

## *The Awkward Age*

Aidan Chambers

They are different. They've been identified since at least the Renaissance. Constantine mentions them in his viaticum. A character in Shakespeare says they do nothing but steal, fight, insult old people, and get women pregnant.

They are the adolescenti, the giovani. They live in a liminal period between childhood and adulthood that Henry James called 'the awkward age'. The United Nations decided it lasts from about 14 to about 24. The World Bank adds a year, 15 to 25.

They came into their own in the 1950s. If we want a literary marker for this development J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye*, published in America in July 1951, will do. It was in the USA that the culture – indeed the modern cult - of youth first became entrenched. Since then it has spread worldwide. If we want a European marker I'd suggest *Bonjour Tristesse*, by Françoise Sagan, written when she was 18 instead of sitting her baccalaureate exams, and published in 1954.

Others can be found in music (Bill Haley and His Comets) and movies (*Rebel Without a Cause*).

Young men and women which radio, movies and television make extraordinarily famous, became carriers of the memes of youth culture. The young imitate their manner of speech, behaviour, hair styles, clothes, and everything else that serves to identify them as something else, something special, most especially not conventional adults, who, Holden Caulfield famously asserted, are all 'phony'.

I've been professionally involved with people in 'the age between' as an observer, teacher, writer about and author of youth novels for sixty years. To adapt Lampedusa's remark in *Il Gattopardo*, during those sixty years everything about the giovani has changed and yet they have remained the same.

What has remained the same is their nature as human beings. They suffer the same emotional and intellectual highs, lows, glories and mistakes that are dramatized in *Romeo and Juliet*. The troubles of Goethe's Young Werther are still news. Jane Austen's conflicted heroines are alive and well, though they dress and talk in different fashions.

These days more than ever they are gripped by their self-conscious awareness. They seek for autonomy, de-identifying themselves from parents and others who wield authority over them. They suffer from worry and anxiety and sadness about their looks, their failures, their unfulfilled ambitions, their embarrassing mistakes, which sometimes deepen into depression. They are more competitive among themselves as well as against the world at large than they will be again. They are consumed by a desire for sex and more than that for the full attention of dedicated love. They experience joy at being alive and quite often are surprised by epiphanies of a spiritual nature. And they are inventive with language, with wit and humour. They are, as the English poet John Keats put it, in the vale of soul-making.

To their elders they can be the cause of joy and anguish, hope and despair, excruciating torment and overwhelming love.

The neuroscientists are demonstrating with increasing detail why this is so. In his book *Teenagers: A Natural History* the British scientist David Bainbridge explains how the changes not only in the body but most especially in the brain are so considerable that 'adolescence is the high point of the human brain – when the brain is at its largest, most flexible, most mutable' (p75).

We are learning the biological reasons for the familiar ontological experience of adolescence which mark it out as such a special time.

What have been the most extreme changes I've noticed since the 1950s?

Information, social and sexual mores, and communication.

I endured my teenage years during the late 1940s and early 1950s. I grew up before the cult got going. When I compare myself then with teenagers now what strikes me at once is how much more they know about everything. That change has been exponential since the arrival of the Internet.

They are sexually knowledgeable and uninhibitedly active, without guilt or condemnation, something we could only dream about.

Most impressive of all is the change in the status, behaviour, expectations and strength of girls and young women.

What has not changed is that though today's giovani are certainly better informed they are not necessarily any the wiser. Raw data does not ensure wisdom. Experience is not in itself educative.

From our beginnings as a species and as individuals we have made sense of ourselves and the world around us by gathering information which we make into narratives and by telling each other what those narratives mean. This is the way, without being academic specialists, we all do philosophy, religion, history, science, politics, psychology, conduct our personal relationships and enable our daily lives.

The giovani cannot become wise without a dramatized expression of their condition, by which I mean poetry, prose, autobiography, and what used to be called *belles lettres*.

Since the evolution of youth culture there has developed a youth literature. What marks it out as different from the rest of literature – what in my view makes it a distinct form of literature with its own poetics – is that it is controlled by youth consciousness. Everything in the work – novel, poem, play, and other forms of narrative – is seen and told through the eyes and language of youth.

I suggest that the first great novel that achieves this is Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. We know from his working drafts that Twain was meticulous in making Huck's story Huck's, not Mark Twain's view of it.

In contrast, Italo Calvino's beautiful evocation of his youth in *La Strada di San Giovanni* is narrated by a man looking back, not living in the 'now' of his character's experience. In my conception this means it is a work of adult perception, not of youth literature.

Since the late 1950s there has been an evolution of youth narratives.

I've done my best in my own novels to expand the form, to write without concession to assumptions about readership. I do not write *for* the giovani, nor *about* them, but *of* them. I am practicing an artform, not providing educational fodder, or lessons in how to live, or using story to discuss social, political or moral 'issues'. I am, as Milan Kundera puts it, attempting to compose novels which are 'meditations on existence seen through imaginary characters', who happen to be in 'the age between'.

I do not want my stories to tell people what to think but rather, if possible, to stimulate them to thoughts of their own.

Young Italians are among my most passionate readers. I've met them on many occasions individually and in groups. What is often noticeably different from my readers in other countries is their interest in narrative form, and in what I call the spiritual aspects of my stories. They like to talk about how the stories are constructed. And they like to dig into the metaphysical depths. They are fascinated by what it means, to be in the vale of soul-making.

I'm not sure why this is so. But I'll make a guess. I find that many of them have studied Latin and are interested in the aesthetics of an artform. Perhaps the Italian education system at its best still exposes students to the great tradition of literature. Dante, for example. Perhaps living in a country where some of the best ancient sculpture, painting and architecture are everywhere a daily sight has a subliminal if not a conscious influence. Environment is educative.

Added to which, though I am told attendance at church and belief in traditional Christianity are in decline, the fact is that Italian culture is still vibrantly influenced by the Roman Catholic religion and its traditions. Deeply embedded is a pressing concern with the spiritual questions about life. In Italy you cannot escape them or neglect them, as you can in Britain or the protestant north European countries or the USA.

One example. Arising from a talk about my books to about fifty giovani I was asked, 'Do you believe in God? If not, what do you believe? And why? And how did you arrive at this belief?' This led to a long discussion on the nature of spirituality as against religion, and the 'purpose of life' and how my books deal with these questions. It reminds me of Paul Ricoeur's remark in *Oneself As Another (Soi-même comme un autre)* that 'fiction has a role to play in the apprenticeship of dying.' In my experience, this kind of discussion is not unusual with a young Italian audience. It is entirely unusual in any other country I go to.

Without stories about ourselves in our current stage of life we quickly lose a sense of our identity and revert to beastly knowledge. If the giovinezza is as formative a time as we are told it is, the giovani need a literature that is theirs more than we need it at any other time of life.

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