The Institute of Ideas, in association with Hodder children's books, presents:  
**Teenage Kicks**  
Discussion day  
Goodenough College, Mecklenburgh Square, London  
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Report by Nathalie Rothschild

The opening session of the Teenage Kicks event was a scene setter for the remainder of the day. The question ‘what is teenage fiction for?’ brought to light disparate views and approaches to teenagers and what they do or do not read. Panellists’ and floor contributors’ points ranged between descriptions of the structure of the teenage brain and of emotional turbulence as part and parcel of being a teenager to the necessity for teenagers to be stimulated and to develop good reading habits, partly as a means to come to terms with the changes and developments they are going through. Alternatively, fiction is a means to escape the reality in which the young adult’s changing needs are grounded and it can also simply be a source of entertainment.

Kim Reynolds (director of the National Centre for Research in Children’s Literature), who opened the discussion, granted fiction an important place in young peoples’ lives as she said that fiction brings about ‘the metamorphosis needed during teenage years’. In Reynolds’ view, teenage fiction is for young adults who are fashioning themselves. She emphasised that the emotional turbulence of teenage years is often trivialised, but the teenager is also often treated as a damaged individual.

Nicola Morgan (author of *Fleshmarket* and *Mondays are Red*) said that the goal of fiction is to engage the teenager and to capture his or her attention. It therefore has no boundaries. Teenagers should read what they want, but what also needs to be considered is that teenagers’ brains are different, teenagers react differently to risk, danger etc. Their brains are not fully developed. It therefore seems like Morgan subscribes to the view of the teenager as a specific category and teenage years as a specific transitional period of life explicable, at least in part, by biological factors.

All of this must of course involve a great deal of responsibility on behalf of writers of teen fiction. One such writer, Graham Marks (author of *How it Works*) expressed a more light-handed view of the role of his work. He felt reading should be entertaining and used as an escape. What matters, he stated, is that the teenager reads and the story is the author’s job. In other words, Marks stressed teenage fiction as an escape and as entertainment and also as playing a part in the development of reading habits.

Chris Meade (executive director of the Book Trust) said that teens should read what they want to and writers are to write for whomever they wish to write. But he also spoke of identity and sex, of becoming ‘sexual beings’. Teenage fiction is an alternative to parents or teachers talking to their teenage children or pupils about sex.

Jennie Bristow (commissioning editor of spiked) also insisted that teen fiction is for teenagers and that the broader discussions around it mostly express the angst of adults. In other words, many of the issues discussed during the day could be taken as overblown adult concerns. However, Bristow also said that it is patronising to simply say ‘it’s just good for them to read’.

Julia Eccleshare, who was on the panel of ‘The Playstation Generation’ session, also said that the idea that ‘good books are difficult’ is an unhealthy fear. Her *Rough*
Guide to Books for Teenagers, examines books for 11-17 year olds and encompasses such diverse reads as Michael J. Fox’s autobiography Lucky Man, J.D. Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye and Sylvia Plath’s The Bell Jar. The recommended age for Homer’s Odyssey is 13+. This seems to blur the category ‘teenage fiction’ and the question of whether or not such a thing as teenage fiction even exists seemed central to many of the debates throughout the day.

The question was directly raised by a year 8 pupil who spoke from the floor and said ‘there is no teenage fiction’. In more subtle ways, the genre also becomes confused when considering ‘cross-over tendencies’, ie books that are on the borders of children, teenage and adult fiction, and books aimed at children and teenagers that also end up being read by adults (eg Harry Potter). Moreover, writers of different types of fiction can also draw on each other’s techniques. Matt Whyman (author of XY: A Toolkit for Life and Boy Kills Man) expressed a desire for such a trend to develop in stating ‘adult novelists can and will learn from teenage fiction’.

Though there might be separate shelves for teenagers in public libraries and though we know that publishers work with teenage fiction as a category and that certain books become marketed as teen reads, it seems as if many of the teenagers participating during the day did not find such a category useful to describe or restrict their reading. Also, it was clear that they are able to spot certain marketing techniques such as glossy covers and ‘cool catchphrases’.

Not only is it difficult, especially after the Teenage Kicks event, to pinpoint a definition of teenage fiction (is it simply what teenagers read and if so can it be investigated statistically?), but it is also hard to separate between literary genres in general. This was illustrated by the confusion that arose during the ‘Battle of the Books’, where Hanna Eiseman-Renyard (a year 13 pupil at Fortismere School) pointed out that classics might have been the gritty realism of their times. Also, certain fantasy books or films may deal with very realistic topics even though these end up being resolved by the help of vampire slayers or guardian angels… It is also hard to argue for, or choose, one genre over the other.

Some of the complex issues brought up during the first session were somewhat trivialised by Matt Wagerfield’s (a year 13 at Lord Williams’s School) speech. He feels that after hours in classrooms and in preparation for exams, it is unrealistic to expect teenagers to have the time, energy or desire to read. He also thinks it is important to experience things first hand, to be active and social. Amy Green (also a year 13 at Lord Williams’s School) spoke from the floor and empathised with Matt’s points. She felt being a sixth form student did not involve a lot of time over for reading and also said that it is not healthy ‘to live in books’.

Certainly there is a point that the exam-driven curriculum kills the joy of reading for the sake of reading, but the excuse of not having enough time is not restricted to busy teens, and reading is not the only activity that is neglected in this way, by teens and adults alike. Encouragement to enter the world of literature, whether it involves children, teenage or adult fact or fiction, seems to be restricted by instrumental expectations, but at the same time analytical skills and reading habits can obviously also be taught and encouraged in a classroom setting.

Honor Wilson Fletcher (from Hodder Children’s books) tried to discourage an interventionist approach, arguing that parents and others should not be overly concerned with boredom, which she feels can be a good thing in the marketed world we live in. That space should to the contrary be allowed to exist and we should realise that any route children find into books is valuable.
The eloquence of some of the teenage speakers participating on the panels and from the floor seemed to be proof of their literacy and ability to critically assess quality of writing. This came through in the ‘Round Table Rumble on Books About War’ where teenagers discussed the books they had read face to face with authors, not shying away from both praising and criticising their work, as well as in the Sixth Form Debate about the proposition ‘Teenage Fiction Should be Relevant to Young People’s Lives’. However, the question of whether or not the teenagers actively participating during the Teenage Kicks events are representative of others in their age group was highlighted in the survey that Olivia Barnett (a year 7 at Streatham and Clapham Girls’ School) had prepared for the ‘Playstation Generation’ session. She had asked her classmates whether or not they preferred reading to activities such as television, music or computers and found that only two out of twenty four answered ‘yes’.

This question of course implies that books are a separate alternative to and/or replacement of other sources of information and entertainment. Though the Internet might have replaced a lot of book-based research, as claimed by Ben Evans (a year 12 at University College School), Amelia Foster (Reading Connects project manager at the National Literacy Trust) also pointed out that there are other forms of reading besides that of literature. ‘Fiction is not God’, she said and people should be allowed to choose. We should stop viewing new technology such as DVDs, computer games and so on as competition, but rather view them as complementary to literature. Nick Gillett (freelance writer and games editor at the Guardian Guide) said that video games are a demonised media form and a less valued activity.

The various media or activities which can go hand in hand with fiction, then, should not just be seen as threats to the high status of books. Julia Eccleshare expressed a rather romanticised view of the internet as ‘the biggest democratiser’ in that it allows ‘every child to find out’, not only those children with books at home.

An emphasis on complementarity, or on striking a balance, between reading and computer use, seems to be part of the sensibilities of both panel members and some of the teenagers in the audience. Jake (a year 10 at Dunraven school) told me that he is not necessarily against computers, but feels one has to find a balance between them and books. ‘That’s the key to everything in life really’, Jake said. ‘Anything is good in certain measures’.

William Davies (a year 9 at University College School) asked the panel ‘why do books stand on such a cultural high ground?’ Speaking to him during the lunch break, I learned that he is a keen reader (at the moment more interested in historical and factual books such as Nelson Mandela’s autobiography and Kenneth Davis’ Don’t Know Much About History) who also highly values the educational potential of computer games.

William thinks many older people who only read feel that computer games are just culturally bad and that reading is much more useful. Though William feels there might be some truth in the argument that television and the internet make you passive, he said that you will also get different things out of different books so it is not a question of one media form being superior to another, but they can complement each other. And just like one book is different from another, so are computer games. They are not all about violence for instance. ‘A computer game about the Second World War’, William said, ‘will not give you the whole scale of the events, but it can still give you a feel of what it was like to be a soldier there, how hurtful it was and so on. It can be quite useful to have a computer game because you’re actually being the person and
it is almost like acting out a play because then you have to think about the character and so on...Reading and playing a computer game is two very different ways of feeling the event but you can gain from both, but I do think in some ways the computer game is much more useful’. William feels there is a lack of understanding about computer games because ‘the so called playstation generation is the first one to actually grow up with both so my parents’ generation don’t really understand it as fully as I do and that’s a bit of a problem’.

Teenage Kicks did not directly deal with computer games as teaching tools or as means of coming to terms with war and conflict. Literature on the theme of war was however debated in a ‘Round Table Rumble’ where the issue of learning about war from fiction was discussed by the panel and audience. Jake from Dunraven School said that fictional books can often address the scenes of war very well, but can also give a one-sided view, in which case learning about war through a textbook in history class for instance is better. Where literature has the upper hand, however, is in its ability to convey what a person is feeling at the time of war. If you want to learn about key events and historical facts, you don’t, according to Jake, want fictional books on war. Emma (also a year 10 at Dunraven School) said that war books can be less biased in that they may show us all sides of what went on. The example she gives to illustrate her point is *All Quiet on the Western Front*.

Much scepticism around teenage fiction seems to revolve around it relying on marketing techniques aimed at the teenager as a specific consumer. This also invokes notions of the teenager as easily swayed and with a malleable mind. Can marketing strategies be seen through and even resisted by these impressionable youngsters?

I spoke to four year nine girls from Rickmansworth School who felt that a lot of the marketing ploys that they, as teenagers are subjected to, construct a stereotypical teenager, which is one that smokes, take drugs and so on. ‘That’s not us’, they said. ‘That isn’t everybody. Most adults accept that they’re different, but they’ve got to learn and accept that children are different as well.’

William Davies from University College School is also aware of commercialism in his everyday life, but feels that ‘if something is being marketed so strongly then there is probably something slightly wrong with the product. If it was so great, it would get around by word of mouth. Of course there is a position for marketing, but I don’t think it has such an effect on my life, but I’m not sure, it may do on others.’ William feels that the fear that teenagers will just buy in to what is told them and that young children do not really know what is good for them is quite patronising. ‘A five year old knows what’s good or bad for them to a certain extent. So if a five year old knows he likes a book, now you can’t really take a 25 year old’s opinion on that book because it’s targeted at five year olds. On more serious issues, like if a 15 year old girl wants plastic surgery, they’re too young really to have a strong opinion and to have formed it. But on books I don’t think you can really say that because it’s a matter of taste.’

Except from advertisement, these teenagers also get informed about what or what not to read through reviews in various magazines, libraries and school and also through more informal networks such as family members giving them books as presents and through word of mouth and recommendations from parents, siblings and friends.

It seem that the formation of teenage fiction as a genre also involves constructions of the teenager as a personality type and attempts to pin down what type of literature is suitable for teenagers restrict their reading habits as opposed to encourage and
broaden it. Reading for the sake of reading can be a patronising guide into the world of literature and rather points to the high status of the book or of reading as a more acceptable and valued activity in light of other sources of information and entertainment.