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PLIETH Carla

Cultural Express, n°10, 2023, La violence dans les objets sémiotiques destinés à l'enfance

Pour citer cet article :

Carla Plieth, « The Phallicity of Weapons : Reclaiming Masculinity following Sexual Abuse in Young Adult Literature », *Cultural Express* [en ligne], n°10, 2023, « La violence dans les objets sémiotiques destinés à l'enfance », Régine Atzenhoffer (dir.), URL :

Article disponible en ligne à l'adresse :

<https://cultx-revue.com/article/the-phallicity-of-weapons-reclaiming-masculinity-following-sexual-abuse-in-young-adult-literature>

The Phallicity of Weapons : Reclaiming Masculinity following Sexual Abuse in Young Adult Literature

Introduction

« Little boys around the world make plain their understanding that sticks, spears, and guns are ready-made phallic symbols¹ », argues Lawrence D. Blum M.D. As such phallic extensions, he continues, guns or knives are not wielded for personal protection – because then females would exert them more often than males, especially to protect themselves from the latter – but to compensate males' feelings of weakness and « bolster their fragile sense of manhood² ». That boys and men try to compensate their feelings of weakness and inadequacy with the wielding of guns, and are therefore often outraged at the thought of gun control not because it would take away from their freedom but rather their manhood, is often ignored. Boys grow up engaging in role-play that allows them to wield a variety of toy weapons: the plastic swords of knights, the rifles and revolvers of cowboys, or the toy guns of police officers and soldiers³. In many parts of the world, military service not only serves as an important rite of passage for boys but allows them to exchange toy weapons for proper firearms. Hence, as Henri Myrntinen states, « [t]he relationship between 'masculine' men and weapons is such a prevailing cliché that one finds it everywhere⁴ », besides many forms of popular culture such as TV/film and video games also in literature.

Young Adult (YA) literature serves as a space to both challenge traditional and hegemonic forms of masculinity and at the same time uphold them. Yet, discussions of (heterosexual) masculinity in YA scholarship are far rarer than that of femininity, despite both being subject to many biases and toxic stereotypes⁵. When it comes to sexual violence, an abundance of scholarly contributions has investigated depictions of the sexual abuse of girls, but only few have looked at the sexual abuse of boys⁶. It could be, rightfully, argued that there exist significantly more YA novels depicting sexualised violence against girls, but there also exist over 50 English-language YA novels addressing the sexual abuse of boys. In one of the few analyses of the latter, Amy Pattee outlines that upon reading Catherine Atkins' *When Jeff Comes Home*⁷, where a 13-year-old boy is abducted and sexually abused for several years, her students « felt that the story of a male victim of sexual abuse was both inordinately graphic and frightening⁸ ». (It should be stated that many novels are much more graphic in their depiction of the sexual abuse and rape of boys than Atkins', and many narrate the abuse on, not off, the page.) Pattee postulates that the novel « urges readers to reexamine our gendered conceptions of strength and weakness and the codification of the feminine victim of violent crime present in much young adult literature⁹ ». It is these 'gendered conceptions of strength and weakness', anchored in the notion of hegemonic masculinity, that undermine many of the novels depicting boys as victims of sexualised violence.

Although there might be significantly more YA novels addressing a girl's experience of sexual violence, it is important to also investigate the novels outlining boy's experiences – as well as those of children and adolescents whose gender identity falls outside the binary construction of gender –, as these often differ significantly in the portrayed dynamics and power hierarchies surrounding the abuse. For instance, sexual perpetrators of girls are largely depicted as (step)fathers or, in the context of date and acquaintance rape, male peers ; sexual perpetrators of boys are almost never fathers, seldom even other relatives, but primarily adult acquaintances like teachers, coaches, neighbours, caretakers, or strangers. However, in a handful of novels,

specifically Robert Lipsyte's *Raiders Night*¹⁰, Joshua Cohen's *Leverage*¹¹, Larry O'Loughlin's *Breaking the Silence*¹², and A. S. King's *Everybody Sees the Ants*¹³, the abuser is another male peer who exerts sexual violence as a form of bullying. These adolescent perpetrators seek to intimidate their victim and enforce a power hierarchy after their own masculinity has been challenged by the peer and they are subsequently confronted with a potential « loss of male power and privilege¹⁴ ». Although rape is always about power, these cases in particular highlight the power dynamic of sexual violence : the boys rape not with a penis but an extension thereof, a phallic object : a baseball bat, a broom handle, an aerosol can, or a banana. In turn, to reclaim their masculinity, the abused boys likewise employ a phallic object, what I call an *ersatz*-penis : a weapon like a gun or a knife. Such a wielding of weapons can also be seen in several other boys who are sexually abused and/or raped by other boys and men, enforcing the linkage between masculinity, the phallus, and weapons.

Hence, this article investigates a range of YA novels depicting sexually abused boys attempting to reclaim their masculinity through weapons following a rape. In Robert Lipsyte's *Raiders Night* and Matthew Quick's *Forgive me, Leonard Peacock*¹⁵, two teenage boys are not only raped by a male peer but excluded, teased, and gay-baited by their wider male peer group, subsequently leading them to wield guns in an attempt to regain and reclaim their masculinity, in particular, a hegemonic masculinity. A similar attempt at reclaiming masculinity through a weapon can be seen in two narratives where young, prepubescent boys are sexually abused by adult men, Adam Rapp's *Little Chicago*¹⁶ and Marc Talbert's *The Paper Knife*¹⁷. Here, however, the abused boys use phallic-shaped weapons to defend their masculinity in front of peer bullies who gay-bait and effeminise them, even when it was not them who had exerted the sexual violence. Similar violent tendencies are not discernible in girls who are depicted as having experienced sexual abuse in YA literature. Hence, I argue that being sexually abused, and especially raped, by another boy or man leads the boys to question their masculinity, even stripping them off it. Unconsciously, reclaiming this masculinity becomes a necessary act to heal from their abuse and appears only achievable through the likewise powerful wielding of a phallus – yet not a penis but a weapon.

Hazing Culture and High School Jocks: Robert Lipsyte's *Raiders Night*

In *Raiders Night*, author Robert Lipsyte portrays a jock culture that is based on hegemonic masculinity. In the run up to the novel's publication, the journalist published an essay reminiscing on his return to sports journalism at *The New York Times* in the 1990s in which he also references school shootings :

Right after the 1999 shootings at Columbine High School, I wrote a column suggesting that the arrogant, entitled behaviour of high school athletes, encouraged by the adults who lived vicariously through their overhyped deeds, had created an everlasting divide between Jocks (and their boosters) and Outsiders (geeks, nerds, greasers, burn-outs, band-fags, etc.). Too often, the pack mentality of the team turned into exclusion or violence or rape¹⁸.

In this regard, Michael Kimmel makes the poignant observation that the dozens of school shootings that occurred in the US in the 1990s and early 2000s were primarily exerted not only by suburban White boys but specifically boys who were « bullied, beaten up, and ... gay-baited¹⁹ », less so because they were actually gay but rather because they did not fit into the picture of hegemonic masculinity performed primarily by the bully, the stereotypical male athlete/the jock. Such exclusion, teasing, and gay-baiting not only elicited a feeling of weakness in the school shooters but also an anger that eventually made them turn to weapons as a means to defend their manhood.

Similar exclusion, teasing, and gay-baiting, through but not limited to the means of sexual assault, lead Chris, in *Raiders Night*, and Leonard, in *Forgive me, Leonard Peacock*, to wield guns in an attempt to regain and reclaim their masculinity. In *Raiders Night*, a hazing initiation during a football camp ends with a new player, Chris, being raped with a baseball bat by co-captain Ramp whom Chris had previously rubbed the wrong way, proving a skilled player who might contest Ramp's position within the team. After Ramp's initial attempts to alienate Chris from the team and humiliate, degrade, and demasculinise him through physical and psychological means were unsuccessful, he takes things one step further during the hazing initiation, generally considered a « rite [...] of passage used to educate newcomers as to their place in the hierarchical structure of the group and to establish and reinforce notions of masculinity²⁰ ». Here, Ramp wields a baseball bat as phallic extension to rape Chris in front of the team, leaving the boy not only in physical pain but psychological torment.

Just before the rape, when Ramp had peed on his face and beat him to the ground, Chris had threatened to get his gun and blow Ramp's « fucking head²¹ » off. When even after his rape, that was successful in alienating Chris from the team and intimidating him into silence, Ramp continues to relentlessly bully and humiliate the boy. Thus, Chris wants to execute his earlier threat. One day, he brings a small revolver into the locker room, claiming he is going to kill Ramp. Even with a gun in his face, Ramp does not back down, further gay-baiting and demasculinising Chris whom he says would not « have the balls²² » to pull the trigger. Ramp's comments that they would « shove that gun right up [Chris'] ass » and Chris should « [s]uck the gun²³ » emphasise the phallic symbolism of the gun. Michael Messner outlines that through sexual insults like « fuck you », « blow me », or « you suck », children and adolescents learn that « sex, homosexual or heterosexual, is an act of domination and subordination »: the penetrating men are dominant and the penetrated individuals, be it women or other men, « subordinate, degraded, and ultimately dehumanized objects of sexual aggression²⁴ ». By indicating that Ramp and his fellow jocks would penetrate, and Chris be penetrated and 'suck', they emphasise the power hierarchy in which they are dominant and Chris submissive. Ironically, it is that same hierarchy Chris is trying to overturn wielding his *ersatz*-penis.

As the size of the gun already indicated, Chris is unsuccessful in reclaiming his masculinity over Ramp. If symbolising his penis, Chris's small gun does not give him much power in the hegemonically masculine space of the locker room, particularly in comparison to Ramp and his previously wielded baseball bat. First-person narrator and Ramp's fellow co-captain Matt, who realises the dire situation his repeated refusal to help Chris has led to, tries to de-escalate the situation by asking Chris to lower the gun, but Ramp teases his victim further, communicating to Chris that he does not consider him man enough to follow through with his threat and is not intimidated by him. Instead, Ramp entices Chris to « [k]ill yourself, you little faggot. ... Get it over with. ... Suck the gun²⁵ ». Forlorn, Chris puts the gun's barrel in his mouth; although Matt is able to knock it out, he cannot move Chris's finger from the trigger before a shot is fired, injuring Chris. The boy will not awake from a subsequent coma during the remainder of the novel.

In the aftermath of the incident, the story is twisted around, and Chris labelled a terrorist who had planned to shoot up the whole school with an AK-47, probably even set off bombs, because he had failed to get onto the football team. When another player on the team asks about Chris's homicidal tendencies, Matt thinks it was more like « delayed self-defense²⁶ », that Chris had just tried to stand up for himself but had, arguably, chosen the wrong means to try to do so. Relentlessly bullied by Ramp, humiliated, and effeminised in front of the whole team, Chris saw his gun as the only way he could claim back his manhood and forego his submissive position. It is important to highlight that beforehand, Chris had repeatedly reached out to Matt for help, first trying to resolve the situation without violence. Only when his peers, in addition to his coach and several adults who were aware of the abuse but expected Chris to « [s]uck it

up [because] he's supposed to be a football player²⁷», failed him, did Chris go for his weapon. Matt as well, afraid what the knowledge of Chris's rape will mean for the football team and their chances of college scholarships, only speaks up about the abuse after Chris's coma, having failed to show courage and help Chris seek justice before.

From Victim to Perpetrator : Matthew Quick's *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*

Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock constitutes another novel where a teenage boy, Leonard, tries to avenge his sexual abuse by shooting his same-age perpetrator, Asher, yet the relationship between the two boys is significantly different than that between Chris and Ramp. Leonard and Asher had been best friends for years. When Asher changed after going on a fishing trip with his uncle Dan, Leonard immediately noticed. However, no one else seemed to worry about Asher's suddenly violent behaviour and freak-outs. Even when Asher gave Leonard a black eye while destroying a model of Machu Picchu they were building for a school project, shortly after weeping bitterly, neither parents nor teachers expressed concern. Leonard's father simply said, « [b]oys fight at that age. Just part of growing up²⁸ », and his mother was more concerned with the look of his black eye. Besides waiving off Asher's erratic behaviour as boyish antics, Mr. Peacock also failed to offer his son emotional support, seemingly assuming that as a boy, Leonard should not complain about being hurt. Leonard, however, knew that Asher hitting him was not okay, and that Asher himself was not okay. Still, overwhelmed with and confused by the situation, Leonard did not know how to help his friend and feared becoming a punchbag yet again if he involved another adult. After all, no one else seemed concerned about Asher, and for a while, he behaved normally, until he did not. Asher began picking fights with smaller kids and ridiculing Leonard, « saying crazy weird stuff like he caught me jerking off to a picture of his mom, or that I tried to grab his dick in the locker room²⁹ ».

To an informed outsider, Asher depicts clear signs of sexual abuse : a sudden change in behaviour, a display of aggression, bullying smaller children, and using sexually charged and explicit language. He had even tried to tell Leonard after the black eye incident, desperately, that « [s]omething happened on the fishing trip³⁰ », but quickly changed his mind and left without expanding. Reflecting on the episode year later, Leonard suspects Asher wanted him « to save him³¹ », subconsciously trying to enrage Leonard enough that he would eventually ask an adult for help. As Leonard did not actively seek Asher help, he not only feels like he failed Asher but considers that « all of what happened afterward – the bullying and then the really bad shit – was his way of punishing me for failing to protect him³² ». Now, at eighteen, Leonard wishes he would have talked more with Asher and gotten him the help he needed, feeling responsible for his friend. Leonard's self-hate is thus not only a result of his abuse but of the fact that he did not help his best friend when he was clearly struggling.

Not receiving any help or support from the adults around him for the trauma inflicted on him by his uncle either, Asher, who had always been « stronger, bigger³³ », started sexually abusing Leonard when they were almost twelve. The abuse continued for two years yet its description in the novel remains vague : « The first time, he said his uncle had shown him how to feel good in a way I wouldn't believe. I wanted to feel good. Who doesn't ?³⁴ » They had been wrestling, « [j]ust messing around. ... And then we weren't wrestling. We were doing something I didn't understand – something exciting, dangerous. Something I wasn't ready for – something I didn't really want. We were pretending – or were we³⁵ ? ». Subsequently, Asher wanted to wrestle all the time, but Leonard was confused and asked questions. Asher told him « to keep what happened between us, not to think about it too much³⁶ » and got continually less friendly. Leonard, at first, did not resist, not wanting to lose his friend, and later tried to avoid Asher, making up excuses for why he could not meet up with him. When Asher understood Leonard's lies, he threatened him and became violent, hitting his friend again. Once Asher realised he

would need to frequently beat Leonard up, leaving visible bruises that would draw people's attention, the abuse stopped.

Again, Leonard's parents did not think much of the bruises, fobbed off with their son's reply that he and Asher had gotten into another fight. Leonard once tried to tell his mother, indirectly, « because how can you be direct about shit like that when you're just going through puberty » but she did not believe him, even laughing « like I had told a joke³⁷ ». Suddenly, during this reminiscence, Leonard remembers his mother had once walked in on him and Asher naked, but had « simply shut[] the door and pretend[ed] it never happened³⁸ », probably assuming the boys were just messing around or exploring their sexuality. After Leonard had managed to rid himself of Asher, he had become a freak and Asher a popular boy whom people thought of as normal. Leonard thinks that it is always the bullies who are popular because « [p]eople love power³⁹ ». He debates whether he will « become temporarily powerful if ... shoot[ing] Asher⁴⁰ ? ». At least, he would become famous and « what is fame if it isn't power and popularity⁴¹ ? ». Both Asher and Leonard's developments from victim to (attempted) perpetrator can be mapped using David Finkelhor and Angela Browne's traumagenic dynamics : traumatic sexualization, betrayal, powerlessness, and stigmatisation⁴². Asher temporarily lost the power over his own body and autonomy when he was sexually abused, and thus, betrayed by his trusted uncle. His powerlessness was then furthered by his unsuccessful (and maybe unconscious) attempt to draw other adults' attention toward his abuse through his unusual and at times violent behaviour. Therefore, Asher attempted to compensate his powerlessness and the pain it caused him by himself gaining power through not only bullying other peers but the very means he himself became powerless. As such, his sexually violent behaviour « may be in large measure to regain the sense of power and domination that [he] attribute[s] to [his] own abuser⁴³ ». Sexually victimising other children is Asher's reaction to his traumatic sexualisation and can be considered a coping mechanism, in lieu of the absent help by adults. Effects Leonard displays following his abuse are linked to stigmatisation. Isolated through his abuse, he expresses guilt, shame, and a feeling of otherness, which leads him to develop self-destructive behaviour culminating in a suicide attempt. To counter his powerlessness, Leonard does not wield sexual violence himself but seeks to kill Asher with a gun. An explicit description of said gun opens the novel : on a table next to an oatmeal bowl lays a P-38 WWII Nazi handgun which Leonard inherited from his grandfather. Not as subtle as Chekov's gun, it is still unambiguous that the gun will play an important part in and even be fired off during the remainder of the story. Soon after, Leonard fuels this implication when he reveals his plan to kill Asher and himself on his 18th birthday, contemplating becoming famous as a « Teenage Killer⁴⁴ » in the aftermath. In one of the 69 footnotes embedded in the novel, Leonard utters his disbelief at the high teenage suicide statistic he read online, and shares the fact that firearms account for more than half of committed suicides. Like Asher has penetrated him with his penis, Leonard now seeks to penetrate Asher with a bullet, killing him.

Although Leonard clearly shares his plan with the reader, he also has doubts about his murder-suicide. In his Holocaust class, he asks his teacher, Herr Silverman, « Let's just say that an American teenager inherited a real Nazi gun from his grandfather, who captured and executed a high-ranking Nazi officer. What should be done with this gun⁴⁵ ? » Leonard worries that someone in his class could figure out that his question was not hypothetical, and he really has a Nazi gun in his backpack. However, like Asher, he is desperate for someone to realise his dilemma and misery, « to piece together all the hints I've been dropping all day long, for years and years even⁴⁶ », and to provide him the help he was unable to give Asher. After class, Leonard asks Herr Silverman if « it's possible to turn an object with a negative, horrible connotation into something that has a positive connotation⁴⁷ ». Killing Asher and himself, thus, appears to Leonard as a laudable action, although the novel does not elaborate on whether Leonard considers Asher a danger to others, or believes the male rape myth that he himself

could later sexually abuse another person. Herr Silverman notices Leonard's suicidal intentions and makes him promise to come to class the next day, yet does not appear to believe the boy to be in imminent danger.

Standing in front of Asher's window and intending to kill his former friend and sexual abuser, Leonard witnesses Asher jerking off. Therefore, he cannot bring himself to pull the trigger and shoot his own load, the bullet. Linking his performance of masculinity with his inability to fire the gun, Leonard considers himself a failure of a man, « a fuckup who can't do anything right », « a terrible soldier », and believes his idolised grandfather – whom he had never met – « would probably call me a faggot and slap the shit out of me⁴⁸ ». Instead of shooting Asher with a bullet, Leonard shoots him with a camera, taking a flash photo of Asher jerking off, hence not penetrating Asher's body but his privacy. The possession of the photo makes Leonard feel powerful, because a mean person « jerking off alone in a room ... seems sort of hilarious and powerless and vulnerable and maybe even like someone you feel sorry for⁴⁹ ». Although the novel does not state it explicitly, this moment suggests Leonard's realisation that despite all the hurt Asher caused him, the boy himself was also a victim, trying to counter the powerlessness and vulnerability he felt being sexually abused by his uncle with the only means he knew : exerting sexual violence himself, to reclaim the power and masculinity he felt robbed of. Leonard decides that he does not need to kill or cause Asher physical harm, but that the psychological torment of knowing someone photographed him in a compromising position is enough punishment for Asher. Only later does Leonard notice that the flash reflecting in the window resulted in nothing else being discernible in the photo.

Having made his peace with Asher, indirectly, Leonard attempts to commit suicide but when he pulls the trigger on himself, the rusty gun does not go off, giving him another chance at life. (His mother later calls the gun a « paperweight⁵⁰ » that obviously would no longer work.) At a loss, Leonard calls Herr Silverman who comes to his aid. The teacher tells Leonard what the reader might have figured out already, that Leonard, like *Raiders Night's* Chris, carries the Nazi gun because he is « trying to prove something to [himself] ... trying to take control »⁵¹ after it had been taken from him. Herr Silverman explains that Leonard does not need a physical weapon, because « being different⁵² » is already a « powerful ... weapon », one that the world needs. Believing Herr Silverman, who just disclosed his homosexuality to Leonard, is implying Leonard's difference is being gay, the boy vehemently refutes the apparent assumption. Instead, he suggests that Asher is gay and finally confides his sexual abuse, the reason behind his attempted murder-suicide, to Herr Silverman. The teacher comforts Leonard and stresses that Leonard's perceived failure of not « even [being able to] kill myself properly⁵³ » is a positive thing. Life will get better for him if Leonard sets his mind to it, and he can start this by discarding of his gun, which Leonard does, throwing it into the nearby river. He acknowledges that he does not need his gun or any *ersatz*-penis to prove his masculinity.

Standing Up to Your Bullies : Adam Rapp's *Little Chicago* and Marc Talbert's *The Paper Knife*

Besides Chris and Leonard (attempting to) wield guns against the boys who sexually abused them, the young, prepubescent boys who are sexually abused by adult men in Adam Rapp's *Little Chicago* and Marc Talbert's *The Paper Knife* also threaten male peers with weapons to try and reclaim their masculinity. In *Little Chicago*, 11-year-old Blacky is sexually abused by his mother's boyfriend, Al. Three weapons are mentioned in the novel which can all be seen as phallic symbols. When Blacky tells social worker Ms. Wolf of a musket Al keeps in his room and promised to gift him eventually, similar to a Swiss Army knife he had promised to buy him « for our one-year anniversary⁵⁴ », Blacky has « to stop talking cause I feel like choking⁵⁵ ». The boy makes the connection between the weapons and the phallus, maybe

unconsciously, when he tells Ms. Wolf what Al penetrated him with : « I show her my thumb. It's like I'm holding a weapon⁵⁶ ». Feeling like he has been stripped of his masculinity by Al and his bullies at school, who call him « [f]ucking faggot buttfuck sissy⁵⁷ » and « a fucking pansy » a slur for an effeminate man, Blacky buys a gun to regain and reinforce his masculinity. With it, Blacky threatens his bullies and even shoots at one, thinking, « I find this so thrilling I almost get a boner⁵⁸ ». The phallic gun, a symbolic extension of his penis, gives Blacky power and manifests his masculinity. When he demands his bullies « Baa like a sheep⁵⁹ » to humiliate them, they obey. To Blacky, this means victory, a moment he will never forget. The novel ends with the boy leaving the gun in an old car. It has done its job to help Blacky put his bullies in their place by emphasising his masculinity and position toward the peers. Now that Blacky has reclaimed and regained his masculinity, also indicated by him almost getting a boner, he no longer needs the gun as an *ersatz*-penis. With Al in jail and his position amongst the bullies manifested, there is seemingly little risk of his masculinity being challenged in the near future. In *The Paper Knife*, 10-year-old Jeremy is sexually abused by his mother's boyfriend, George. After George beats his mother, they move in with his caring parents and Jeremy changes schools. Jeremy is anxious about the new circumstances and that George might lie in wait for him somewhere. Calming him down when he feels the panic rise in him is fiddling with a pocketknife George once gifted him and which he keeps in his jeans pocket. When two boys at school bully him, one of whom had drawn a naked boy with Jeremy's face next to a naked woman for all the class to see, Jeremy threatens them with his knife. When a teacher confiscates the knife and Jeremy's reassurance with it, he feels « helpless – as naked as he felt in the bathtub whenever George walked in and closed the door behind him with that silly grin on his face. ... As naked as he was in bed whenever George crept in late ». His knife also provided Jeremy with a phallic extension, giving him the self-confidence⁶⁰ to stand up to his bullies, in lieu of George. In search for another weapon « that could cut and hurt and threaten George as much as the pocketknife⁶¹ », Jeremy weaponises George's fear of people finding out about his abuse by writing George's deeds on a piece of paper that he carries around like his knife, intending to use its words should George come near him again : « Paper can cut – like a knife⁶²».

When Jeremy's bullies steal his money and the paper knife, his mother finds the latter upon the boys being made to return Jeremy's belongings. She first assumes that another boy fooled around with and touched Jeremy, considering him being bullied, before concluding that the abuser must be Jeremy's sympathetic teacher, not sharing this assumption with Jeremy who could have cleared up the misunderstanding. With the paper knife being taken from him as well, and as such, his second *ersatz*-penis, Jeremy expresses a castration wish by having his penis cut off : « He looked at this thing that George had liked to play with. Sometimes he wished that he was brave enough to cut it off and be rid of it. When he was afraid or sorry, it didn't tuck between his legs and disappear like the tail of a scared dog. It didn't care. And sometimes when George touched it⁶³ ». Jeremy feels betrayed by his penis, which sometimes reacts to George's touch. Pulling on several pairs of underwear, Jeremy tries to « smother this thing that poked out, this thing that caused him so much anguish and guilt and pleasure and confusion and fear⁶⁴ ». While such ambivalent feelings are normal reactions to sexual abuse, Jeremy is also relieved that his mother did not consider George his abuser who « had become his father and brother and best friend – all at the same time. He didn't want to tell on George⁶⁵ ». The novel continues to downplay George's crime, and after he has served some time in country jail for abusing Jeremy, he continues to visit the family on the weekends, although Jeremy tries to stay out of George's way and his mother rejected George's request to move back in with him. George had also given Jeremy a new pocketknife that he now carries with him, providing him with self-assurance the way his first knife had. He is no longer afraid of George and knows what to do if the man tried anything again. However, that Jeremy continues to find comfort in

a weapon, and especially it being George who gifts it to him, diminishes his character development. Seemingly, although it is George who claimed his masculinity in the first place, it is also George who re-establishes it later on.

Conclusion

Despite differing circumstances and dynamics, several boys in YA literature wield weapons to reclaim their masculinity following sexual abuse by other males. Chris, raped by a fellow footballer during a hazing initiation in *Raiders Night*, and Leonard, raped by his former best friend who himself had been sexually abused by his uncle in *Forgive Me, Leonard Peacock*, seek to reclaim their masculinity by shooting their abusers. Both boys cannot bring themselves to pull the trigger on their tormentors, only on themselves. Sexually abused by men, prepubescents Blacky, in *Little Chicago*, and Jeremy, in *The Paper Knife*, also employ phallic-shaped weapons to defend their masculinity, yet not aiming at their adult perpetrators but peer bullies who humiliate, gay-bait, and effeminise them. Both boys are successful in asserting themselves in front of the bullies by means of their weapons. Functioning as *ersatz*-penises, the guns and knives seek to penetrate – or threaten to – the male who robbed them of their masculinity through sexual abuse or effeminising and gay-baiting bullying.

As a phallic symbol and penis extension, weapons do not appear to be wielded by girls to reclaim their femininity, manifest a status amongst a peer group, or seek revenge following abuse in YA fiction depicting girls experiencing sexual violence. Arguably, the sexual assault of girls and women has been normalised since the beginning of time : they are expected to be penetrated, including being raped ; their submission is considered the norm. Boys and men are expected to be active, to penetrate, and rape ; their submission is considered abnormal. Many YA novels stress these gendered dynamics of sexuality and sexual abuse, and variations of the notion that girls are expected to be raped and boys rape, can be found in an abundance of narratives. Therefore, when boys experience sexual violence, this is often equated with a loss, or at least the challenging, of their masculinity. Subsequently, that the boys reclaim their masculinity appears paramount. That this reclaiming of masculinity often occurs through means of wielding a penis or an *ersatz*-penis should be critically considered.

1 Lawrence D. Blum, « What Guns Often Protect Is a Sense of Manhood. Denying the Obvious Phallic Symbolism of Guns Is Not Helpful », *Psychology Today*, 13/10/2019, para. 2, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/beyond-freud/201910/what-guns-often-protect-is-sense-manhood>

2 *Ibid.*

3 Henri Myrntinen, « Disarming Masculinities », *Disarmament Forum: Women, Men, Peace and Security* n° 4, 2003, p. 37-46, p. 38.

4 *Id.*, 37.

5 For discussions of masculinity in children's literature, see for example: John Stephens (ed.), *Ways of Being Male: Representing Masculinities in Children's Literature and Film*, New York, Routledge, « Children's Literature and Culture 19 », 2002 ; Annette Wannamaker (ed.), *Mediated Boyhoods : Boys, Teens, and Young Men in Popular Media and Culture*, New York, Peter Lang, " Mediated Youth ", vol. 8, 2011.

6 Matthew B. Prickett, « Who Is the Victim Again ? Female Abuse of Adolescent Boys in Contemporary Culture », p. 37-56, in Annette Wannamaker (ed.), *Mediated Boyhoods : Boys, Teens, and Young Men in Popular Media and Culture*, New York, Peter Lang, 2011 ; Lydia Kokkola, *Fictions of Adolescent Carnality : Sexy Sinners and Delinquent Deviants*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, « Children's Literature, Culture, and Cognition », Vol 1, 2013 ; Amy S. Pattee, « Disturbing the Peace : The Function of Young Adult Literature and the Case of Catherine Atkins' When Jeff Comes Home », *Children's Literature in Education* n° 35.3, 2004, p. 241–255, <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:CLID.0000041781.89615.7b>

7 Catherine Atkins, *When Jeff Comes Home*, New York, Puffin, 2001.

8 Amy Pattee, « Disturbing the Peace : The Function of Young Adult Literature and the Case of Catherine Atkins' When Jeff Comes Home », *op. cit.*, p 242.

9 *Id.*, 246.

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- 10 Robert Lipsyte, *Raiders Night*, New York, HarperTempest, 2006.
- 11 Joshua Cohen, *Leverage*, New York, Dutton, 2011.
- 12 Larry O'Loughlin, *Breaking the Silence*, Dublin, Wolfhound Press, 2001.
- 13 A. S. King, *Everybody Sees the Ants*, New York, Little, Brown, 2011.
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