

“A just concern for the public danger”: *Trompe l’oeil* journalism, social metaphor, and *Mayday Rampage*

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When Daniel Defoe’s narrator evokes “a just concern for the public danger” in *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722), his concerns are very like those in the 1993 Clayton Bess novel *Mayday Rampage*. He is concerned that health and civic reforms be made to reduce the threat of plague and similar public disasters, and he is also concerned that the public danger lies in spiritual failings. As Jeffrey Meyers notes in *Disease and the Novel, 1880-1960*, “disease has always been a great mystery: a visitation, a curse, a judgment” (1). The narrator knows the plague is a visitation, and implies that it is a judgment. When Defoe wrote his novel that, as the Folio introduction notes, is “indistinguishable from fact,” a novel that readers have ordinarily and falsely assumed was journalism, he was also exploiting both the desire to read about catastrophe, and the tendency of many readers, often unsophisticated readers, to value non-fiction over fiction as a source of truth.

Adolescence is notable for being a period of time when truth is assumed to be bad news, and the feeling that adults are keeping secrets about the truth is common. Making *Mayday Rampage* a book that appears to be journalism, then, has some advantages: if the technique works, it has a better chance of gaining readers or listeners and thereby promoting prudent sexual behavior. If it appears to be the work of two teenage reporters, it also bypasses an adult author to convey the “real” untainted truth and forbidden knowledge as teenagers can tell it. I felt like weeping when a student recently explained to me that “teenagers think that bad endings are real because if they were fiction the writer could just make a happy ending,” but I suspect that she was insightful about some readers. In this case, the style of the story that is being told also reinforces belief in its veracity.

Mayday Rampage (which also comes as an audio tape) is a transcription of a tape-recording by two high school journalists to bear witness to their experiences while trying to make the school newspaper a source of practical information about AIDS, which was discovered in 1981 about 12 years before the book was published. The tape includes sections that each teenager insists on the other leaving the room for, conversations that they don’t really intend to tape but do when they get preoccupied, indignant quotations from their censored columns, and lots of funny teasing. As in the case of *Plague Year*, the verisimilitude is in the details. The high school Molly and Jess attend has the Ram as a mascot, and, in the tradition of high schools all over the country, the newspaper is called the “Rampage.” Three issues of the paper are discussed on the tape – March, April, and May – enough time for the school and the students to be irrevocably changed, and not for the better.

In March, Molly and Jess write columns containing straight-forward medical information, although Molly’s use of colloquial terms for sexual practices (in an effort to reach all at-risk students) is reprimanded. In April, the couple researches AIDS by investigative reporting of prostitution and condom use on the street, and they become sexual partners on tape and pariahs in the principal’s office – their principal is an African American whose appointment was

opposed on racist grounds and whose vote of confidence cannot take too much strain. In May, Jess's column, which is influenced by his idealistic love for his favorite former teacher, a gay male whose partner has AIDS, eventually – after frightening violence in the principal's office – gets his teacher fired, the principal fired, an evil manipulative teacher made principal, Jess expelled and Molly suspended. Molly also learns that a strange encounter with Jess's best friend the summer before has probably given her AIDS, which she may have passed to Jess because of their first, unprotected sexual experience – the one that they accidentally taped. The epilogue to the novel confirms Molly's disease, and gives a month to month *Newsweek*-style report of her physical deterioration and Jess's loyalty: he quits school, gets a job, and marries her so that she can receive insurance benefits, another glaring symptom of a dysfunctional society.

AIDS statistics are certainly not reassuring today, but in 2002 teenagers such as Molly and Jess—college-prep, heterosexual, non-drug-using teens—are not the hardest-hit population. We live in a somewhat different climate than that of 1983, and it is, perhaps, because books like this one helped scare American teenagers away from unprotected sexual behavior.

Just how teenagers approach this book, however, is a question that has teased me as I sought to untwist its various strands because it is a novel built on tension between various views of sexuality and truth, and I feel that it offers a variety of readings, many of them worth discussion. In keeping with Defoe's plague journal, the illness metaphor in the novel has very broad application, an aspect of the prize-winning *Story for a Black Night*, as well. In *Mayday*, illness reflects in part the corrupt thinking of many of the adults in the community. Vocal censors of student newspapers, who would prefer the children to get AIDS than learn how to avoid it, are an easy target. A society that professes to protect children but that has no indignation over the plight of the teenage prostitute whom Jess interviews for the April *Rampage* deserves divine judgment, one way or another. The willingness of their teacher to manipulate the adolescent reporters' zeal to protect fellow students completes the picture of human wickedness, fear, and lack of compassion that preys on youth and youthful ideals. But human attitudes are not more disturbing in some ways than those situations within the novel that call into question more fundamental sexual issues. One central theme of the novel seems to me to be how the unfortunate characteristics inherent in the sexual experience, combined with the constraints added by adults, ruin the adolescent dream of first love. The death of this ideal and the death of Jess's illusions are among the most strongly felt situations in the book, a consideration that takes the novel beyond the level of an "awful warning" tale.

Nature, as the novel demonstrates, is a disastrous force for teenagers. The sexual promptings that populate the planet, reinforced by sentimental societal expectations, act most strongly on the young. Unfortunately, rationality is too much tried under these conditions within the novel. Only the vulnerability that comes with inexperience could have turned Molly, a remarkably articulate straight-A student, into a shy idiot when confronted by a boy she didn't know at all well who wanted to have sex with her. We later find that he was driven by a furious desire to find his own gender preferences, but Molly, so alert and in-your-face on all other occasions, thought that he might "think there was something wrong with her" and went along with his plans. It may be that the novel wants us to see that this was a fatal idea so that, armed with this information, we may be stronger in our turn. Frankly, though, I never expect to rise to

Molly's level of self-possession, and the incident fills me with despair for the young and shy—teenagers in the grip of sexual initiation are pitiful victims here.

So, too, with Molly's first experience with Jess, an experience that bears out the more subtle victimization of the sexual act. It is bad, indeed, that in the midst of discussing AIDS prevention they have unprotected sex; it is worse, on some levels, that Molly's urgency leaves Jess feeling raped. The romantic ideals brought to the situation are further betrayed by Molly's disappointment over Jess's later absorption in quick orgasms as opposed to the non-sexual intimacy they used to share. Further, even before the damage done by Molly's lack of judgment is made manifest, the knowledge that Jess was not the first – though he is her first love – has already poisoned some of their happiness. The tape recording of their encounter, to my mind, falls under Roger Shattuck's heading of "knowledge forbidden because it is fragile" – I imagine it would "destabilize or desecrate the hoped-for response" (331), whether it is kept, turned over to lawyers, or given to students as a warning. When the lack of teenage privacy caused by adults "coming back suddenly into a room" or guilt caused by mixed parental messages that sexuality may be expected but it isn't accepted are added, dreams of first love and perfect intimacy erase very quickly. That teen sexuality, while viewed idealistically by teens, is surrounded by adult attempts to bring shame to the situation is exemplified by the reviewer's note on the cover of my copy that commends the author for being explicit while not pornographic.

In other words, the young, raped by the adult community, are further raped by the nature of the sexual experience itself. I am made uneasy, however, by the knowledge that narratives of love and death are unusually popular with young people within other contexts, and that what I might see in one fashion might be conveying quite a different story to others. For example, Molly's story is not unlike those familiar in teen horror movies – the girl who is carefree about virginity gets axed or eaten while the virgin lives at the end. Lovable and funny as Molly appears to me, and perhaps admirable in her straight-forward honesty about wanting to have a romantic relationship with a worthy young man – to the young teenager imbued with guilt over owing to sexual desires, Molly might be a fallen woman who deserves her death. Worse, since she seduces Jess and thereby exposes him to HIV, she is also guilty Eve. Leslie Fiedler's *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1960), which examines the strong effect of Richardson's *Clarissa* (1747-48) on American fiction, can easily be brought to support the idea that Molly is a sentimentalized *Clarissa* in the bourgeois love religion tradition, the impure woman who has, in this condition, no redemptive power (in this case, presumably, it would be society that needs the redemption) but whose own redemption comes with her death. And, of course, tears are a pleasurable adjunct to narratives for some readers. The justly, mythically punished Molly is arguably usefully didactic and likely to reinforce the message that AIDS is a danger, but her role has obvious drawbacks. I think, though, that stopping here is a mistake.

As a reader who has never seen the romance in narratives in which a love relation is ended by the death of one party, but who is aware that such works —*Moulin Rouge* and *Titanic* are recent examples—often have enormous appeal to teenagers (and, indeed, large numbers of others), I also have tried to think about why the Jess and Molly relationship might be functioning this way. A Lady of Delta Gamma whom I interviewed on this topic thought that the answer was perfectly obvious: "Nobody wants to survive love," she said, "maybe you ought to think about it like that." Change, not death, is the enemy of teenaged love in this kind of thinking. The end of

love through death is no end at all – it perpetuates the love for all time. The dying partner never rejected, never grew older or wiser, never changed in his or her affections. Jess’s steadfast decency and loyalty – virtues fully recognized in the narrative – mean that Molly might well be envied by those who have been forgotten or forsaken, uncherished, not loved to the end, a situation that could not be more common. In turn, Jess may lose every track and field event, he may be betrayed by those adults he trusted, but he possesses the love of someone who will not live to change her mind. Nature has reproduction in mind, but the young may have even more urgent needs.

Sigmund Freud’s “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” also seems to speak to a similar point. On the one hand, Freud speaks of the sexual instincts as “conservative” in the sense that they “preserve life itself for a comparatively long period. They are the true life instincts.” Clearly, he did not have the physical depredations of sexually-transmitted disease in mind. Sexual instincts complicated by AIDS are a betrayal of life and love – a point well made in Francesca Lia Block’s *Dangerous Angel* books. But his other recognition that there is a death wish, brought about by the pleasure principle – that human life includes this opposition of instincts – is instructive here. He says

The dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general, is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli – a tendency which finds expression in the pleasure principle; and our recognition of that fact is one of our strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death “instincts.” (55)

And again,

The pleasure principle seems actually to serve the death instincts. It is true that it keeps watch upon stimuli from without, which are regarded as dangers by both kinds of instincts; but it is more especially on guard against increases of stimulation from within, which would make the task of living more difficult. (63)

As portrayed in *Mayday Rampage*, adolescents have many reasons to recoil from life, and the mentoring available to the young people, though good in Jess’s case, is inadequate to protect them either physically or mentally. Disillusionment, exposure to hatred, callousness, corruption, manipulations, sexual misunderstandings, disease await at every hand, and the young people’s resolve not to let go of their love, while admirable in the way that tragic heroes are admirable, is not a situation that length of time would necessarily improve. There is no reason for idealistic youth to want to keep living within the *Mayday Rampage* community. As Jess repeatedly remarks, “What a world.”

But to the strong and hopeful, the tape itself, ultimately, is the possible source of redemption. If the funny and lively story is listened to, is, like the school newspaper, absorbed in spite of censorship attempts, it can conceivably save lives, strengthen compassion, and encourage advocacy: the students’ goal before and after AIDS came so close to them. Solzhenitsyn, who himself used cancer as a metaphor for the Stalinist regime, said that “the small place in the breast which is faith’s cramped quarters remains untenanted for years and

decays” (Meyers 119). Our desire to see resilience in youth, and the brevity of adolescence itself, allow us to end Bess’s novel in better shape.

Works Cited

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