels decide on adoption early in the pregnancy, typically because they feel they have no other option, others decide to keep their babies throughout most of the pregnancy. Then, near the end of the pregnancy or soon after the birth of the baby, these teens realize that adoption is the best option for them. Two novels that follow this pattern are *What Kind of Love? The Diary of a Pregnant Teenager* by Sheila Cole and *Perfect Family* by Jerrie Oughton.

In *What Kind of Love? The Diary of a Pregnant Teenager*, Val decides she wants to keep the baby after she finds out it is too late to have an abortion. She is confident she will be able to keep her baby because her boyfriend, Peter, proposes to her, and she believes they will be a family. However, their families keep them apart because their parents believe they are too young to be married, and no one in her family will support Val if she chooses to keep her baby. Val tries to figure out a way to raise her baby by herself, but she wants to finish school and has dreams of being a violinist, and she cannot see how she can support a child alone and pursue her goals. At the end of the novel, Val has an appointment with an adoption agency that she “would cancel in a second if [she] thought [she] could make it on [her] own” (Cole 192).

Like Val, Welcome in *Perfect Family* has career goals and does not know if she can raise a child and pursue them. The difficulty of her decision is exacerbated by the fact that she lives in the 1950s, when society expects her to give her child up for adoption. That does not stop her, though, from considering keeping her baby. When her family finds out about her pregnancy, Welcome is sent to live with her aunt and uncle. She considers staying with
them after the birth of Adam, because she knows she cannot bring him back home with her. However, she decides Adam needs more than she can give him, so she leaves him with her childless aunt and uncle to raise as their son.

While the protagonists mentioned above decided on adoption either during their pregnancies or soon after their babies were born, a few novels feature teens who choose parenting before making the decision to place their children for adoption. Two teen protagonists who decide to parent first, virtually on their own, before placing their babies through adoption agencies are Annie in *Annie's Baby: The Diary of Anonymous, A Pregnant Teenager*, a fictionalized representation of an actual diary edited by Beatrice Sparks, and Sam from *Hanging on to Max* by Margaret Bechard.

In *Annie's Baby*, Annie finds out she is pregnant at age fourteen. After briefly considering abortion, Annie tells her mom about the pregnancy, and her mom says she will support Annie no matter what her decision. Annie decides she will keep the baby, and at first is excited at the thought. However, when Mary Ann arrives, Annie admits, “Having her isn’t anything like I thought it would be. I honestly did think I was prepared for a baby, but I’m not” (Sparks 163). Annie’s mom had to take another job to financially support Annie and Mary Ann, so Annie is left to parent on her own. As a fourteen-year-old, she feels too young to raise a child, and she wants to be doing things other people her age are doing. Also, she does not believe she can provide the kind of life Mary Ann deserves. After much deliberation and about four months of being Mary Anne’s mother, Annie decides to give her baby to a “real” family.

Sam, the protagonist in *Hanging on to Max*, is another teen parent who decides he and his son, Max, would both be better off if Max were raised by adults. When Sam’s
girlfriend gets pregnant and decides to give the baby up for adoption, Sam steps in and says he wants to take the baby. Sam has complete parenting responsibility for Max while Sam’s dad supports them financially. Sam and his dad have agreed that Sam’s dad will support them until Sam finishes high school, but then Sam will work in a construction job so he can support himself and Max. However, Sam has always thought he would go to college, and he misses playing basketball and hanging out with his friends. He also cannot imagine doing all of the things for Max that he needs, and he wants Max to have a mom, so when Max is almost a year old, Sam places him through an adoption agency.

Though there is variation in when the teens decide to give their babies up for adoption, all the teens who make this decision near the end of the pregnancy and after the birth of the baby want to give their babies better lives and want to pursue their own lives. They believe both they and the babies will be better off if the babies have “real” families. The message of these novels seems to be that adoption can be the better choice for both the teen and the baby because life changes drastically when one becomes a parent. These novels show that many teens are not prepared to take on the responsibilities of parenting.

Some of the teens presented in the novels want to take on the responsibilities of parenting, but they are unable to do so without the appropriate support, both emotional and financial. Annie and Sam, while being supported financially by their parents, are not given parenting help. Val and Terry know they cannot stay at home if they choose to keep their babies. Welcome is supported by her family (aunt and uncle), but she is not supported by society, and neither is Anne (Don’t Think Twice). Since these young people lack the support they need to successfully raise their children, they see adoption as the best option.
The teens who choose adoption make a difficult decision, and none of the novels mentioned above treat this issue lightly. However, by the end of the novels, most of the teen protagonists believe they made the right decision. The novels that portray teens who regret this "choice" are the novels in which the teens really did not have any other option. In *Don't Think Twice*, Anne does not want to give up her baby, but society and her family tell her that this is a reasonable decision for young women in her situation. After the birth of her baby, she is to return home, pretending the experience never happened, but she believes her life has changed permanently. Likewise, Terry, in *Someone Else's Baby*, knows her father will not support her if she chooses to keep her baby. She decides on adoption, but after her baby is placed in adoption, she kidnaps a baby she believes was hers. Both Anne and Terry regret giving their babies up, but neither had much choice in the decision. Therefore, having a choice in what to do about the baby is very important for the pregnant or parenting teen.

All of these teens who give their babies up for adoption are intelligent, Caucasian, middle or upper middle class teens who have goals for their futures and parents who reinforce a middle class value system and middle class ambitions. In reality, teens who choose adoption are often "more affluent, have higher aspirations for themselves, and are performing better in school" than teens who choose to parent their children (Luker 162). Also, statistically, these teens are predominately white (Bachrach, Stolley, and London 29; Stolley 32). Some teens choose adoption after they are unable, for one reason or another, to have an abortion, such as Welcome and Val. Others believe another family would be able to provide more for the child, such as Welcome, Annie, and Sam. Generally, then, the young adult novels about teen pregnancy in which the teen protagonist decides to give the baby up for adoption are true to life in terms of class, race, and situation. However, in *The White*
Horse by Cynthia Grant, Raina is a homeless girl who decides to give her baby up for adoption. Raina wants to support herself and her baby, but after living in a homeless shelter indefinitely, she decides her baby deserves a better life. She is poor, which does not fit the description of the majority of teens who choose adoption, but, like Welcome, Annie, and Sam, she believes someone else can provide more for her child.

While seven of the twenty novels included in this study end with the protagonists choosing adoption, some teens in the novels consider adoption and then decide against it. In Dear Nobody, after Helen decides not to have an abortion, she does not know what she will do. Her parents do not want her to keep the baby because they have other plans for her life that do not involve parenting at such a young age. However, after Helen feels the unborn baby move for the first time, she decides she is ready for parenthood. She already feels connected to her unborn baby, which is in fact why some teens decide against adoption. In Teens and Pregnancy: A Hot Issue, Ann Byers explains that teens who decide on adoption “sometimes feel cheated out of the product of nine months of pregnancy” (34). Helen believes she would feel this way, and so she decides to keep her baby instead of pursuing adoption.

Interestingly, only two non-Caucasian protagonists in this study mention adoption, and Tasha, from Imani All Mine, discounts the option immediately. Tasha does not want to “get rid of it” or “give it away,” so she knows right away that she will keep her baby (Porter 5). In The First Part Last by Angela Johnson, Bobby and Nia decide to give their baby up for adoption, though Bobby is less relieved about the decision than he originally thought. When Nia has complications with the pregnancy and it is clear she will not recover, Bobby decides against adoption and chooses to raise his baby on his own. Both of these non-
Caucasian protagonists who consider adoption and then decide against it are African American. Statistically, African Americans are less likely than Caucasians to give their babies up for adoption (Stolley 32). Although multiple reasons may exist, one reason for African Americans to refuse adoption is stated succinctly by Gayle in Like Sister on the Homefront. When Gayle is waiting to have an abortion, one of the counselors mentions adoption as an alternative, and Gayle says, “Ain’t nobody breaking they necks to adopt black babies” (Williams-Garcia 6). Research indicates that most “couples seeking to adopt are white, and most of them wish to adopt only healthy white newborns” (Luker 161). Therefore, African Americans often legitimately feel concern that their babies will be placed in foster care instead of being adopted, and many teens believe they would be more effective parents than foster parents. Though Bobby and Nia did strongly consider adoption, none of the non-Caucasian protagonists in the novels in this study elected adoption.

Adoption in young adult novels, then, is generally portrayed as a positive solution for those who believe they are too young to parent and who have goals for themselves that they believe they would have difficulty reaching while parenting. The protagonists in Don’t Think Twice and Someone Else’s Baby were dissatisfied because they felt forced to go through with the adoptions, although Someone Else’s Baby ends on a positive note regarding the adoption. Otherwise, the teens believe they made the right decision. Also, with the exception of Raina in The White Horse, the protagonists who give their babies up for adoption fit the description of the majority of teens in real life who make this decision, and the characters’ reasons for doing so coincide with nonfiction accounts of teens’ experiences as evidenced statistically.
Parenting

While adoption is generally portrayed in young adult literature as a positive option for pregnant teens, parenting is a more common decision both in real life and for the teen protagonists. Twelve of the twenty novels included in this study portray a teen choosing to keep the child, and the authors present this in three ways. First, some of the novels focus on the pregnancy and the novel ends either before the birth of the baby or soon after. Second, some novels include both the pregnancy and the first few months or years of parenting. Finally, some of the novels begin with the teen already parenting.

In three of the novels included in this study, the story ends either before or just after the birth of the baby. Triangle by Jon Ripslinger is told from the father’s perspective, and he and his girlfriend make plans to keep the baby even though the story ends before the birth. The reader is encouraged to believe that everything will work out for Jeremy and Joy when their baby comes, but it is unclear how this will be achieved, since Joy plans on attending college and Jeremy plans on leaving soon for the Navy. For these reasons, a review in Book Report by Diane Pozar indicates that the “story is realistic” and the “characters’ reactions are sincere,” but the ending is “unrealistic” (49).

In the second example, Waiting for June by Joyce Sweeney, Sophie is in her third trimester when the story begins, and she has already decided she will be keeping her baby. Besides being physically uncomfortable, Sophie must cope with the stares and whispers of her peers at school. Sophie and her mom do not get along well, so Sophie has decided to be a live-in housekeeper/babysitter with a family who does not mind that she will have a baby. She also plans on attending college, and her mom offers to help. When Sophie’s baby, June, is born, Sophie has a large support network as she raises her daughter.
Finally, in *Dear Nobody* by Berlie Doherty, the author shows what both Helen and Chris experience as they decide what to do about the pregnancy. Chris is more concerned about maintaining his relationship with Helen, while Helen tries to think practically about what life will be like with a child. As mentioned earlier, Helen initially plans on having an abortion, but she changes her mind. Her parents clearly want her to give the baby up for adoption after she decides not to have an abortion, but she decides she wants to keep the baby after she feels the unborn baby move for the first time. Chris supports her decision, though he does not have any plans for what they will do about the situation. Doherty portrays how both teens interact with their families as they prepare to become parents, and she shows the physical and emotional changes Helen experiences during her pregnancy. As she prepares for motherhood, Helen breaks up with Chris because she does not believe that he is ready to be a father. With the break-up, Chris feels disconnected from both Helen and the unborn baby. In the end, Helen lives at home with her family and her baby, and Chris goes away to school.

The novels that include both the pregnancy and a few months of parenting are *Detour for Emmy* and *Too Soon for Jeff* by Marilyn Reynolds, *The First Part Last* by Angela Johnson, and *One Night* by Margaret Wild. *Detour for Emmy* and *Too Soon for Jeff* present similar stories, with the main difference being that the reader gets a female’s perspective from Emmy and a male’s perspective from Jeff. Another important difference between the two novels is that while Jeff shares custody of his son with the baby’s mother, Emmy raises her daughter on her own. Like Doherty, Reynolds portrays the physical and emotional changes the protagonist experiences during her pregnancy. She shows how Emmy’s life changes in terms of not being able to participate in soccer or go on her choir trip, and of
switching schools to attend classes for teen mothers. Reynolds even describes the birth of baby Rosie. After Rosie is born, Emmy finds out just how difficult taking care of an infant can be. She gets especially frustrated that Rosie takes so long to eat and needs to eat so often, even at night. However, Emmy loves her baby, and with the help of her mother, her brother, and Rosie’s father’s family, Emmy is able to finish high school and go to college.

Like *Too Soon for Jeff*, *The First Part Last* presents the father’s perspective. Though the story begins with Bobby taking care of his daughter, Feather, Johnson tells the entire story of Bobby and Nia’s relationship, Nia’s pregnancy, and Bobby’s decision to parent Feather with chapters labeled “now” and “then.” Not only is this an effective story-telling technique, but it also highlights the differences between Bobby’s life before and after he becomes a father. Bobby’s life as a parent revolves around Feather to the point that he gets very little sleep, does not have time for his friends, and sometimes misses who he used to be. The *Horn Book Magazine* book review of this novel pinpoints its impact: “What resonates are the sacrifices Bobby makes for Feather’s sake” (Beram 459). Though it is not clear how Bobby will raise Feather on his own, it is clear that he loves her and believes he has made the right decision in choosing to parent.

*One Night* also portrays the teen experiences of both pregnancy and parenting. The novel is similar to *Dear Nobody* in that it includes both the teen mother’s and the teen father’s perspectives, and it is similar to *Too Soon for Jeff* since both teens share responsibility for their baby. Through free-verse poems, Wild is able to capture the emotional experiences of Helen and Gabe as they choose to share the responsibility of parenting their son.
Other novels portray teens who have already made the decision to keep their babies and are in the process of raising them. The three novels in this study with this perspective all include African American protagonists: *Spellbound* by Janet McDonald, *Imani All Mine* by Connie Porter, and *Like Sisters on the Homefront* by Rita Williams-Garcia. Though these novels tell different stories, they share certain characteristics. First, Raven (the protagonist of *Spellbound*), Tasha (*Imani All Mine*), and Gayle (*Like Sisters on the Homefront*) are all young (early high school) teen mothers. Second, they all live with their mothers, and their fathers are absent. And, third, they are all from poor families. All three authors illustrate the experience of being a young mother of a baby, but Porter's novel, *Imani All Mine*, concentrates on parenting more than do the other novels.

When Tasha has Imani, her mother tells her that she is completely responsible for her. Tasha still lives at home since she just started high school, but her mother will only help financially. As the sole parent of Imani, Tasha attempts to be a good mother. She has always been a good student, and she takes her parenting class seriously, learning from her errors. When Mrs. Poole, the teacher of the parenting class, talks about Shaken Baby Syndrome, Tasha confesses to her, "I shook Imani. I ain't never done it again . . . I ain't know you shouldn't do it" (Porter 70). Tasha wants to be a good mother to Imani. She depends on the parenting class to learn what she needs to know since her mother does not help her, and she receives positive feedback from Mrs. Poole about her abilities as a single parent. In "Strong Portraits and Stereotypes: Pregnant and Mothering Teens in YA Fiction," Cynthia Miller Coffel writes, "Tasha mothers her daughter lovingly and shows confidence in her ability" (16). The reader experiences, through Tasha, both the difficult and joyous moments of parenting, from the frustration that leads Tasha to shake Imani when she is an
infant to the first steps Imani takes before her first birthday. Though Tasha has a difficult life as a teen parent, her experiences as the teen mother of Imani lead her to want to keep her second baby when she gets pregnant again.

Besides the three novels that portray African American teen mothers raising their babies, two other novels included in this study begin with the teen protagonists already mothering their babies. These novels are included here not only for their content, but also for their format. *The Amazing “True” Story of a Teenage Single Mom* by Katherine Arnoldi is a graphic novel (which reads like a comic book) that illustrates the difficulties one teen mother faces as she attempts to provide the best possible life for her daughter and herself. The protagonist encounters many difficulties, but in the end she applies for financial aid and finds day care for her daughter so she can go to college. The other novel, *Doll Baby*, written by Eve Bunting and illustrated by Catherine Stock, is in picture book format. Though the reviews of this book in *Horn Book Magazine* and *School Library Journal* are somewhat negative, indicating the content is inappropriate for the presentation, the author succinctly presents the message that caring for an infant can be a challenging task for a teen parent (Adams 564; McGinty 112).

Given the information presented in these novels, the teens who decide to parent are satisfied with their decisions even though life becomes significantly more difficult when they have children. The difficulties are not always presented, but many of the authors portray how life changes for the teens. For instance, in *The First Part Last*, Bobby leaves to go play basketball with his friends, but when he gets to the corner of his block, he realizes that he cannot just leave because he is responsible for the baby he left alone in the house (Johnson 23). Also, many of the teens in the novels, like Helen in *Dear Nobody*, put their schooling on
hold or change their plans so they can provide for their children. However, the overriding message in the novels is that though things change and life is difficult when one chooses to be a teen parent, it is still possible to be successful in life.

The young adult novels may end on a hopeful note for the parenting teens, but the reality of teen parenting is not so positive. Since “more than 80 percent of teenage mothers were living in poverty or near-poverty long before they became pregnant,” these teens do not have the resources that many of the teens in the novels have available to them (Luker 107). Kerry, from the nonfiction Kerry, a Teenage Mother by Maggi Aitkens, must support herself and her daughter on her own. This is proving to be difficult, especially as she hopes to get off of welfare:

[Kerry] hopes to get a job and finish school at night. This might not be a realistic solution, however. If Kerry gets a full-time job while trying to finish school, she’ll have little or no time to spend with her daughter, and she will have to find—and pay—someone to babysit Vanessa. She’ll also have to deal with the stress of trying to do three things well at once—parent, study, and work.

What’s more, if Kerry decides to quit school and work full-time, she will also lose her welfare payment and the free day care for Vanessa. To make up for the loss of government assistance, she would have to find a very high-paying job. (Aitkens 13)

Kerry’s situation may not represent every parenting teen’s experience, but she certainly is not the only teen parent living on her own and trying to support her child. In fact, all four young mothers interviewed by Gail Stewart for Teen Mothers live apart from their families. Stewart’s interviews show “how vulnerable both the mothers and their babies are,
and how tentative their futures” (9). Three of the four interviewees regret being young mothers, and, if they could, they would go back and change the situations that resulted in pregnancies. In fact, Kay feels “as though her life stopped when she learned she was pregnant at age fifteen” (Stewart 10). She decided not to get an abortion when she found out she was three months pregnant and decided against adoption because she “‘couldn’t abandon her [baby] like that’” (Stewart 17). When it was clear Kay would be keeping the baby, her family expected her to support herself. She lives in an apartment of her own with her daughter and is supported by welfare. Though she loves her daughter, Kay resents the fact that she has no social life and explains, “‘I’m not glad she’s born. Mostly, I’m sad’” (Stewart 28).

Parenting teens face other burdens besides financial difficulties and lack of a social life. In *Teen Parenting*, Gail Stewart writes, “Experts say that one of the most serious challenges facing teen parents is the potential for abusing children” (49). Teenagers often lack the maturity to restrain themselves and may shake or hit their children out of frustration (Stewart 49). Therefore, the abuse often happens because teens make harmful choices out of immaturity as opposed to a real desire to do harm. Besides the possibility of physically abusing her child, a teen may neglect her child, either physically or emotionally. Some teens do not realize how much care and interaction a small child requires, and others may not have the desire to provide the necessary care and interaction.

Overall, then, the picture of teen parenting presented in the novels is more positive than the reality of being a teen parent. The authors of the novels do illustrate some of the difficulties teen parents face, but they focus on the changes in social life and sleep patterns more than anything else. While, in reality, parenting teens are in danger of abusing their
children, Tasha (Imani All Mine) is the only teen protagonist who takes her frustrations out on her child, and she only shakes Imani once. Since many of the teen protagonists in these novels are from middle class families, and since many of the families agree to help support the teen and her child, most of the teen protagonists do not have the financial concerns that many teen parents actually face. In Detour for Emmy, Emmy does talk about money in that she cannot buy what she wants because she has to make sure Rosie gets what she needs. However, she is not worried about money for food, rent, and other living expenses. Unlike Emmy, Helen (One Night) is not allowed to stay at home. She drops out of school to get a job so she can support herself and the baby. Helen does worry about how she will afford a baby on her own, but her landlady helps her by halving her rent and by offering to babysit for free, both kind but unrealistic gestures. Both Emmy and Helen have financial concerns, but their situations differ greatly from the teen mother living alone on welfare.

Gender

As mentioned in the previous section on choice, some young adult novels about teen pregnancy and parenting include the male’s perspective. Of the twenty novels used in this study, six include the male’s perspective and one of the six is written by a male. One Night by Margaret Wild and Dear Nobody by Berlie Doherty include both the female’s and the male’s perspectives, while The First Part Last by Angela Johnson, Too Soon For Jeff by Marilyn Reynolds, Hanging on to Max by Margaret Bechard, and Triangle by Jon Ripslinger are all told from the male’s perspective. These six novels illustrate what the young man experiences in terms of his girlfriend’s pregnancy; the decision of whether to choose abortion, adoption, or parenting; and his involvement in the child’s life if parenting is chosen.
Statistics and information regarding teen males who have full custody or who share custody of their children are limited, but five of the six young men in the novels included in this study choose to be involved in their children's lives. Chris, the only uninvolved father, from *Dear Nobody*, leaves the raising of his daughter to his ex-girlfriend. Jeremy, from *Triangle*, plans to be involved in his baby's life, but the baby is not born by the end of the novel, and Jeremy also plans on going into the Navy (thereby being gone for most of the first few years of the child's life). Gabe, from *One Night*, and Jeff, from *Too Soon For Jeff*, share custody with the mothers of their children. In *Hanging on to Max*, Sam has full custody of Max for almost a year before deciding to give Max up for adoption. And Bobby from *The First Part Last* has full custody of his daughter and plans to raise her alone.

Though these male teens in the novels are often part of the decision-making process, many teen fathers are not given that opportunity. Ted Gottfried, author of *Teen Fathers Today*, explains, "The male should be involved in the decision, but in a practical sense she [the mother] is the one who will make it, and will have to live with it" (20). When Jeff (*Too Soon For Jeff*) finds out that his girlfriend, Christy, is pregnant, he tries to convince her to have an abortion. Jeff believes the pregnancy is "a stupid mistake that needs to be corrected as soon as possible" (Reynolds 37). Conversely, Chris (*Dear Nobody*) does not want Helen to have an abortion because "it's [his] baby too . . . it's life itself" (Doherty 101). Jeremy (*Triangle*) also does not want his girlfriend to have an abortion. He feels strongly about being able to be a father to his unborn child but realizes that Joy could have an abortion without telling him. Ripslinger captures the helplessness Jeremy feels in this situation: "Maybe Joy will put the baby up for adoption—that would be the easy thing to do—and start school a year late. I'll never get to see the baby or be part of its life" (190). While Jeff,
Chris, and Jeremy all have an opinion about what to do with their unborn babies, none of them believes he really has much say in the final decision.

Most often in the novels, the female does make the final decision on her own. For example, Gabe (*One Night*) does not even know he has a son until Helen needs Gabe to babysit for a weekend. However, one of the novels, *The First Part Last*, shows the couple making the decision together. Bobby and Nia are one of the few couples who remain together through the pregnancy. They discuss what to do and decide on adoption because neither feels ready to be a parent. However, Bobby ends up making the final decision on his own when Nia has complications in labor. Sam (*Hanging on to Max*) also makes the decision to parent on his own. He thought Brittany was going to keep their baby, and when she decides to give the baby up for adoption, Sam chooses to keep him. Since Sam has custody of Max, he also makes the decision regarding adoption on his own. Bobby’s and Sam’s decisions to raise their children (even though Sam only raises Max for about a year) may be unusual, but a teen father has that option if “he can establish his legal custody over the child” (Gottfried 68).

While Bobby and Sam are given full custody of their children, Jeff (*Too Soon For Jeff*) and Gabe (*One Night*) share custody with the mothers of their children. Since Jeff wanted Christy to have an abortion, he was not excited about the prospect of being a father. However, when Ethan is born, Jeff says to him, “’Okay. You’ve got me... Even though I’m not yet a true man myself, I’m trying to be one, and I’ll help you be one too’” (Reynolds 160). He wants to be there for his son, but he still decides to go away to school for his first semester of college. After seeing Ethan over Thanksgiving break, though, he realizes that he wants to be part of Ethan’s daily life. Jeff moves back home, buys a crib, and attends a
community college while taking care of Ethan “Sunday through Tuesday” and every other Saturday (Reynolds 214-215). Though the term “joint custody” is not mentioned in the novel, Jeff’s situation in taking care of Ethan seems to be an example of such an arrangement. By contrast, Gabe is simply helping out with Raphael. After finding out that he is a father and taking care of Raphael for the weekend, Gabe wants to be involved in Raphael’s life. He babysits while Helen studies, and Helen and Raphael are invited to family events at Gabe’s house. At the end of the novel, it appears that Gabe will continue to be part of Raphael’s life.

While many of these young men in the novels commit to being fathers to their children, studies show that teen fathers who want to parent their children face many difficulties. In their study on African American teen fathers, William Allen and William Doherty found that there is “a positive correlation between partner relationship and paternal involvement” (147). Since the teen mother usually has custody of the child, if the teen father does not get along with the mother, he may be kept from being involved in his child’s life. In an interview with Allen and Doherty, one young father states, “Well, like when me and [partner] weren’t fond of each other, it kept me and my son apart. She would always [say], ‘I don’t want to see you today’” (150). Also, if the teen mother and father do not get along and the teen mother’s parents do not approve of the teen father, he may have difficulty in trying to be part of his baby’s life. In an interview with Gail Stewart, author of Teen Parenting, Brad (teen father) says, “I kept wondering what she [his daughter] looked like, if she looked anything like me . . . I was real interested—I admit that—but I couldn’t figure out a way to see the baby without getting into a scene with her parents. I was afraid” (57). These fathers
wanted to see their children, but their strained relationships with the mothers of their children kept them from being involved in their children’s lives.

Another difficulty actual teen fathers face is “the attitude of the very social institutions that are set up to facilitate child care by young parents” (Gottfried 67). While talking with teen fathers about their parenting efforts, Ted Gottfried found that “they viewed the staffs of service agencies, hospitals, and schools as hostile to them—assigning blame—and biased in favor of their child’s mother” (67). In fact, Gottfried relates an account of a young man who found a bite mark on his child’s face when he picked him up from the mother’s home. He took the child to the emergency room since the mother did not know the origin of the bite. The staff at the hospital told this young man to take the child to a foster home agency, and the foster home agency took the child and would not give the young man any information about the child or let him take the child home. He was simply trying to help his child, and, instead, he was treated as if he were the cause of the bite mark. Another young man, interviewed by Janet Bode for *Kids Still Having Kids*, explains a similar reaction from the staff when he took his sick baby to the hospital: “The doctors are looking at me, looking at the baby. I hear one say something about child abuse. They want to call the police and I’m just trying to help my kid” (127). This young man also thought he was doing what was best for his child, and instead of receiving support from the hospital staff, he was judged.

Some young fathers end up being left out of their children’s lives because the obstacles are too difficult to overcome, but other teen fathers choose to be left out of their children’s lives. In the novel *Dear Nobody*, Chris exemplifies this type of father. He was supportive of Helen initially, when they found out she was pregnant, so he feels left out when Helen breaks up with him during her pregnancy. However, after the birth of his baby, Chris
realizes he is not yet ready to be a father, and he chooses to not be involved in his daughter’s life.

Unlike Chris, some teen fathers will deny paternity, “maintaining that the baby can’t be theirs” (Stewart, Teen Parenting 55). This is true of both Annie’s boyfriend (Annie’s Baby) and Emmy’s boyfriend (Detour for Emmy), two novels from the female’s perspective. Annie’s boyfriend, Danny, calls Annie a “ho” and breaks up with her when she tells him she is pregnant (Sparks 109); and when Emmy tells her boyfriend, Art, about her pregnancy, he claims, “Well, you can’t be pregnant . . . . Unless you’ve been with someone else” (Reynolds 83). In Dubious Conceptions, Kristin Luker quotes one young woman who says, “When I told him [father] I was pregnant, he said that it wasn’t his baby. He dropped me and started dating my best friend” (151). Other teen fathers may acknowledge their children but not support them in any way. Emmy’s boyfriend, Art, finally admits that he is Rosie’s father, but he rarely sees her and he does not support her financially. Another young woman quoted in Luker explains, “He [boyfriend] said if I got pregnant he’d want to be with me and the baby always, which is what he said when he found out I was pregnant. Then he changed his mind and split” (151). These fathers want nothing to do with their children, so they either deny paternity and leave or just leave.

Teen fathers who do not deny paternity but have every intention of parenting their children are not likely to remain involved in their children’s lives. The authors of the article “What About Dad? Fathers of Children Born to School-Age Mothers” explain, “Although some fathers remain in contact with the family, for many fathers contact tends to diminish gradually” (Larson et al. 281). This fact is not represented in the young adult novels included in this study, if only because none of the stories in the novels go beyond the first few years of
the child’s life. While it appears that Gabe, Bobby, and Jeff will continue to be in relationships with their children, none of the fathers portrayed in the novels using a first person female narrator is very involved in his child’s life. Therefore, the only novels that portray an involved teen father are the novels that include the male’s perspective, and the teen fathers are either portrayed as being involved long-term or portrayed as basically not involved.

Though the novels in this study include both involved and uninvolved teen fathers, the novels from the male perspective generally show teen fathers in a positive light. In five of the six novels, the teen father is either already involved in his child’s life or plans to be involved. These fathers make sacrifices to support their children, like Jeff when he decides to attend a local community college so he can stay at home and be a father to Ethan. These fathers may be young, but they know that being a father means spending time with and providing for a child.

**Education**

The authors of “Books about Teen Parents: Messages and Omissions” found that in young adult literature “a very common theme is that having a baby doesn’t mean that one’s educational or occupational aspirations stop” (Davis and McGillavray 92). While this is true of many of the novels in this study focusing on teen parenting, education is also an important aspect of the novels in which the protagonists choose adoption. Though some of the authors focus on education more than others, school is mentioned in all twenty novels, and thirteen of the twenty novels include a college-bound protagonist. Four of the seven novels in which college is not mentioned include protagonists who are in early high school, so it might be too early for them to be thinking about college.
While forty-one percent of teens who begin families before age eighteen never complete high school ("Fact Sheet"), only Raven (Spellbound) drops out of school when she gets pregnant, and Raina (The White Horse), who is homeless, attends some of the time. Raven drops out of school because, though she was supposed to be heading toward college, she was embarrassed about her pregnancy and did not want to go to school once her pregnancy became evident. After the birth of Smokey, she stays home to take care of him. However, even though she is a dropout, Raven still wants to go to school, so she enters a spelling bee in which the winner gets to participate in a college prep and scholarship program; Raven wins the contest, and her dreams of college are fulfilled. Like Raven, Raina also goes back to school. She does not win a contest, but both she and her baby are adopted by her teacher so that they are no longer homeless. Her teacher always had great hopes for her, and once she has a home, Raina succeeds in school. Though both of these novels end positively, the endings are unlikely.

Raven is the only dropout represented in the novels, but there are other protagonists who leave school for a short time, usually during the pregnancy, before deciding to go back. Helen (Dear Nobody), who is "considered to be a very clever girl," gives up on school for a time after she finds out about her pregnancy (Doherty 119). However, she realizes that she has already worked hard and cannot give up right before exams, so she "put [her] head down and got on with them" (Doherty 145). The other Helen (One Night) also leaves school for a time, but she does so because she feels the need to get a job to support herself since her parents would not support her. She still wants to finish school, though, so she enrolls in correspondence courses. When she makes her decision to finish school, she says, "I can do it. I've always been able to do anything I want to. In spite of my job, in spite of the baby, I
will pass my exams with top marks” (Wild 114). Both of the Helens are motivated to succeed in school even after leaving during their pregnancies.

The other two protagonists who leave school during their pregnancies do so because they have no other alternative, given the time periods in which they live. Welcome (Perfect Family) is sent to stay with her aunt and uncle when her family finds out about her pregnancy, and Anne’s (Don’t Think Twice) family sends her to a home for unwed mothers during her pregnancy. Both Welcome and Anne are sent away because it was socially unacceptable in the 1950s and 1960s to be an unwed and pregnant teen, and neither one of their families want to be the subject of gossip. Though Welcome and Anne cannot attend school during their confinements, both go back to school when they return home, and both are college-bound. The authors of these two novels set their stories in the past, but both still created female protagonists who would go to college, placing emphasis on education. In fact, Welcome even becomes a doctor.

Of the protagonists who stay in school throughout their pregnancies, some attend alternative high schools. In certain school districts in the United States, students do have the option of attending alternative schools. In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics found that thirty-nine percent of school districts “reported administering at least one alternative school or program during the 2000-01 school year” (National Center). When Annie (Annie’s Baby) is four months pregnant, she transfers to a school for unwed mothers in her district where she can take both academic classes and parenting classes. Sam (Hanging on to Max) also attends an alternative school. The school has a day care for the students’ children, so Sam can take Max to school with him and know that he is being taken care of while Sam is in class. Val (What Kind of Love?) and Emmy (Detour for Emmy) also attend
alternative schools, and all four of the authors of these novels portray a relaxed atmosphere for academics in these schools. Of the four characters, Val says she is “not going to learn much” at her new school (Cole 110), Emmy describes the alternative school as “way too easy” (Reynolds 125), Annie compares her school experience to kindergarten, and Sam is able to sleep through his classes without missing much information. Initially, these are negative portrayals of alternative schools. However, after attending the alternative school for a time, Emmy realizes, “...what I was learning at Teen Moms was as important as anything I would have been learning back at Hamilton High” (Reynolds 130). After her baby is born, Annie looks forward to going back to school and bringing her baby. And Sam’s teachers, telling him he needs to “sleep a little less” in class, challenge him to work above and beyond his classmates (Bechard 6). Though three of the four teens end up having positive experiences at their alternative schools, the curriculum in all four schools focuses on life skills, such as parenting, instead of on academically challenging material.

Along with the protagonists who either leave school for a time or attend alternative schools, some of the protagonists simply continue attending their original high schools while they are pregnant or parenting. In Waiting for June, Sophie keeps going to her high school until June’s birth. She is a strong student and plans on attending college to become a writer. Bobby (The First Part Last) does not share his plans for the future in terms of whether or not he will go to college, but he does discuss the hassles of trying to get Feather to the babysitter in the morning so he can make it to class on time. Finally, Tasha (Imani All Mine) also continues attending her high school during her pregnancy and after Imani is born. The school she attends has a day care where she can take Imani during the day, and she also takes parenting classes at school. School is important to Tasha, not only because she can take
classes that help her in taking care of Imani, but also because she believes education will allow her to create a better future for her child.

In terms of further education, many of the pregnant and parenting teens in these young adult novels plan on attending college or are already attending college at the end of the novels. Generally, these teens are college-bound before they find out about their pregnancies, and they are not going to allow a baby to change their plans of pursuing further education. Therefore, they may decide on adoption so they have the freedom to pursue their dreams. Or, if they decide to parent, they believe a college education will give them more opportunities in providing for their children. Either way, more than half of the protagonists from the novels represented in this study are college-bound or in college, while only 1.5 percent of teen mothers have a college degree by age thirty ("Fact Sheet").

Research shows that women who choose to give their children up for adoption “express higher educational aspirations than their counterparts who choose to parent their child” (Stolley 32). Therefore, education is a determining factor for teens who must decide what to do when they find out they are pregnant. In the novels where the teen protagonist decides to give his/her child up for adoption, future goals, including further education, emerge as significant factors in the decision. In *What Kind of Love? The Diary of a Pregnant Teenager*, Val wants to study music and her boyfriend, Peter, wants to be a doctor. They had talked about getting married and raising their baby together, but neither could see where school would fit into that scenario. Val has several reasons for deciding to give her baby up for adoption, but being able to pursue her dreams via education is one of them, and it is the reason Peter gives for choosing not to parent. Likewise, when Sam (*Hanging on to Max*) decides he can no longer raise Max, college is an important part of this decision. Sam
knows that when he graduates from high school, he must obtain a job to support himself and his son. His guidance counselor encourages him to take the SAT, though, and he earns high scores. Sam’s SAT scores make him think of the possibilities of going to college and getting a degree, among other things, and he realizes that he cannot successfully parent Max and do the other things he wants to do in life. For both Val and Sam, education is not the only factor in their decisions to give their children up for adoption, but it definitely impacts their decisions.

Only 1.5 percent of teen mothers have a college degree by age thirty ("Fact Sheet"), yet eight of the twelve parenting teens in the novels included in this study are planning to go to college or are in college by the end of the novels. Since the majority of the parenting teens represented in the novels are middle class and have the support of their families, it may be possible for them to go to college while raising their children. In fact, it is not as likely as the novels portray. An example of this can be found in Detour for Emmy. Emmy lives with her mom, and they are often financially bereft. Since Emmy gets good grades, she achieves membership in a program called Project Hope, which provides college scholarship money. While attending community college, Emmy has access to free day care for Rosie, and Rosie’s father’s family gives Emmy a small amount of money every month to cover some of her expenses. Also, by living with her mother, Emmy does not have to pay rent. Though Emmy does work hard toward her college degree, she has more help and opportunities than would be likely for many parenting teens.

Another novel in which the parenting teen protagonist pursues college is The Amazing "True" Story of a Teenage Single Mom. This novel may be a bit more practical than other novels in this study because Katherine Arnoldi writes for the purpose of letting teen moms
know that they have the right to go to college. In the format of a graphic novel, she illustrates the discovery one young mother makes of the possibilities of financial aid and day care assistance for full-time students with children.

Given that school is mentioned in all twenty novels, and considering that over half of the protagonists are college-bound or attending college by the end of the novels, the authors of these young adult novels promote the importance of education. In the novels that conclude with the protagonist deciding on adoption, education often becomes a significant factor in that decision. The protagonist realizes that he/she will not have the same opportunities to pursue educational goals if he/she also has full ongoing responsibility for a child. In the novels where the protagonist chooses to parent, he/she may have to revise his/her goals, but education still remains a definite option. This viewpoint is unrealistically optimistic since the majority of teen parents do not go to college, at least by age 30 (“Fact Sheet”). These authors also unrealistically portray the possibilities of successfully providing for a child while attending college.

Overall Picture of Reality vs. Fiction

In examining choice, gender, and education, all of which are influenced by socioeconomic class and ethnicity, the authors of the twenty novels reviewed in this study provide a somewhat realistic portrayal of teen pregnancy. Some aspects of the novels mirror the realities of teen pregnancy, but the differences between what is presented in the novels and the reality outweigh the similarities.

The similarities between what is presented in fiction and the reality of teen pregnancy tend to concern the physical changes and on the challenges teens face in making decisions regarding the pregnancy and/or child. A number of the authors give details of the difficulties
of pregnancy, specifically focusing on morning sickness. They also illustrate the challenges a teen faces in deciding what to do about the pregnancy. However, like many other young adult novels, the stories end optimistically with teens generally satisfied with their decisions, and though they may have had to change their future goals slightly because of the unexpected pregnancies, they still have opportunities to succeed in all areas of life.

Even though the authors appropriately present some of the realities of teen pregnancy, there are more differences than similarities between their presentation and reality. One reason for this difference between reality and fiction is that the authors generally begin with protagonists who are middle class white students who do well in school. Research shows that these teens are, first of all, less likely to get pregnant, but also they are more likely to have abortions or give their babies up for adoption than poor and minority teens who become pregnant (Luker 116). Even if the middle class teen keeps her child, she is more likely to have resources that a poverty-stricken teen would not. Since the majority of teens who get pregnant are poor, the authors write a vastly different story from the more common reality when they choose to write about a middle class protagonist.

In terms of choice, the novels show that “most mothers keep their babies” (Davis and MacGillivray 91). This is true, since of the sixty percent of real teen mothers who choose to give birth, only three percent choose adoption (Luker 155; Stewart, Teen Parenting 8). Again, the mothers who keep their babies are more likely to be poor minorities than they are to be the middle class Caucasians that the majority of the novels feature. All of these novels end optimistically, although a perceptive reader could imagine the difficulties Emmy (Detour for Emmy) and Jeff (Too Soon for Jeff) will face as they try to balance being full-time parents (or more than half-time in Jeff’s case) and full-time students. Emmy and Jeff both receive
support from their families and friends, though, so their situations can be presented
optimistically. These authors do not seem to be promoting becoming parents as teenagers,
but they are saying – within the contexts they create – that if it happens, it is more than
possible to keep the baby and have a "happily ever after" life.

Adoption is well represented in the novels in this study, although research shows that
only three percent of pregnant teens actually choose adoption (Stewart, Teen Parenting 8).
Novels that end in adoption typically focus on the difficulties of being a young parent while
pursuing future goals. Some of these novels ask teens to consider whether they would be as
capable of providing for a child as an older couple would be, as in What Kind of Love? The
Diary of a Pregnant Teenager and Hanging on to Max. The issue of being able to provide
for the child is especially relevant if the teen’s family cannot or will not support the baby.
However, even if the teen’s family will help with the baby, as in Annie’s Baby, the teen may
still decide to give the baby up for adoption, usually because the teen believes that both she
and her baby will have a better life. On the other hand, though Anne (Don’t Think Twice)
and Terry (Someone Else’s Baby) have goals in life they want to pursue, neither wants to
give up her baby. They both feel coerced into the decision, which both authors portray as
being unnatural. Someone Else’s Baby still ends optimistically, but Anne does not think she
will ever fully recover from having to give up her baby. Therefore, adoption is portrayed as
both a difficult decision and a decision that can affect the parent and child positively. Some
of the authors may be encouraging pregnant teens to decide on adoption, but the issue is
presented as more complex than that by most of the authors.

While adoption may be over-represented, abortion is under-represented in young
adult literature. Close to half of pregnant teens choose abortion, but only one novel in this
study, *Borrowed Light*, explores the topic in depth (Luker 155). Fienberg anticipates readers who may not agree with the protagonist’s decision to have an abortion, so, in a conversational tone, Cally justifies her decision. The story is not told to condemn abortion as a choice, though. It simply takes the reader through the complex situation of one young woman who finds out she is pregnant, decides to have an abortion, and believes her decision impacts her life positively despite the difficulties. Cally is a white, middle class teen who has goals and believes that a baby would not fit into her life; her character, situation, and decision are supported by research. Also, though she believes she made the right decision, living with it is not easy for her; the depression she occasionally experiences is a common response among women who choose to have abortions (Arthur 74). Therefore, Fienberg portrays Cally’s situation realistically, but since few novels about abortion written from the perspective of the pregnant teen exist, the decision is not statistically represented in young adult literature.

In terms of gender, most of the novels featuring a female protagonist either barely mention the father of the child or include an uninvolved father. Since none of the protagonists are married, this means the females are entirely responsible for their babies. However, five of the six novels in this study that include the male’s perspective show teen fathers who either plan to be involved in their children’s lives or who already are involved. There is limited statistical information regarding teen fathers who share custody or have full custody of their children, but nonfiction accounts indicate that some teen fathers are involved in their children’s lives (Allen and Doherty; Gottfried; Larson et al; Stewart). The authors of “Teenage Pregnancy as Moral Panic: Reflections on the Marginalization of Girls’ Feelings” and “Books About Teen Parents: Messages and Omissions” have found that in young adult
fiction about teen pregnancy, generally the female is left with the responsibility of making all of the decisions about the child while the male does not have to take responsibility (Cockett and Knetzer 52; Davis and MacGillivray 94). While this may be true, the five young adult novels in which the males take responsibility reflect the reality that some teen fathers do want to be involved in their children’s lives, or they at least decide that being involved is the right thing to do. It may not be likely, though, for a teen father to have full custody of his child, as in *Hanging on to Max* and *The First Part Last*.

Another difference between fiction and the reality of teen pregnancy is in the authors’ focus on education. All twenty novels stress the importance of staying in school. While research shows that forty-one percent of teens who begin families before age 18 never complete high school (“Fact Sheet”), it appears that all of the protagonists in this study will complete high school if they have not already done so by the end of the novels. Furthermore, while only 1.5 percent of teen mothers have a college degree by age 30 (“Fact Sheet”), more than half of the protagonists are college-bound or in college. A number of the protagonists are able to continue with the plans they made before they became pregnant, but some of the authors do show that a baby will affect future plans, even if these plans are not thwarted. Emmy (*Detour for Emmy*) and Jeff (*Too Soon for Jeff*) attend community colleges instead of four-year schools so that they can raise their children, and Helen (*Dear Nobody*) delays going to college until after her baby is old enough to go to a day care center, but because many of the teens in the novels are middle class, they may have the resources to attend college. However, while the authors of the novels portray college as a distinct possibly for the pregnant and parenting teens, this is, in reality, unlikely.
Though these authors of novels about teen pregnancy do show a somewhat realistic picture of life as a pregnant or parenting teen, the differences between fiction and reality far outweigh the similarities. If a teen were to read a selection of young adult novels about teen pregnancy from the perspective of the pregnant or parenting teen, she might get a realistic view of the difficulties of daily caring for a child. She would learn that many pregnant teens choose to keep their babies, although adoption could be an option if her family would not support her. She would also learn that teen fathers are either uninvolved or highly involved, and she would be reassured that she could successfully pursue her future goals while parenting, especially if those goals include education. She is not likely to be exposed in the fiction to the harsher realities of teen pregnancy as experienced by the majority of pregnant and parenting teens who are most often poor instead of middle class. Finally, she is also not likely to find much information about abortion in young adult fiction. Therefore, these young adult novels that represent teen pregnancy in young adult literature are more fictionalized than novels categorized as contemporary realism should be.
Chapter 5. Conclusion

Young adult novels that focus on teen pregnancy are categorized as contemporary realism. Novels in this category reflect experiences of young adults, and young adults can usually identify with these texts since they represent real life in fiction. In “Teenage Pregnancy as Moral Panic: Reflections on the Marginalization of Girls’ Feelings” the authors suggest, “It is appropriate for young adult literature to be reflective of the real lives of young women and men” (Cockett and Knetzer 53). Whether or not young adult fiction should be responsible for realistically portraying real life situations, young adult authors of contemporary realism do have a certain responsibility toward their readers.

How realistic is the portrayal of pregnant teens, specifically from the perspective of the pregnant and/or parenting teen, in young adult literature from 1990-2004? While many factors could be examined in analyzing the portrayal of teen pregnancy in young adult literature, this study focused on the representation of choice, gender, and education, all of which are influenced by socioeconomic class and ethnicity. Given these factors, the discrepancies between the reality of teen pregnancy and the portrayal of pregnant and parenting teens in young adult literature outweigh the similarities. In terms of choice, the options of abortion, adoption, and parenting are all represented in the literature. However, while forty percent of pregnant teens choose abortion (“Facts in Brief”; Luker 155), this option is rarely chosen by protagonists in young adult literature. One reason for this discrepancy may be the difficulty of presenting the topic. More often, young adult novels include a minor character who has an abortion, probably because then abortion can be mentioned without going into detail about how the character came to that decision and what resulted from the decision. By contrast to abortion, adoption is well represented as an option.
Only three percent of pregnant teens choose adoption (Stewart, *Teen Parenting* 8), but the authors favor this choice for their protagonists. Overall, the authors do not treat this subject lightly. However, the number of novels on the topic indicates that authors generally see adoption as a positive option for teens. The novels that end in adoption convey the idea that teens are too young to become parents and life will be better for all participants if the babies are given to other families. With regard to parenting, the primary discrepancy between reality and fiction is the overwhelming financial and familial support the parenting teens in the novels receive. In reality many teens do not receive much support from their families (Aitkens 13; Stewart, *Teen Mothers* 17). Most of the teens in the novels garner family assistance, but reality and fiction differ in this sense partially because while many pregnant teens are poor, the teens in the novels are usually middle class. Therefore, the teens’ families in the novels have money to provide support, but this usually is not true in reality. Also, young adult novels usually end optimistically, so if authors decide that their protagonists will keep the children, giving the protagonists financial and familial support allows for the “happily ever after” ending. Whatever the reasons for how authors represent choice, the misrepresentations could lead their readers astray.

Gender behavior regarding teen fathers is also often misrepresented in young adult literature about teen pregnancy. Though a few of the teen fathers in the novels choose to be very involved in their children’s lives, two even having full custody, research shows that, generally, teen fathers’ involvement is minimal (Gottfried 20; Larson et al. 281). By writing from the perspective of the teen father, a few authors provide a voice that would otherwise be missing in literature about teen pregnancy. Angela Johnson, author of *The First Part Last*, states in an interview that she wanted to write about the “boy who does the right thing”
instead of about the stereotypical “clueless” boy who deserts his girlfriend when he finds out she is pregnant (Hallett 16). Berlie Doherty (*Dear Nobody*) also wrote her novel from the male’s perspective. She explains, “I want it to work for boys as well as for girls, because they are an equal part of the equation when it comes to making a baby” ("Dear Nobody," [Berlie Doherty.com](http://berliedoherty.com)). Though the story involving teen pregnancy from the male’s perspective may be an important story to tell, the discrepancy lies in the fact that the novels either portray little involvement from the teen father or full involvement. They do not show that some teen fathers are partially involved and many become less involved as the baby grows older.

Finally, optimism regarding education overshadows reality in the novels. While forty-one percent of teens who begin families before age eighteen never complete high school ("Fact Sheet"), only one of the twenty protagonists in this study drops out of high school. Furthermore, eight of the twelve (sixty-seven percent) parenting teens in this study have college plans while, in reality, only 1.5 percent of teen mothers have a college degree by age thirty ("Fact Sheet"). Since these authors are writing to teens, they emphasize education with the intent of reinforcing the message teens most likely hear from many authority figures: stay in school. However, by showing the pregnant and parenting teens completing high school and going on to college, the authors portray an unrealistic picture of teen pregnancy. Therefore, though the authors may make an attempt to portray teen pregnancy realistically, they fall short in accurately presenting all three areas: choice, gender, and education.

In general, the portrayal of teen pregnancy and parenting in young adult literature is much more optimistic than the reality, chiefly because of the skewed representation of
ethnicity and socioeconomic status in the novels. The protagonists in the novels are primarily Caucasians (sixteen of twenty), while research shows that the pregnancy rates for African American and Hispanic teenagers in 1999 were more than twice the rate of non-Hispanic white teens (Ventura et al. 4). However, in the twenty novels included in this study, only four protagonists are African American and two protagonists have Hispanic partners.

The socioeconomic class of the protagonists also skews novels toward optimism. While eighty percent of pregnant teens are of low socioeconomic class (Luker 107), the majority of the teens in the novels live in middle class families and seem to have unlimited opportunities no matter what decision they make regarding the pregnancy. The story not very well represented in young adult literature is the story of the low socioeconomic minority female, who is statistically more likely to get pregnant and keep her child than the middle class Caucasian female. There may be many reasons why authors do not represent this story, but the lack of it creates an unrealistic picture of teen pregnancy.

In the analysis of the portrayal of teen pregnancy in young adult literature, one strength of this study lies in the number of novels analyzed. Previous research in the area of teen pregnancy in young adult literature focused on four to fifteen novels; this study expanded the field by including twenty novels chosen from an initial field of forty novels. Future studies could examine greater numbers of novels or particular subsets by choice, gender, education, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Furthermore, it may be helpful to analyze novels not only from the perspective of the pregnant or parenting teen, but also from the perspectives of family members and friends. Also, this study focused on choice, gender, and education, and included the influence of class and race on these areas; ethnicity and
socioeconomic status as they relate to teen pregnancy in young adult novels are important factors that should be studied further.

Other areas to include in future research on the topic of teen pregnancy in young adult literature include an analysis of the intended audience and the messages being sent to it. The audience could include pregnant teens, parenting teens, sexually active teens, pre-dating teens, or friends of the pregnant or parenting teens. Authors may also have a certain socioeconomic class or ethnicity in mind for their audience as they write. Audience should be considered, not only because of the misrepresentation of who (in terms of race and class) is portrayed as getting pregnant, but also to consider what messages these authors are sending regarding teen pregnancy. For instance, the overall message of the novels in which the teen chooses to parent is that though life will be difficult, everything will work out for the best. This may be an uplifting message for the teen who is already pregnant or parenting, but is this the intended message to the teen who is not yet sexually active? A study could also be done to compare the messages in early young adult literature about teen pregnancy to the messages in current literature.

The intended audience directly affects the author's choices of genre and narration, which could also be analyzed. In terms of genre, one novel included in this study is written in verse form, one is a picture book, and another is a graphic novel. In terms of narration, many of the novels told in first person are written as diaries, but authors also present their stories in third person, and one protagonist seems to be in a casual conversation with the reader at times. The authors obviously made these decisions for a reason, so it should illuminate the literature to study the purposes underlying these authorial decisions.
Finally, in “Books about Teen Parents: Messages and Omissions,” the authors identify three areas of omission that they found “significant” (Davis and MacGillivray 96). They noticed “few discussions of race and class” in the novels they studied (96), as mentioned previously in this study. There was little mention of prenatal care when young adult novels could be a “very easy place to educate readers about a non-controversial and life-saving practice” (96). And they saw a “striking absence of informative discussions with adults about birth control prior to pregnancies” (96). In addition to their findings, positive adult roles and influence seem to be missing from many of the protagonists’ lives. All four of these areas could be studied to determine why they are absent and the implications of these omissions.

Teen pregnancy remains a serious issue since almost one million teenagers become pregnant each year (“Facts in Brief”). It also comprises a popular topic in young adult literature. Though the authors included in this study do portray some of the realities of teen pregnancy and parenthood, the entire story remains inadequately told. New novels on the topic should better represent the realities of teen pregnancy, and researchers should examine this complex topic in depth so teen readers receive a more realistic picture of the situation confronting many teens, their families, and their friends. Teachers and librarians should be able to select a variety of novels on the topic to present a broad view to students. Unfortunately, many young adult novels featuring teen pregnancy or parenthood are truly fictional and do not adequately reflect the realities of the situation.
Works Cited


Works Consulted


<http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/familife/bulletin/volume.3/bull34f.html>


<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/~kvandcr/williamsgarcia.html>


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