

Sue Townsend

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"I have just realized I have never seen a dead body or a real female nipple. This is what comes of living in a cul-de-sac." (Sunday, 9 May – The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole)

“Happy People don’t keep a diary” (Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction)

At the age of 2 in 1935 Joe Orton, outrageous playwright, acidulous social critic, and flamboyant working class hero, moved with his parents to the Saffron Lane Estate in Leicester, a “drab, soulless and monotonous” area of cheap suburban housing for workers. In 1967 Orton was murdered by his lover, who left a suicide note: ““If you read his diary all will be explained” (Leicester, n.d.).

Thirteen years after Orton’s birth, the creator of the modern world’s most popular diary was born right down the street, in a Leicester area of pre-fabricated housing known as “the rabbit hutches” (Kittle, 2005-2006). The oldest of three daughters, Susan Lilian Johnstone, later Sue Townsend (Kittle, 2005-2006) was born on 2 April 1946, a birthday she shares with her enduring fictional creation, the “thing” measuring, spotty-chinned social critic, and author of a vowel-less novel, diarist Adrian Mole. Critics label the Adrian Mole series “one of the literary phenomena of the 1980’s” (Thomson Gale, 2005-2006); the first book is a perennial best seller in Britain with over 8 million copies sold. Richard Ingrams, creator of the eminent British humor magazine, *Private Eye*, calls Adrian "a true hero of our time" (Patterson, 2008). Townsend herself shares that “an inspiration for the girl-obsessed Mole was boy-obsessed Joe Orton, who wrote a diary growing up in the Midlands town” (Gerard, 2003). Said Townsend, “The thing about Adrian Mole is that he is Suburban Man. He was a product of the suburbs” (Leicester and Leicestershire, 2005). Though in obvious ways the doomed gay playwright and the beloved “national treasure” (Gerard) are worlds apart, they are artistic soul mates, sharing a class-fueled

anger which is rooted in the suburbs and expressed through humor. Townsend's parents were socialists--father John a "postman" (White, 2006), and mother Grace Johnstone, a bus conductor (Kittle, 2005-2006), who took her to hear noted 'labour' politician Harold Wilson speak when she was 13 (White, 2006), Townsend has commented that her parents were "clever enough to have been anything under different circumstances" (Kittle, 2005-2006). Townsend has been "left-wing since childhood" (White, 2006).

A life-long resident of Leicester, Sue Townsend attended Glenhills Primary School (Collier, 2005). In a 2004 interview with *The Independent*, she describes her intimidating early reading education: "You were actually punished. You had your legs slapped" (Hanks). When she was eight Townsend was kept home from school by illness for several weeks, and during that time her mother bought at a rummage sale a collection of Richmal Crompton's Just William stories, recognized by many as a primary influence on the Adrian Mole series. Townsend learned to read through the Just William stories during that absence, and recalls, "That was the single most important thing that ever happened in my life" (Hanks, 2004). Another early influence which would prove significant was that of a primary school teacher, whom she recalled for years as "Mr. Mole". He loved literature and read aloud to his students each day, especially from English comic writing, during which reading Townsend would later recall "...he would slowly slide down the side of his big table and sometimes end up on the floor in laughter" (Newnham, 2004). Without doubt, according to Townsend, he inspired her with a love of comic writing, but it was years before she discovered that he had actually been called "Mr. Moles" (Newnham, 2004).

Townsend's parents encouraged her intellectual development, modeling through their own voracious reading, as the family consumed four library books apiece every two weeks.

(White, 2006). Townsend has often said that her family's regular use of public libraries led to her love of literature and her eventual success (Kittle, 2005-2006). "I'm a child of the municipal", she once declared. "Everything good had this word carved above its grand entrance. In Leicester, where I was born and still live, there were municipal libraries, majestic solid buildings with beautiful entrances, windows and doors, oak furniture and bookshelves" (Townsend, 2005, April).

Once she began to read, Townsend quickly progressed to sophisticated texts, and imagined a future career as a journalist. In a 2004 interview with Lesley White she said, "I wrote letters to the local paper under the name of Susie-Gone-Wong. Ridiculous!" Nevertheless, at the end of primary school Townsend failed her examination for the selective academic grammar school, later speculating that her family wouldn't have been able to afford the uniform anyway (White, 2006). Townsend attended South Wigdon, a secondary modern school for girls, the equivalent of an American comprehensive high school. Here she was influenced by Mary Morris, a teacher of impeccable standards who demanded manicured nails, perfect punctuation, and who instructed her lower-middle class students in Milton, Shakespeare, and Blake. Under Miss Morris Townsend joined the school drama group, touring Holland as Jesus in the Passion Play, which was her first time abroad, but which forced her to "lug this big cross around" (Newnham, 2004), no doubt contributing to her comical world view.

Miss Morris, reported Townsend, "wanted me to go on to higher education. But I left school at fourteen and I think she was really disappointed" (Newnham, 2004). Often characterizing the British education system as an instrument of class control (Thomson Gale, 2005-2006), Townsend says now that in her working class family, hungry for extra income, there was never a serious consideration of leaving her in school long-term, but she also discusses a

rationale for dropping out which would not be popular at the library or school: reading made her do it. "I could not wait to grow up", she remembers. "Because I was reading - it just sounds so pretentious, but I was reading the classics. You know, there's a big world out there. If you read Madame Bovary and Dostoevsky, you're not going to be wanting to stay on at school" (Hanks, 2004).

After leaving school Townsend worked in a series of unskilled jobs—a dress shop, a shoe factory (According to White's 2006 interview, she retains an ongoing love for expensive shoes), a garage, and in encyclopedia sales, before marrying, at age 18, Keith Townsend, a sheet metal worker. (Kittle, 2005-2006) She tells the story of herself at 19, first baby on her hip, meeting the exacting Miss Morris on the street, and recalls how her former teacher did not acknowledge the baby, and remembers her own shame (Newnham, 2004). By the time she was 22 Townsend had three children under 5. At the same time, she had begun to write in secret, late at night as her family slept, hiding her efforts from her husband in an old refrigerator box under the stairs. "It was a secret", she remembers, "because I knew I wasn't good enough. When you're reading Updike, how can you be? I had no voice of my own, I didn't know which genre, but against my will it was always funny" (White, 2006). During this period Townsend continued to work in low-paid jobs, often choosing them on the basis of whether there would be time to read. She once lost a job in a dress shop when she was caught reading *The Ballad of Reading Gaol* in one of the changing rooms (Hanks, 2004).

In 1971 Townsend's husband left her when, "the way she tells it — her hunter-gatherer husband discovered liberation, velvet jackets and long hair" (White, 2006). In her early 20's, with three children to support, Townsend was desperate for income and was soon forced onto public assistance and into public housing, where she was often reduced to searching for coins in

the couch cushions to pay for food (Kittle, 2005-2006). For income she ran an 'adventure playground' on the same rough Leicester housing 'estate' (White, 2006) where Joe Orton grew up; on the first day of a canoeing class for this job she met Colin Broadway, her current husband and father of her fourth child, Lizzie (Hanks, 2004).

At this point, Townsend now says, she had been writing in secret for almost twenty years. In the 1970's, through her work with the adventure playground and a local youth group, Townsend wrote scripts for 'pantomimes', the traditional raucous British Christmas shows, which were performed by children for their parents. She later said writing and directing children's plays was "the best introduction to professional theatre I could have had" (Kittle, 2005-2006). She finally confessed her clandestine authorship to her new husband, and with his encouragement and support she joined the Leicester area Phoenix Writers Group in 2008. Her first play, *Womberang*, which features a revolt of the tired women in a doctor's waiting room led by the tenacious 'Rita Onions', won a 2000 pound Thames Television bursary in 1979, with the revered John Mortimer chairing the panel and supporting her work. After the London performances of this play, Townsend was hired as a writer in residence at the Phoenix Centre, where she wrote plays for a variety of performance groups, including mosques, temples, and handicapped children. She has supported herself as a writer ever since (White, 2006).

One Saturday afternoon during her years 'on the dole', Townsend records that her son, in a moment which would later be echoed in the first of Adrian Mole's *Diaries*, asked his impecunious and exhausted single mother why she didn't take her children to safari parks, like the other parents did. In that supremely solipsistic moment, the great Adrian Mole was born (White, 2006). In 1980 Townsend staged some of the early Mole material at a Phoenix Centre workshop, after which the actor who played Adrian, who was then called Nigel (after the

aforementioned actor, Nigel Bennet) asked permission to use the material in a BBC Radio tryout. The first excerpts featuring the character appeared in print in a Leicester arts magazine in 1980 as *The Secret Diary of Nigel Mole Aged 14 ¾* (*TV Times*, 1985). In March 1981, after hearing Bennet's audition, BBC Radio 4 commissioned a thirty-minute radio script based on the diary of Nigel Mole. Later that year, a BBC Radio producer sent a copy of Townsend's completed radio script to Geoffrey Strachan, Managing Director of Methuen publishers, suggesting that the script had good potential for success as a book. In January of 1982, young actor Nicholas Barnes performed *The Diary of Nigel Mole* for BBC Radio 4. It proved very popular and a series was commissioned. Geoffrey Strahan, considering publication of *The Diary* in book form, was concerned that the name of Nigel was too similar to that of Nigel Molesworth (and he certainly had a point), the main character of the then very popular humorous *Down With Skool* series. Nigel, although Townsend complained that she was suffering "severe withdrawal symptoms", became first Malcolm, and then Adrian Mole (*TV Times*, 1985), and a hero was born.

The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 ¾ went straight to the top of the UK Best Seller list, and it has remained among the top selling books in Britain ever since. In 1984 it was joined on the list by its sequel, *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole*. Besides the radio series and the books, Townsend also penned a successful West End play, a television series, and even a computer game (Kittle, 2005-2006). According to the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, when Townsend created the theatrical version of her novel, the Leicester production sold out completely almost immediately, and "The Times reported terrible scenes outside the theatre with people trying to fight their way in" (Kittle, 2005-2006). Sue Townsend was suddenly very rich. She was able to purchase and remodel a large old Victorian vicarage which she had always admired in her neighborhood, and where, as a struggling young welfare mother, she formerly

came to pay the rent to her landlord (White, 2006). Looking back at the delight she took in her happy home life and gloriously successful career, Townsend remembered a moment in 1984 as one of her happiest, “flying over the Australian outback in a jet, looking down at the incredible orange scenery, the uninhabited hills and gullies, listening to Tchaikovsky on my headphones and drinking champagne with a cigarette in my hand. It was 1984, I'd been to the Adelaide Book Festival and was going back to my husband and my children” (Greenstreet).

Unfortunately, at the height of her success, Townsend was diagnosed with insulin-dependent diabetes, and partly as a result, she suffered a serious heart attack right before her fortieth birthday. “A lifestyle that included both cigarettes and alcohol, and an overload of work-related stress resulting from the success of the Mole books” is also mentioned as a factor in her ill-health (Kittle, 2005-2006). Townsend herself wrote, in a heartfelt condemnation of “Queen Thatcher’s” regime and the devastation wrought on the British working class by Conservative policies, that her diabetes was “not self-inflicted: I was not a chocolate-eating lard-arse who brought it on herself. I was slim and active and I cooked good food for my family and me” (Townsend, 2005 April). In 2001 Townsend registered as legally blind due to diabetic retinopathy. When she was interviewed by *The Independent* in 2004, she had not been able to read properly for two years, and was also in a wheelchair due to a bone condition related to diabetes. She agreed with the *Independent* interviewer that losing the ability to read was “Unbearable. But the unbearable must be borne.” (Hanks, 2004). Townsend looks at her amazing success in life and considers her blindness in terms of her school training in literature, “I come back to my early training with Miss Morris and the gods: what they give they also take away” (Hanks, 2004). Since the time of that interview Townsend has been dictating all her new work to her husband, who reads her production back to her, often as much as twelve or

fifteen times. This process of hearing her content read aloud to her, Townsend feels, has resulted in a “new strain of realism” and caused her to curb some of her former comic excesses (Hanks, 2004). In spite of her continued ill-health, Penguin (2009) has a new Adrian Mole book: *The Prost#ate Years*, listed for release in November this year, and IMDb continues to run entries about a full-length film in production (IMDb, 2009). In 2003 Townsend was awarded the Frink Woman of the Year Award, which is presented to “those who make a difference to the lives of others and for achievements in the face of adversity” (BBC, 2003). She received an honorary degree from Loughborough University in 2007, and the Honorary “Freedom of Leicester” Award in 2009, along with a famous footballer and also local boy Engelbert Humperdinck (Leicester, 2009).

Sue Townsend is the author of eleven novels—six Adrian Mole diaries and five novels which are unconnected to Mole. She has also authored seven plays, one an early children’s pantomime from her Phoenix Centre Days. Complete performance and licensing information for the plays which are still in print is available on Dollee—The Playwright’s Database (n.d.). Townsend has written radio serials and screenplays for television based on various Mole volumes, plus two radio plays and two screenplays which are not related to the Mole diaries. In 2001 Townsend produced *Public Confessions of a Middle-Aged Woman Aged 55 ¾*, a collection of columns originally published in *Sainsbury’s*, a popular British food and home magazine (Kittle, 2005-2006). A listing of her complete works from her current publisher, Penguin, is attached as an appendix.

The Dictionary of Literary Biography (2005-2006) observes that the recurring contrast in her work between determined females survivors and weak, useless men is almost certainly a reflection of Townsend’s own early experiences, and quotes the *Times Literary Supplement*:

"That the mass of women lead lives of quiet desperation is one of Sue Townsend's recurrent themes, and their liberation from boring or violent men one of her favourite fantasies" (Kittle, 2005-2006)) Similar in theme to her earlier plays, her more darkly political novels, which are clearly intended for adult audiences, focus on such material. Her 1998 novel, *Rebuilding Coventry*, features a Midlands woman who escapes the oppressive drudgery of her lower-middle class family life after she bludgeons an abusive neighbor to death with an Action Man figure. Although enjoying nowhere near the popular success of the Mole books, *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* (2005-2006) quotes one of the book's many positive reviews which calls the narrative "a feminist fairy tale" (Kittle).

Her 1998 novel, *Ghost Children*, in which "the horrors of abortion are not made to seem more dreadful than the alternative of letting babies come into the world to be tortured and neglected by inadequate parents" (Kittle, 2005-2006) received mixed reviews in England and great praise in the US. The story describes the regret and rupture which follow between a husband and wife after the man, on an early morning walk, finds a bag of fetuses from an abortion clinic and revives memories of his wife's abortions. The subject of the novel derives from the personal experiences of Townsend, who underwent two abortions before her years of success. Reviews of the book praised her deep empathy for her characters. "Townsend", Garan Holcombe wrote, "is a writer for whom social commentary is as natural as breathing... There is an underlying seriousness to her work, a political consciousness, the desire to attack injustice and intolerance" (2004). Her other books, however, have never approached the popularity of the Adrian Mole series. After *Ghost Children* was published Townsend said, "The book didn't sell. They didn't reprint. People were waiting for the next Mole"(Kittle, 2005-2006).

A reviewer once enthused, “Dear Mole. He is, for me, one of the key literary characters of our time” (Thomson Gale, 2005-2006), but the nature of Adrian, whom a 2006 New York Times Book Review article referred to as a success “of near-Potteresque proportions” (Dixler), is complex. Adrian Mole is a British teen living, as the diaries begin, in the Leicestershire town of Ashby de la Zouch. In fact, Adrian Mole is listed among “Notable People” in the real town’s Wikipedia entry. His diary seems to be of the pre-dated variety, since he frequently notes that it is “Quadragesima Sunday” (1997, p. 128), or “Bank Holiday (Scotland)” (p. 151). We first meet Adrian in *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 3/4* (1982), and hear from him again soon after in *The Growing Pains of Adrian Mole* in 1984, both of which were later published together in the US as *The Adrian Mole Diaries* (1997). In his secret diary Adrian records the obsessions and difficulties of his teenage life. He is a hypochondriac, and worries incessantly over his complexion as not only a social crisis but also a medical emergency, only to hear from his harried family doctor that acne “was so common that it is regarded as a normal state of adolescence. He thought it was highly unlikely that I have got lassa fever because I have not been to Africa this year” (Townsend, 1997, p.23). The younger Adrian records in his diary his ongoing love for his posh classmate Pandora and her “treacle hair”, his battles with the school bully, Barry Kent, to whom he has to pay protection money, and his efforts on behalf of his “Good Samaritan” school service project, the aged, unwholesome, but still vital Bert Baxter. Adrian is in a constant, admittedly often justified frenzy of self-righteous disapproval concerning the behavior of the underemployed, feckless, lower middle class adults who surround him as they struggle to survive in the 1980’s Britain of Margaret Thatcher.

Unsympathetic as Adrian is to these adults, who never rise to his expectations, he nevertheless often considers the political climate of his times. Norma Klein’s 1986 *New York*

Times review found the *Mole Diaries* to be “as vivid a satire on Margaret Thatcher's England as can be found in recent fiction”. Adrian’s personal concern about his family’s precarious position on the lower rungs of the middle class ladder reflects the harsh reality of life in Britain for many during those times, when incursions into union protections allowed drastic reductions in available jobs, while governmental reliance on ‘entrepreneurship’ as a solution to the crisis left many both impoverished and ashamed. Adrian’s frequently unemployed father, who has been ‘made redundant’ from the heating business, does not enjoy his new work as a “Canal Bank Renovation Supervisor...in charge of a bunch of school leavers” (Townsend, 1997, p. 129). Adrian, as usual, is both aware of political impact and oblivious to many of its ramifications. He and some classmates form a club for the ultimate destruction of capitalist society, and Adrian observes, “Claire Neilson’s father is a capitalist; he owns a greengrocer’s shop. Claire is trying to get her father to give cheap food to the unwaged but he refuses. He waxes fat on their starvation!” (Townsend, 1997, p.127). Sue Townsend has often mentioned that she has a purpose beyond comic entertainment. In a 1994 interview she said, "If I tell people something serious, they don't listen. If they laugh, they listen" (Kittle, 1995-1996). Ultimately, as an American review quoted from *The Listener*, "When the social history of the 1980s comes to be written, the 'Mole' books - astonishing as it may seem now - will probably be considered as key texts" (Klein, 1986).

Adrian shares universal teenage concerns and traits, and also reflects the reality of Britain in the 80’s and 90’s, but authenticity and political observation alone do not make an international phenomenon out of a fictional 13 year old. It is Adrian’s enormous and resilient ego, along with his phenomenal capacity for self-centered delusion, which creates the comedy of the novels. Still driven by vast literary ambition, at 35 Adrian is reminisces about “the glory days

of the Leicestershire and Rutland Creative Writing Group, when the members would sit enraptured for hours, listening to my novel, *Lo, the Flat Hills of My Homeland*” (Townsend, 2005, p.262). Strangely enough, membership has now dwindled to two, and one of them is Adrian. In one of the best ongoing devices of the *Diaries*, Adrian is forever asking inaccessible people for unlikely favors, and is eternally shocked when his requests are not granted. In *The Adrian Mole Diaries* he records that he has “been reminded that Malcolm Muggeridge never did reply to my letter about what to do if you are an intellectual. That is a first-class stamp wasted! I should have written to the British Museum, that’s where all the intellectuals hang out” (Townsend, 1997, p.199). As he ages, Adrian’s sense of entitlement remains intact. In *Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction* (2005), Adrian wants to interview David Beckham for his book on how celebrity ruins people’s lives. Adrian writes, “I would like to arrange an interview on a mutually convenient date. You would have to come here to Leicester because I work full-time” (p.9). He concludes his letter with a full correction of the grammar used by the soccer star during a recent TV appearance. During the same book Adrian strives to secure speakers for his writer’s group, and to his surprise is rejected by both Ruth Rendell and Cherie Blair. In a lovely instance of the conflation of life and art, research into the influence on YA of the Mole *Diaries* uncovered this online exchange between Meg Cabot and a young fan:

“!!!Christina: Another question, sorry if I'm bothering you. Haha. But do you think one of these days you can come to the Teen Center at the Donnell Library and talk to us face to face?

megcabot: Well, I live in Florida now, so that would be a long commute. But I hope ...” (Cabot, 2005)

Like his distant literary relative Harry Potter, in the years since the first *Diary* Adrian has continued to age. The third book, *Adrian Mole: The Wilderness Years* (1993) contains diary

entries through Mole's 25th birthday in 1992. Mole is living in Oxford with his true love, Pandora, although her actual boyfriend is unfortunately living in the flat as well. Adrian has a job tracking newt populations for the Dept. of the Environment (Kittle, 2005-2006), an occupation which can not fail to remind fans of British comedy of P.G. Wodehouse's immortal Gussie Fink-Nottle, aka "Spink-Bottle", and his indefatigable newt collecting. *The Dictionary of Literary Biography* (2005-2006) however, sums up the responses of many critics to this era, saying "The willful naiveté of the young adolescent sits less comfortably on the shoulders of a twenty-something and pushes the limits of the reader's suspension of disbelief".

In *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years* (1999), Tony Blair is just coming to power, and Adrian has finally become slightly famous as a trendy chef in London, where he cooks traditional British cuisine such as "scrag-end of lamb with marrowfat peas and a Kit Kat bar" (Kittle, 2005-2006). In the last Mole novel, 2004's *Adrian Mole and the Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Margaret Thatcher and her minions are vanquished, but under the auspices of Tony Blair Adrian stands to lose the deposit on his Cyprus resort vacation, which he cancels when the Prime Minister justifies Britain's participation in the 'coalition of the willing' by claiming that Iraq's elusive 'weapons of mass destruction' are able to reach Cyprus. In this last book Adrian turns 35, still self-pitying: "It is all downhill from now. A pathetic slide towards gum disease, wheelchair ramps, and death" (Townsend, 2005, p.234). Adrian has purchased a remodeled 'loft' in a former ammunition plant in the insalubrious Rats Wharf area, where he is plagued by aggressive marauding swans. Many critics have noted that the prospect of a 35 year-old man who is still as relentlessly self-absorbed as Adrian is not an inviting one, but in this novel, though he remains recognizable, Adrian has grown a heart. His political commentary and his private life finally fuse as an 18 year-old son he somehow acquired in an earlier novel is deployed to Iraq.

When the son's friend is killed there, Adrian's son phones him and says, "You told me I was fighting for democracy, but Robbie's dead, Dad...you shouldn't have let me go to Iraq, you should have stopped me". Adrian records, "I...didn't try to defend myself as he was correct in everything he said" (Townsend, 2005, p.320). Sue Townsend said in a recent interview that she would like to be remembered "as somebody who wrote serious comedy" (Greenstreet, 2007). In the later installments of Adrian's life, she achieves that goal.

In addition to the Mole books, Townsend has written three non-Adrian novels of political satire: *The Queen and I* (1992), *Number 10* (2002), and the sequel to *The Queen and I*, *Queen Camilla* (2006), which in their acerbic yet warm vision of the royal family banished to a squalid Leicester neighborhood are well-suited as crossover material. Readers who may remember a childhood delight in Leonard Wibberley's *The Mouse that Roared* series will recognize the YA appeal of the books' mixture of political satire and whimsical fantasy. In *The Queen and I*, Queen Elizabeth II wakes up on April 1992 to discover that the election battle between the 'Labour' and Conservative governments has been won by the People's Republican Party. The PRC evicts the entire Royal Family from their palaces and sends them all to live in a run-down Midlands public housing 'council estate'. The ambivalence of traditional British socialism is much in evidence here: Prince Philip pines away and has to be institutionalized; the clueless Prince Charles is imprisoned for murdering a swan, the little princes turn into neighborhood street toughs, but the Queen herself remains kind, unflappable, and capably determined, in a way reminiscent of war-time photos of her coping in a military garage. Though Townsend has said she loathes the institution of the monarchy (White, 2006), her fondness for the long-time queen is obvious. For anyone who has ever suffered through an elementary writing class, the book is marred by its "and then I woke up" ending.

Number Ten (October 2002), is a political comedy in the same vein, in which the Prime Minister of England slips out of his house in disguise to learn about the true needs and desires of the British people. *Queen Camilla* (2006) is a sequel to the first Royal Family comedy. In this book Charles is married to Camilla. He's spending a great deal of time concentrating on his root vegetables. Camilla has a friend in the neighborhood named Bev, and seems to be settling in well, when someone claiming to be Charles and Camilla's lovechild appears to claim the crown (Penguin, 2009).

In works such as Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, the diary has been part of the epistolary tradition in the western novel since its earliest development. One influential work, George and Weedon Grossmith's comical *The Diary of a Nobody* (1892) records the life and wisdom of the social-climbing Pooter family so successfully that the book has never been out of print in England, and the adjective "Pooterish" is now found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The Pooters, in their combination of anxiety and egotism, are clearly the grandparents of Adrian Mole (Motor, 2005). In a 2003 feature in *The Independent* Townsend discussed Pooter and other diaries. She wrote that she was fascinated by diaries as a teenager, including those of Joe Orton and British intellectual Colin Wilson, observing, "Both started to keep a diary at the age of 11 or 12, both boys in their council-house bedrooms, both saying that they were undiscovered geniuses. Add Mr. Pooter to the mix, and it's not very hard to see where Adrian Mole came from". Michelle Griffin (2004) in an Australian article is one of many who also observe the influence on Townsend of Geoffrey Willan's 1950's Molesworthy series, most often known, if at all, to Americans today for its brilliant, frenetic Ronald Searle illustrations.

The *Mole Diaries* are the preeminent entry into the modern canon of comic creations using this ancient epistolary form. In fact, look up "diary writing" in the encyclopedia--Adrian's

name will literally be found there (Diary Writing, 2009). Michelle Griffin (2004) argues that the success of the Adrian Mole franchise has persuaded publishers to stick with the format, noting, “an Amazon search pulls up novels such as *The Botox Diaries*, *Gotham Diaries*, *Crystal Diary*, *The Moth Diaries* and *Diary: A Novel*, as well as various fictionalised diaries of nannies, call girls, doctors, housewives, queens, and single women looking for love”. The debt of well-known single woman Bridget Jones to Adrian Mole is often mentioned in criticism. A 2004 article on the influence of Townsend reported that Helen Fielding was “quite open about her debt to the Sue Townsend masterplan when she started writing the newspaper columns that turned into *Bridget Jones's Diary*” (Griffin). In a 2002 critical study of *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Yes, really.) Whelehan analyzes the connections between the two works, observing of Townsend’s, “As with Bridget, the reader negotiates a path between the self constructed by Adrian Mole in his own image and the ways in which others might perceive him through descriptions of conversations and incidents in his daily life”. Completing the cycle, Griffin quotes from *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years*, in which Adrian sees Bridget Jones in a café and with typical myopia, writes in his diary, “The woman is obsessed with herself” (2004).

Within the YA genre, the influence of Mole is indisputable, and in fact, the strongest claim the Mole series may make for a YA classification is its enormous influence on the rest of the genre. We might all be happier not to consider in unison Adrian Mole, alone in his room with his copy of “Big and Bouncy”, and Mia, the jejune princess of Meg Cabot’s *Diaries*, but the connection must be acknowledged. Cabot reveals herself to be a Townsend reader and recognizes the influence of the Mole diaries on the form and content of the *Princess* series, telling a young fan, “I definitely kept Mr. Mole in mind when I started writing the books” (Cabot, 2005). Liz Rettig, author of the contemporary ‘Kelly Ann’ series of diaries which begins

with *My Desperate Love Diary* (2007), also acknowledges the influence of Mole. In a 2009 interview she commented, “A long time ago I read Sue Townsend’s classic, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole 13 ¾* and laughed myself silly. I remember thinking at the time that the diary of a teenage girl might be hilarious too and I contemplated writing something like that”. Louise Rennison’s popular Georgia Nicholson series, beginning with *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging* (2001), is marketed on a British shopping site as “A female Adrian Mole - or a teenage Bridget Jones” (dooyoo, n.d.), although Michelle Griffin rates Rennison’s “execrable” work as one of many “rip-offs” of Mole. (2004). It’s perhaps ironic that most of the influence of this fictional 13¾ year old boy should be on ‘Chick Lit’, but his presence is also felt in the world of male fiction. A 2003 article by Jonathan Heawood finds that books such as those by Nick Hornby, which the author refers to as “the male confessional genre”, also have their origins in the Adrian Mole books.

For reasons that remain mysterious since the punctuation is not reflected in the content, the Amazon excerpt of *School Library Journal* ‘s review of *Adrian Mole: The Lost Years* begins with “YA?”, which, in a paper focusing on that genre, would certainly seem to be a central question. Beyond their unquestionable influence, are the Adrian Mole Diaries accurately or consistently classified as Young Adult literature? For a first step, it would be helpful to know what audience the author originally hoped to reach, but the convoluted history of the *Diaries* is not helpful in determining this. First read at the Phoenix Centre where Townsend had written and produced plays for both children and adults; first performed as an audition piece for a 14-year old boy; first appeared in print in an adult arts magazine—Adrian Mole’s intended audience is ambiguous from the start. Among the subject headings for *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole Aged 13 ¾* on Powell’s website are found: Children's 12-Up - Fiction - General; Humorous

Stories; Social Situations – Adolescence; Family - Marriage & Divorce; Children's Baby – Sociology—again inconclusive (Powell's, 2009). Complicating the classification of Adrian Mole even further is the nature of the series as earlier described--Adrian has continued to age, and though his narrative style and hilarious personality mixture of diffidence and megalomania retain their universal humorous appeal, it is difficult to imagine that many younger teens find refurbishing loft spaces or daily employment in a small bookstore to be compelling material at first glance. In general, though they are often sharply observed, well written, and hilarious, the appeal of the later books largely depends on the readers' connection to the earlier incarnations of the character. Fortunately for Townsend's ongoing sales, few characters in their original appearance have resonated so intensely with youth as did Adrian Mole.

An article in an Australian newspaper, *The Age*, captures the strength of this connection: "Twenty years before another spotty British boy in spectacles hijacked the collective consciousness, Adrian Mole was an everyboy for a dorky age. Forget generation X - Douglas Copeland's catchphrase for American slackers with college debts - we're the Mole generation. (Griffin, 2004). This identification continues as in 2006 Britain's prestigious current affairs journal, *The New Statesman* ran a three-page article with colored photo illustrations entitled, "The Adrian Mole Generation". The article examined the bonds and similarities of three politicians from different political parties who "picked up a distaste for class politics during the miners' strike when, like Mole, they turned 18" (10). Like Mole, they are "an ultra-conventional bunch, in their social attitudes as well as their politics". The article ends with the concern that the "Mole Generation" "risks producing a political philosophy as anodyne as the Pink Brigade, the "radical group" set up by Adrian Mole aged 13¾ with the distinctly unthreatening manifesto: "War (we are against it), peace (we are for it)". The pervasive nature of the Mole influence on

British life is seen in the variety of strange allusions to the character uncovered during research. An excellent example is Kerrigan's 1985 dermatological paper, in which Adrian is used to exemplify for practitioners the true suffering of adolescent acne victims.

Though Britain is certainly the epicenter of Mole mania, Adrian's influence is not confined to that island. In a blog posting last summer Kalyan--"Bengali by birth" recalls, "I think this was one of the most circulated books amongst us. It had, as my aunt wrote in the book, 'helped me grow up'" (Karmakar, 2009). By 2008 the *Diaries* had been translated into more than 40 languages (Patterson, 2008), but the question remains: does Mole translate into American? Recent inconclusive reader reviews posted on the Young Adult (+Kids) Books Central website include both, "FANTASTIC!!!! A+", and "not great" (2009). In a North Carolina literacy project, novels are read aloud to an entire class as a prelude to study of the literary elements of the work. After listening to fifty pages, the students can vote to veto a work they do not find engaging. During many years with the project, a teacher reported, "Only one book was rejected, *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 - 3/4*, by Sue Townsend". Her teenage students in North Carolina had difficulty connecting to the British teenager in the novel (Blessing, 2003). In a 2006 presentation to an international workshop on intercultural studies, Dr. Christopher Rollason examines the particular type of 'translation' needs which arise when a British book moves to an American audience. He finds that the Mole books are, "as the British scholar John Denton has shown for Sue Townsend's novel of 1982 *The Secret Diary of Adrian Mole, Aged 13 3/4*, a cult best-seller in Britain but far less successful in the US, where its very British cultural codes and slang terms have impeded readers' enjoyment, to the point where Denton even suggests the case points up the need for intralingual translation". The unsatisfactory form of 'translation' provided

in the American compilation, *The Adrian Mole Diaries*, is an appendix of letters purported to be between Adrian and his American friend, Hamish Mancini, in which Hamish asks Adrian for explanations of various terms. One reason for the failure of this device serves to underscore the difficulties of transatlantic communication—Hamish is an extremely inauthentic American voice. Still, though cultural barriers may present difficulties, there are many Americans of all ages who are devotees of British humor, attracted rather than repelled by its rich argot, sophisticated irony, and by that very quality of ‘foreignness’. Fans of Monty Python, Terry Pratchett, or Little Britain are always happy to offer Adrian honorary citizenship.

Whoever its original intended audience may have been, the Adrian Mole series, like *Alice in Wonderland* or, earlier, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, has clearly been adopted by children and teens. In his Chapter 35 essay in the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children’s Literature* (1996) Peter Hannabus examines the criteria often used in determining whether certain works would be accurately categorized as children’s literature, which is a complex determination even without including the intermittent level of YA fiction. When enough of these qualities are present in a work originally intended for adults, adoption will often occur.

He lists some common characteristics of literature primarily intended for children, which include a focus on concrete events rather than abstract discussion, the use of happy endings, “firm moral frameworks”, and specialized style and vocabulary (p. 418). Certainly every Adrian Mole book is rich with incident; the abstract philosophy is always embedded in Adrian’s record of the plights of the characters. Each book does end with at least a temporary upturn in Adrian’s fortunes. The moral framework of the books is complex: on the one hand, the author’s view of Thatcher’s Britain as an inhumane assault on the working class is consistent and clear

even to younger readers; on the other, Adrian's personal list of the moral failings of others, which can include such transgressions as his mother's feminism (when it prevents her from providing him with a hot lunch) is ambivalent in its ironical approach. The books contain many examples of vocabulary and style which might often be associated with works for younger people—the first person diary and the everyday jargon and slang of a school child, for example—but this language is often used to record adult activities not traditionally included in children's fiction. In part, Hannubuss finds, such categorizing is based on “expectations about what intellectual and emotional experience the implied reader can bring in reading response” (p. 418). This interesting discussion offers some insight into the proper cataloging of the Adrian Mole series.

Children, Hannubuss (1996) explains, may like a book because adults recommend it. On the other hand, they may be attracted to a book specifically because it contains material adults prefer they *not* encounter (p.418). A large study posted on the National Literacy Trust (2009) website lists the Adrian Mole Diaries number two on the list of books children want to recommend to their parents. In the list of books parents recommend to their children, Adrian Mole is nowhere to be seen. Some critics have pointed out not only that Adrian's diary entries may be inappropriate, but that much of the books' focus is actually on the forbidden world of adult bad behavior, as seen through Adrian's immature eyes (Thomson Gale, 2005-2006). The Adrian Mole books, in their combination of sincerity and vulgarity, may have discovered exactly the formula to attract young teens, especially the elusive younger male readers, who seem to make up a large percentage of Mole fans. *Authors & Artists for Young Children* quotes Peter Campbell: “Children take to the books partly, I gather, because the disgusting details of Adrian's spots, the mention of his wet dreams and of his regular measuring of his ‘thing’ break taboos”

(Thomson Gale, 2005-2006). Another element which Hannubuss notes may be found in a work intended for adults but adopted by children is an archetypal appeal—when a narrative or character seems to arise from what he calls “the common cultural pool” of tradition (p. 419). It is clear that readers recognize and enjoy in Mole both a specific British comedic type and a universally recognizable modern adolescent. An Independent article touching on Mole’s special appeal for the British speculates, “perhaps the vital secret ingredient in the lucrative Adrian Mole formula is that most English of qualities, beloved of princes, paupers and newspapers: failure. Poor Adrian tries, and hopes, and aches, and fails... He wants to be John Updike, but stacks his books instead. And we love him. How we love him!” (Patterson, 2008).

In the arc of its story and the specifics of the main character, *The Adrian Mole Diaries* have an appeal that transcends Britain. The narrative pattern of the books, as Adrian matures and attempts to achieve his quest in an indifferent world, is universally recognized as a literary archetype of eternal importance in human narratives. The books together “form a satiric bildungsroman” (Kittle, 2005-2006). Readers worldwide see Adrian as “a hero who suffers as they suffer” (Patterson, 2008). “I’m an intellectual”, writes Adrian, “but at the same time I’m not very clever” (Townsend, 1997, p. 120). As altruistic in his efforts for his old age pensioner Bert as he is indifferent to the pain of his struggling parents, Adrian exhibits a vertiginous mixture of self-absorption and social conscience. He manages through more than a dozen years to be simultaneously paralyzed by self-consciousness and insanely self-confident, humiliated by his family’s shortcomings and his own failures, but always harboring unshakably grand ambitions for himself. In *Adrian Mole* Sue Townsend has created the universal teen, an immediately recognizable archetype—just like the rest of us, only comformtingly worse.

When boy-chick lit writer Mike Gayle was quoted in Heawood's (2004) article concerning Sue Townsend's influence on the modern male confessional novel, he said, "Although they were written by a woman, they gave a very true portrayal of a 13-year-old boy. As far as I'm concerned it's all grown out of that." Perhaps, Heawood observed, "Publishers should stop chasing the elusive dream of books by men, for men, and be content with books by women, about adolescent boys, written for everyone" (Heawood, 2004).

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