

## Teen Fiction

by Michael J. McKenna

Once in an airport, waiting to board my flight, I beheld a spectacle that was one-third entertaining, one-third saddening, and one-third clinical social observation, mixed, shaken well, and served up as a sad commentary about where our culture was headed.

A little girl—no more than four—was romping about the airport waiting lounge, running up and down the nearby escalators, knocking into adults she was having too much fun to notice, shrieking with delight at the entertainment she was making for herself, and generally being a disturbance to everyone in the vicinity, *save two*. (Honestly, I was trying very hard not to be a curmudgeon. But trust me—*this girl was getting on everyone's last nerve*. Well, *almost everyone's*.)

I was finally brought to the point at which I asked my fellow travelers, “Where is that girl’s father?” I didn’t have to look far. One or two rows over was not only that girl’s father, but her mother as well. Every so often they would look up from what they were doing, get their daughter’s attention, and say something perfunctory, like, “Come back here, Anna,” and then continue on as before (as did she)! What were they up to, besides failing to properly supervise their young progeny? *They were playing video games on their cell phones!*

I looked from one train wreck to the other, from child to parents, and from parents to child, and soon found myself feeling like the animals in the end of George Orwell’s *Animal Farm*: “The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig again;

but already it was impossible to say which was which.”

Last year, the Manhattan Institute published two essays on the modern twentysomething male, identifying what has come to be known as “adulthood,” a toxic brew of both adulthood and adolescence. Apparently,

“teenage” was used to refer to clothing and activities, but young men and women were still, well, *young men and women*. Then, in 1941, the word “teenager” made a casual appearance in an issue of *Reader’s Digest*, suggesting that it had actually been around for a few years prior. But the word is not so

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the sociologists have identified what I observed in the parents at the airport and given it a clinical name. The author of the Manhattan Institute article described these males as men content to wile away the hours “in a playground of drinking, playing *Halo 3*, and underachieving.” She went on to say that these young men are the embodiment of our culture’s failure to “define worthy aspirations” for its young people, and that we’re allowing our young men to occupy their default state of adolescence far too happily and for far too long.<sup>1</sup>

Which raises the question: *What’s up with this “default state of adolescence”?* Where did we ever get the idea that adolescence—or the teenage years—was rightfully about wiling away the hours playing games and underachieving? It seems to me that, once we gave away *that* farm, it was only a short time before the dawn of the adultercent. So where did the “teenager” come from?

In the 1920s, the word

much a problem as the meaning behind the word. Social reforms of the early twentieth century, including mandated education through high school, extended pre-adult years. In times prior, a person reaching adult size at age 13 or 14 was ready to do adult work. Now adult size was achieved as it always was, but adult responsibilities were deferred until 18 or later. So, the years ending in *-teen* became something new and separate. Now, these years were either to be savored as the best of times, combining childhood freedom with adult physical maturity, or endured as years of hazard, combining childish irresponsibility with adult urges.

So first we took away adult responsibilities from our young men and women—*er*, teenagers—and then we extended that period of freedom (license?) into adulthood, and *voilà!* Adultercent!

It only takes a short time reading God’s word until we find that there’s a curious absence of the “teenager.” There we find the words “youths, children, babies.” We also find “men, women,” even the word “adults” is found once in

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the NIV (I Cor. 14:20). In short, the Bible makes no allowance for something in between youth and adulthood. So why do we? In addition, if the Bible makes no allowance for the gray zone of “teenagerhood,” it certainly gives no credence to the idea of adolescence, grown men and women *acting* as though they were teenagers. What’s going on? What’s at the root of this phenomenon?

Consider the testimony of a few adolescents and we’ll see. One woman admitted, “I want to get married, but not soon. I’m enjoying myself. There’s a lot I want to do by myself still.” Another twentysomething stated that he might be interested in marriage, just not anytime soon. “It’s a long way down the road. I’m too self-involved.”<sup>2</sup>

Could it be that, at the very heart of the modern notion of both the teenager and the adolescent is a sinful desire to gratify “the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life”? Is it really just self-absorption? If so, let’s not forget the rest of that verse: this “is not of the Father but is of the world” (I John 2:16).

Consider also, whether the modern notion of teenager or adolescent fulfills the biblical command to “honor your father and your mother.” Oftentimes, the adolescent is a twentysomething (even a thirtysomething) living at home with a flat-screen TV in his bedroom and new car in the driveway, all the while testifying to mom’s great lasagna and the fact that she does a mean load of laundry!

At Rockbridge Academy, we’ve begun addressing this cultural issue largely by going right to the root. We don’t encounter adolescents to any large extent,

so we’re doing our part to prevent them from emerging in the first place. You’ll rarely, if ever, hear us refer to our students as “teenagers.” They’re gentlemen and ladies, young men and women. I often refer to them as “Mr. Smith” or “Miss Jones.” I believe that, in their heart of hearts, they want to be treated as young adults, so we gladly oblige them.

We agree with the Apostle Paul who said to Timothy, “Let no one despise you for your youth.” But Paul didn’t stop there. He added, “But set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (I Timothy 4:12). We don’t look down on them because they’re young, and we require that they set godly examples for their peers. We require meaningful work of them, for after all, idle hands are the devil’s workshop.

How else should we, as parents, fight the good fight against the modern teenager and prevent the emergence of the adolescent? Let me go out on a limb and suggest a few ways: limit the amount of time our kids spend surfing the web or watching TV and movies. Instead, encourage them to read good books and talk about them with you. Don’t permit them to live as modern consuming machines, spending the weekends plying the local malls, eating out, buying clothes they don’t need, and so forth. Require them to help with jobs around the house. Encourage them to find a way to serve at your church, rather than seeing church as a place for the youth to be served (it’s participation and support that makes a member, not attendance). Finally, encourage them to spend time in God’s Word. Nothing will better equip us to be *men and women* of God than to have “the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly.”

## ENDNOTES

1. Kay S. Hymowitz, “Child-Man in the Promised Land,” *City Journal*, Winter 2008, vol. 18, no. 1.
2. Lev Grossman, “Grow Up? Not So Fast,” *Time*, January 16, 2005, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1018089-6,00.html>.