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## **“The World Loves an Underdog,” or the Continuing Appeal of the Adolescent Rebel Narrative: A Comparative Reading of *Vernon God Little*, *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Huckleberry Finn***

### **Abstract**

The early reception of D. B. C. Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* (2003) has been characterized by comparisons with two canonical literary antecedents: J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and, at a greater remove, Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). The three novels capitalize on the subversive potential of disaffected teenage narrators, whose compelling vernacular voices, and distinctive position as outsiders in the adult world, are powerful tools for social critique.

This article offers an analysis of the continuities and discontinuities in the narrative tradition that links Vernon Little to Huckleberry Finn via the pivotal figure of Holden Caulfield, who is widely considered as the original, unsurpassed model of adolescent rebelliousness in modern literature. Grounded in an extensive exploration of the history of reception of the three texts, this study proceeds to highlight and explore the wider implications of Pierre’s provocative twist on his predecessors’ narrative template. Significantly, this deliberate departure is overlooked in most reviews of *Vernon God Little* – an omission which testifies to our deep investment in the idea of teenagers as liminal figures between childhood and adulthood, and thus still relatively untainted by worldly corruption.

Paradoxically, the persistence of this romanticized view of adolescence coexists with much less idealized representations of young people, especially in the media. This particular contradiction is tentatively teased out in a brief coda to the main argument, with reference to another idiosyncratic adolescent narrator who has managed to capture the popular imagination in recent years: Christopher Boone in Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003). Although his connection with Salinger’s text is less immediately obvious than Vernon’s, in some ways Christopher is a more legitimate heir to Holden Caulfield than Pierre’s protagonist.

### **Key words**

*Vernon God Little*; *The Catcher in the Rye*; *Huckleberry Finn*; adolescent rebels in literature; childhood innocence.

As far as literary debuts go, D.B.C. Pierre’s *Vernon God Little* (2003) could hardly have made a bigger splash than by winning the Man Booker Prize. That the victory was a surprise undoubtedly made for good copy since, as one of the media-savvy characters in the novel remarks, “the world loves an

underdog” (Pierre, 2003, p. 33 – henceforth *VGL*). Even better: the first-time writer’s colourful personal history prompted such heart-warming, juicy headlines as “‘Dirty but clean’ Pierre beats his past” (*BBC News*, 2003) and “Bizarre twist to strange tale as repentant rogue wins over Booker prize judges” (Gibbons, 2003).<sup>1</sup> The comment about unexpected turns in an already odd narrative applies both to the author’s own background – which includes drug addiction, gambling, fraud, a horrific car accident and mounting debts – and to *Vernon God Little* itself. Pierre readily acknowledged the similarity between “the dynamic of [his] novel” and the “curious twist of fate” (Gibbons, 2003) that saw him triumph over the bookies’ favourite Monica Ali and literary royalty like Margaret Atwood. Readers looking for more serious reasons to pick up a copy of *Vernon God Little*, however, have never been short of inducements: well before the Booker accolade – and all the more since – reviewers have hailed Pierre’s novel as a direct descendant of J. D. Salinger’s *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and therefore, at a further remove, of Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Like its canonical predecessors, *Vernon God Little* is narrated by a teenage boy whose idiosyncratic voice and outsider status are the sources of great humour and of a mordant critique of adult society. So self-evident is this statement that the identification of Vernon with the image of the “adolescent rebel” – a fundamentally moral and innocent figure in a corrupted world – has become a truism.

The present article tests the validity of this position by offering an in-depth comparative analysis of *Vernon God Little* alongside the classic texts it has been so breezily likened to. Central to my argument is a reassessment of the history of reception of the three novels under scrutiny – a reassessment informed by, and casting light onto, changes in the conceptualization of adolescence as a cultural construct. In particular, the discussion of the respective fortunes of *Catcher* and *Huckleberry Finn* highlights critical blind spots or, conversely, aspects of these two narratives at the heart of vibrant interpretative debates. These hermeneutical omissions and hotspots are interconnected with our continuing fascination with the figure of the adolescent rebel; in turn, this long-standing investment in the subversive charge of the young misfit is the reason behind the wide-spread, wilful misreading of

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre’s real name is Peter Findlay, and the initials in his pseudonym stand for “Dirty But Clean”. Joyce Carol Oates refers to him as the “dark horse” in the 2003 race for the Booker, while Sarah Fay McCarthy’s 2004 review of *Vernon* opens with a description of a “dumbstruck” (p. 183) Pierre’s failure to stand up to accept the awards when his victory was first announced.

*Vernon God Little* that I challenge in the penultimate section of this essay. Of course Pierre inscribes his first novel in the distinctive sub-genre most influentially epitomized by *Catcher*. Even so, with his provocative ending, he does depart from this tradition in a spectacular fashion: for all his affinity with Holden and, to a lesser extent, with Huck, Vernon deliberately fails to retain his status as an outsider and capitulates to the perverse logic of the society he has been critical of, though necessarily embroiled with, throughout the entire narrative. The full implications of Vernon's final surrender have failed to register with many readers, and have been glossed over by critics, especially those who praise Pierre's text. As I will argue, this extraordinary oversight testifies to the persistence of the myth of the "adolescent rebel" as a figure of dissent endowed with a peculiar innocence *because of his young age*. The endurance of this myth is remarkable in itself: it is an oddly anachronistic vestige of the Romantic notion of childhood, which is otherwise under siege at a time when young people are at worst criminalized or, at best, viewed with anxiety and suspicion, particularly by the media.

#### *Catcher*, the canon and the 'invention' of adolescence

In 2001, *The New Yorker* ran Louis Menand's "Holden at Fifty. *The Catcher in the Rye* and what it spawned," an astute piece on the cultural legacy of Salinger's only novel in the half century since it first came out. By Menand's reckoning, at least once a decade we get a book that mines the rich narrative vein opened up by *Catcher*:

Sylvia Plath made a version of it for girls, in *The Bell Jar* (1963); Hunter Thompson produced one for people who couldn't believe that Nixon was President and Jim Morrison was dead, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971). Jay McInerney's *Bright Lights, Big City* (1984) was the downtown edition; Dave Eggers' *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) is the MTV one.

One wonders whether *Vernon* would have made the list, had it appeared before the golden anniversary of *Catcher*'s publication. Virtually all the major reviews of Pierre's novel name-check *Catcher* as an obvious literary precedent. The terms in which this connection is articulated go from the declarative to the mischievously creative: Vernon is a "modern Holden Caulfield" (O'Grady, 2003) and "endearing

in a Holden Caulfield way” (McCarthy, p. 184) or, more punchily, “a Holden Caulfield on amphetamines” (Oates, 2003) and “Holden Caulfield on Ritalin” (Sifton, 2003). (In a review entitled “A Huckleberry Finn for the Eminem generation,” we find a variation on the theme of substance abuse with the reference to Vernon as a “Huck Finn tanked up on six-packs” - Brace, 2003). The association with a canonical work is a sure-fire way of intimating the value of a more recent or lesser known text, and therefore of legitimizing its status as an object of serious scrutiny. This is exactly what happened to Holden’s narrative before the “Salinger Industry” truly hit its stride from the late 50s onwards;<sup>2</sup> its similarity to *Huckleberry Finn* is the focus of several early studies, including a 1956 article by Arthur Heiserman and James E. Miller, identified by Graham (2007, p. 41) as “probably the first academic appraisal of *Catcher*.”

Although well documented, the history of reception of *Catcher* is worth recapping here, not so much for what it says about the text, but for what its blind spots reveal about our collective investment in the novel. For a large part of its existence, the text has polarized readers: while most of its early reviews were positive, praising Salinger’s creation of an authentic adolescent voice, the critics who disliked the book did so vehemently, denouncing in particular its use of expletives. In fairness, this was a matter of discomfort for some of its fans too, as was to be expected of a time when such language would have probably raised eyebrows even under a “parental advisory” logo. For therein lies the rub: the reason why *Catcher* has incurred the wrath of censors is its alleged corrupting influence on young readers, since its main character is a school drop-out who smokes, drinks, punctuates his sentences with profanities such as “goddam” and “hell,” and at one point hires a prostitute. The novel is both a favourite of educators looking to engage their adolescent pupils with a troubled protagonist of their own age, and remains widely censored in conservative circles on the grounds of Holden’s unsuitability as a role model. Especially in the United States, *Catcher*’s presence in school libraries and syllabi continues to be challenged by concerned adults who might not realize that in their eagerness to protect the innocence of the younger generation they are, ironically, on the same page as Holden. (Unlike them, Holden learns

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<sup>2</sup> George Steiner first referred to the “Salinger Industry” in 1959 to gesture to the high volume of critical studies generated, on the author’s relatively small body of work, in the wake of the popularity of *Catcher*. As Sarah Graham (2007, p. 48) points out, this scholarly momentum had gathered in less than a decade since the publication of *Catcher*.

that his fantasy of being a “catcher in the rye” to save children from corruption is both unfeasible and undesirable.) For those prone to moral panics, the definitive proof that *Catcher* makes for dangerous reading lies in its notorious association with Mark Chapman, who killed John Lennon in 1980, and with John Hinckley Jr., who attempted the assassination of President Reagan a year later (see Whitfield, 1997, pp. 571-72). By then, a quarter of a century had passed since *Catcher* had “become the book all brooding adolescents had to buy, ... the indispensable manual from which cool styles of disaffection could be borrowed” (Ian Hamilton, quoted in Whitfield, 1997, p. 568). The novel had started off with good auspices, especially on home ground, in the U.S.: as Book-of-the-Month Club choice, it was an immediate bestseller, receiving a further, significant boost when the first paperback edition was printed in 1953. But the real key to its success lay in the fact that Holden sprang to life at the same time as a strong adolescent culture began to make its presence felt in American society.

While recent studies, such as Kent Baxter’s (2008) and Sarah Chinn’s (2008), have made compelling arguments about moving the “invention” of modern adolescence back to the turn of the twentieth-century, it is after the Second World War that teenagers – the term itself is a coinage of the 1940s – started to be perceived as a separate group from children and adults alike. In the United States, “[t]he 1950s marked the first time that all the mass media specifically targeted youth as a distinct audience” (Mintz, 2004, p. 295). This new stance made many adults anxious about not being able to extend their “refining” influence on teenagers, who were becoming an independent age group, as they still are today. *Catcher* was entangled in the ensuing debate about adolescents and their moral fibre, and the concurrent rise in fears about juvenile delinquency. As Mintz (2004, p. 293) rightly points out, the growing number of teen arrests in the 1950s does not necessarily signal a sudden epidemic of criminal offenses, which might just as easily be explained by “increased law enforcement and broadened definitions of criminal behaviour,” since the two phenomena clearly feed off each other. Like *Rebel without a Cause* (1955) – with James Dean’s iconic performance as Jim Stark gaining added poignancy in the wake of the actor’s premature death – *Catcher* is crystallized in our collective imagination first and foremost as the epitome of the (middle-class) adolescent, disenchanted with societal conventions and values, but also prey to the emotional turmoil that characterizes the transition from childhood to adulthood.

Already in 1904, G. Stanley Hall had identified adolescence as a period of “storm and stress.”<sup>3</sup> Holden and Jim Stark are perfect incarnations of this idea of adolescents as inherently ill-at-ease, even in their own skin, and possessed of a subversive charge in their resistance to following unthinkingly into their parents’ footsteps. For example, Holden recoils at the thought of “working in some office, making a lot of dough, and riding to work in cabs and Madison Avenue buses” (Salinger, 1991/1951, p. 133 – henceforth *CR*) – in other words, of slotting into the same groove as his corporate lawyer father. The very qualities which had incurred general opprobrium when the novel first appeared were shortly afterwards reclaimed as part of Holden’s anti-establishment attitude, and made him a quasi-heroic model for the countercultural movement of the 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Both the perception of Holden as a classic American character, after Huck, and his identification as a prototypical modern teenager, illustrate how readers have often unproblematically latched onto Salinger’s creation as a figure of universal resonance, side-lining considerations about the novel’s, and its protagonist’s, socio-historical context.<sup>5</sup> The titles alone of some of the book reviews published in 1951 give away this tendency: a “Manhattan Ulysses, Junior” (Smith, 1951), Holden possesses “The Vision of the Innocent” (Behrman, 1951), and functions as a “Case History of All of Us” (Jones, 1951, p.176). This last title is the most generalizing of the three, banking as it does on an implied commonality of the experience of growing up, regardless of differences in gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and other contingencies and permutations in people’s individual circumstances.

#### A critical blind spot: Holden’s grief

During the past seven decades, these mythical/archetypal readings have been fleshed out, contextualized and qualified, but they have also been vociferously contested: getting to the heart of the matter, Mary Suzanne Schriber decries the fact that “a sixteen-year-old urban, male, WASP preppy” should have

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<sup>3</sup> The expression is a translation of *Sturm und Drang*, the name of the late 18<sup>th</sup>-century German Romantic movement which gave us, in the protagonist of J. W. Goethe’s *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774), a blueprint for the sensitive, tormented and fiercely non-conformist young man.

<sup>4</sup> On the subject, see Graham (2007) and Whitfield (1997).

<sup>5</sup> Heiserman and Miller identify both Huck Finn and the narrative tradition of the quest (typically found in epic journeys and their modern counterparts) as Holden’s literary antecedents.

been co-opted as “a classic American hero, *the American adolescent*, and *the whole of American youth*” (1990, p. 101, my italics). In acknowledgement of the need to avoid universalizing interpretations, or at least to state their unspoken assumptions, Graham’s 2007 study guide includes five original short essays that analyse the novel through the lens, respectively, of racial, sexual, and gender identity (two of the pieces look at *Catcher* and notions of masculinity), and of trauma theory (the perspective adopted by Denis Jonnes). In spite of these recent correctives to the idea that Holden represents the “degree zero” of the adolescent experience, what is remarkable in the novel’s history of reception is the relatively scant attention on the specificity of Holden’s psychological condition, not so much as a (white, male, affluent, sexually confused) teenager, but as a sibling who is still grieving for the death of his younger brother Allie. From the start, reviewers and critics have praised Salinger for capturing a “typically and heartbreakingly adolescent” (Burger, 1951) sensitivity and for “chart[ing] the miseries and ecstasies of an adolescent rebel” (*Time*, 1951); but the longer this (understandable) trend has continued, the more the impact of a – thankfully far from typical – tragic bereavement on Holden’s state of mind has receded into the background. Jonnes himself, who recognizes Holden’s malaise as “a state of inconsolable mourning” (2007, p. 104) rather than mere teenage angst, frames his analysis within the context of “reinventing youth in Cold War America” (p. 98), and reads *Catcher* as the work of an author who had been traumatized by his active involvement in the Second World War.<sup>6</sup> Brought to the foreground, Holden’s grief becomes a symptom of a wider social distress, and Allie’s death from leukaemia, a disturbing allusion to the dangers of nuclear fallouts. Interesting as this interpretation is, it too ends up seeing Holden as a representative of an entire age rather than an individualized, unique figure.

The regular oversight of the main reason for Holden’s fragile psychological state is tackled head on by Menand’s reappraisal of the novel on its fiftieth birthday: Salinger “wasn’t trying to expose the spiritual poverty of a conformist culture; he was writing a story about a boy whose little brother has died. Holden, after all, isn’t unhappy because he sees that people are phonies; he sees that people are phonies because he is unhappy.” Having spelled out what all readers of *Catcher* surely sense, in the

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<sup>6</sup> Salinger was drafted in 1942 and saw combat as an infantryman in various major European campaigns, including the D-Day landings. There is no doubt that the war had a huge impact on his life and on his writing.



close of his article Menand concedes that the text's enduring appeal nonetheless lies in its distillation of the earnestness of youth: adults look back on it nostalgically, while passing on to adolescents the idea that "[r]eading Holden's story is ... the literary equivalent of looking in a mirror for the first time." In short, our ability to qualify the root cause for Holden's rebellious discontent does not change the reality of his grip on our collective imagination, especially within an educational context.<sup>7</sup> Retrospectively, *Catcher* has been reclaimed as a forerunner of the Young Adult fiction phenomenon, *the* seminal text to have alerted publishers to the huge commercial potential of this section of the market.<sup>8</sup> In tracing *Catcher's* legacy on contemporary Young Adult Literature, Steven Bickmore and Kate Youngblood (2014, p. 253) do not need to spend much time elaborating on their premise: the claim that Holden is "the very essence of the intrigue of adolescence [...] suspended in a liminal space between childhood and adulthood, and [...] all too aware that this suspension will, eventually, come crashing down."

In another article written from a pedagogical perspective, Göran Nieragden (2010, p. 568) targets *Catcher* as one of the "time-honored classics" due for retirement from a school curriculum in need of refreshing. With his suggestion that canonical texts might lack appeal because they "do not address issues which young people of today feel to be pressing, thrilling, or, difficult enough, interesting," he champions the view that literature ought to be immediately relevant to the lives of

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<sup>7</sup> This is true both at school and in universities, and in less formal exchanges of advice about "must read" books, as Menand acknowledges in this unashamedly anecdotal passage: "People generally read *The Catcher in the Rye* when they are around fourteen years old, usually because the book was given or assigned to them by people—parents or teachers—who read it when they were fourteen years old, because somebody gave or assigned it to them. The book keeps acquiring readers, in other words, not because kids keep discovering it but because grownups who read it when they were kids keep getting kids to read it. This seems crucial to making sense of its popularity. *The Catcher in the Rye* is a sympathetic portrait of a boy who refuses to be socialized which has become ... a standard instrument of socialization. I was introduced to the book by my parents, people who, if they had ever imagined that I might, after finishing the thing, run away from school, smoke like a chimney, lie about my age in bars, solicit a prostitute, or use the word "goddam" in every third sentence, would (in the words of the story) have had about two hemorrhages apiece. Somehow, they knew this wouldn't be the effect."

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, the entry on "Teenage Fiction" in the *International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature*, where Julia Eccleshare (2004, p. 543) identifies *Catcher* alongside William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* (1954) as the "two most recent precursors of the teenage novel." The latter text "shatters any illusions about childhood innocence" and therefore "appeals powerfully to readers who have begun to recognize this loss in themselves." *Catcher* "has made an even greater impact, because the stream of consciousness, first person narrative of Holden Caulfield, with its detached and critical view of the adult world, is not only in itself liberating but has also been imitated in many subsequent novels" (2004, p. 543). See also Jonathan Stephens's 2007 attempt to define the category of Young Adult Fiction in *The ALAN Review*.

twenty-first-century adolescents; the five novels he puts forth as alternative set texts achieve this relevance by “tak[ing] up issues which have formed the basis of continuous public debate over the last decade, both in and outside the US” (2010, p. 568).<sup>9</sup> Nieragden is concerned that “[i]f classrooms worldwide still stick to *The Catcher in the Rye* as a portrait of adolescence’s perennial problems in 2010, they are unlikely to find credibility with readers born in, say, 1992” (2010, p. 577). This call for a revision of the syllabus is an appeal for temporal currency at the expense of a more abstract and timeless “relatability” (to use a word that has crept up in my students’ vocabulary in recent years). He might be encouraging us to say “thank you, Holden, and goodbye,” but with his reference to “adolescence’s *perennial* problems,” Nieragden reiterates the identification of Salinger’s character with an unchanging teenage archetype, once again glossing over the very specific, tragic reason behind his troubled nature. Whether offered from an educational, or from a more purely literary perspective, readings of Holden as a character who encapsulates “teenage angst” (Bickmore and Youngblood, 2014, p. 250) and, by extension, as a subversive figure in “a revolt against all fixed values” (Takeuchi, 2002, p. 321) continue to flourish. In fact, they dominate the discussion of a text whose own popularity – *pace* Nieragden – shows no sign of abating.

### Rereading Huck (and Holden): the deferral of growing up American

*Huckleberry Finn* has also had its share of run-ins with concerned parents and educators, initially for very similar reasons to *Catcher*, such as its perceived vulgarity and unsuitability as reading material for innocent young people.<sup>10</sup> However, the early calls for the novel’s proscription from public libraries and schools on account of its inappropriate language and “bad grammar” have long been subsumed within a more focussed debate: “Now the issue is racism,” as Thomas Cooley (Twain, 1999/1884, p. vii –

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<sup>9</sup> These counter-proposals – one of which is *Vernon God Little* – can all “readily be subsumed under the genre category of ‘boyhood narratives’,” though, according to the author, they are “equally suitable for mixed-gender classrooms” (Nieragden, 2010, p. 568).

<sup>10</sup> In Louisa May Alcott’s often cited, possibly apocryphal, comment: “If Mr Clemens [Mark Twain’s real name] cannot think of something better to tell our pure-minded lads and lasses, he had best stop writing for them” (quoted in Trites, 2007, p. 3). Alcott was close to the committee who banned *Huckleberry Finn* from the Concord Public Library in 1885, a decision which, according to Twain, doubled the sales of the book.

henceforth *HF*) puts it. While Toni Morrison and Jane Smiley are amongst those who have recently written about the treatment of race in *Huckleberry Finn*, in the intervening years since the publication of Cooley's Norton critical edition there have been signs of a renewed acknowledgement of Huck's resonance in American culture as an archetypal child. This change in focus is, I suspect, linked to a concomitant resurgence of anxieties about the state of the nation's youth. In the final chapter of *Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood* (2004), Steven Mintz talks about the phenomenon of high school shootings as one of the catalysts for public debate about adolescence at the turn of the millennium. Periodic revisions of the notion of adolescence, and discussions about the quality and amount of adult supervision required to educate our youngsters, are nothing new; in the wake of tragic events which seem to take on an epochal impact (for example, the Columbine massacre in 1999), there is an urgent, collective imperative to identify negative influences in the emotional and moral development of children. Popular culture features regularly in the list of likely culprits, albeit with some obvious variations over time: in the 1950s, films, comic books and television were accused of glamourizing violence, while these days the finger is more often pointed towards digital media. In the 1880s, the time of another "boy crisis" in America, "reading was the Xbox 360 of the age, and dime novels and magazines were the video games – the means through which teenagers [...] were exposed to violent and salacious content over which their parents had no control" (Levy, 2009, p. 47). With this in mind, Levy continues, Tom Sawyer's foolish deference to the authority of books in planning his pranks reads like Twain's direct intervention in the debates about juvenile delinquency and about who brings up the nation's children.

Levy is not the first scholar to suggest that we should regard *Huckleberry Finn* as a novel deeply concerned about childhood as well as race – although he is perhaps the most passionately outspoken advocate of the need to teach it as a classic whose "main purpose [is] to take seriously the voice of a child, a teenager" (2009, p. 57). From this perspective, he invites his students to ponder the extent to which Huck's "streak of loneliness, [...] casual attraction to violence" and "cross-racial border crossings" are part and parcel of "growing up American" (2009, p. 57), and to consider whether the country has really made any progress in how it nurtures young people. Levy's approach is informed by a desire to engage with an intergenerational discussion about the current "boy crisis," as his reference

to *Columbine* (p. 50) makes clear. In recent years, several other critics have looked back at *Huckleberry Finn* through a critical lens focused on its conceptualization of childhood. Mintz references Twain's creation in the title of his above-mentioned study, gesturing to the familiar interpretation of Huck's raft as a symbol of the "American ideal of childhood as a world apart, a period of freedom and self-discovery" (2004, p. 382). In this romanticized, pastoral framework, childhood is easily equated with innocence too: at one with nature and in their self-sufficient drifting down the river, Huck and Jim live out an idyll in so far as they can remain unmoored from the corrupting influence of "sivilization," which constantly threatens to hijack their journey. This reading is not without its problematic oversimplifications: it infantilizes Jim and sweeps Pap's abusive treatment of Huck under the carpet, as Mintz is aware. His study, though, is a cultural history of American childhood, not a work of in-depth literary criticism, and the allusion to Huck's raft in the title is in itself indicative of the Romantic connotations that this image has accrued. (The iconic status of Twain's character is also acknowledged, tongue-in-cheek, by Pierre, who has Vernon, donning a straw hat, catch his reflection and exclaim "Huckleberry Finn, boy" (*VGL*, p. 188), in the only "literary" allusion of the novel.<sup>11</sup>)

For more nuanced contemporary interpretations of what *Huckleberry Finn* says about American childhood, we must turn to Kenneth Kidd and Peter Stoneley, who both tease out the unspoken premises of the novel. Kidd sees Twain's masterpiece as an eccentric, hypercanonical example of the "Bad Boy" genre, and thus indebted to a tradition that celebrates "the pre- or early pubescent boy as irrational, primitive, fiercely masculine, and attuned to nature" (2004, p. 53). In the American literary landscape, bad boys incarnate a "polished" version of the Romantic trope of the boy-savage. Twain places these cognate figures side by side in his juxtaposition of Tom Sawyer, whose "delinquency is safely middle-class," both "innocent" and with the promise of "future success" (Kidd, 2004, p. 54), and the boy-savage Huck Finn. The two become interchangeable in the novel's controversial ending at the Phelps Farm: "Huck's rebirth as Tom, as his acquiescence in Tom's wild schemes, suggests a merger of the social outcast with the socially sanctioned Bad Boy. Any marginality or special vantage Huck may have enjoyed disappears when Tom Sawyer returns" (Kidd, 2004, p. 80). Stoneley instead drills down to the

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<sup>11</sup> John Mullan (2006) shrewdly comments that one "could not be sure that this is exactly a bookish reference: maybe our TV-obsessed hero once caught some half-baked dramatization [of *Huckleberry Finn*]."

real significance of Huck's decision to light out for the Territory: influenced by Tom's dreams of "howling adventures among the Injuns" (*HF*, p. 295), "in proposing to go out into an unregulated land or wilderness, Huck is not so much turning his back on American 'sivilization' as living up to it" (Stoneley, 2016, p. 176). Both for Kidd and for Stoneley, Huck is an inherently normative figure: rougher around the edges, but cut from the same cloth as his friend Tom. While Tom's bourgeois rebelliousness is only nominal anyway, Huck too is an establishment figure in the making, as witnessed by his final metamorphosis into a "junior pioneer" (Stoneley, 2016, p. 176). This reading flags up the paradox intrinsic to the notion of the frontier, as the place where the best of wilderness and civilization supposedly come together. Yet Stoneley's emphasis on the contradiction inherent in Huck's westward flight is reminiscent of the similarly paradoxical logic behind the argument that Holden's non-conformism is exactly what makes him typically American. In a country that mythologizes its revolutionary, pioneering, individualistic spirit, there is no greater conformist than the "rebel without a cause."

In the end, Huck and Holden cannot escape the debate about whether they are uncompromised in their critique of society or, conversely, the extent to which they are ideologically implicated with the status quo. Interestingly, this is a shared point at issue for the two novels *irrespective* of a major difference in the characterization of their narrators: while Holden is very consciously vocal in his condemnation of hypocrisy and other widespread moral flaws, Huck's exposure of the fault-lines in "sivilization" is for a large part inadvertent, especially with regards to race. Huck is well aware of the dark side of humanity: of people's tendency to lie, of greed as their prime motivation, of how easily they resort to violence; he is capable of seeing through much pettier misdeeds too, such as the Widow Douglas's self-serving tolerance for snuff but not for smoking. His conscience is troubled by unkindness, even when it extends to those who might not deserve it; for example, the tarring and feathering of the King and the Duke, two despicable impostors, prompts an outpouring of sympathy for "them poor pitiful rascals, it seemed like I couldn't ever feel any hardness against them any more in the world. It was a dreadful thing to see. Human beings *can* be awful cruel to one another" (*HF*, p. 239). However, this sensitivity to malice does not affect Huck's understanding of racism and slavery as outright abominations: throughout the narrative, he remains convinced that helping the runaway Jim is

ethically wrong because it is tantamount to abetting theft – an action for which Huck thinks he has doomed himself to hell. For all his several glimpses about our common humanity, Huck’s final rejection of Southern culture has relatively little to do with its racism; Twain must trust his readers to approach the text ironically, and draw their own conclusions about equality, rather than acquiesce with Huck’s singular inference that Jim is “white inside” (*HF*, p. 279), hence an exceptional case.

Of course, regardless of how informed his critique of the status quo is, Huck can only exercise his full rebellious charge so long as he is on the run, either on the Mississippi or in suspended animation beyond the pages of the novel; still, it is important to point out that even within the confines of the narrative, he retains an innocent, healthy scepticism towards social rules and conventions. In other words, it is possible to read Huck’s contrast with Tom in ways that lead to conclusions opposite to Kidd’s and Stoneley’s; after all, Huck’s deference to Tom’s schemes does not extend beyond the playground. The uncomfortable experience of being Tom at the Phelps’ – and the prospect of becoming like him for good – is reason enough for Huck to make tracks. Besides, unlike us, in his naivety Huck does not know that the frontier represents a mere postponement of his capitulation to “sivilization.” Lack of closure in the ending of *Catcher* also allows room for alternative interpretations, starting from the exact nature of the Californian institution where Holden has had to go to “take it easy” (*CR*, p. 1), and recuperate from his mental and/or physical breakdown. Holden’s journey westward harks back to Huck’s frontier, but no longer as an escape, however temporary and fraught, from “sivilization.” Rather, close to that bastion of phoniness that is Hollywood, the sanatorium from where Holden has been telling his story is a place designed to facilitate the young patient’s re-integration into society – even if Salinger is careful to cast a degree of uncertainty over the success of Holden’s planned return to school. For Huck and Holden, assimilation into the world they have been rebelling against is perhaps inevitable, but it does not quite happen under the readers’ eyes. The ambiguity and inconclusiveness of the two endings are essential to the heroic aura and continuing popularity of the two protagonists. Their future remains a matter of speculation, impossible to pin down, frozen as they are on the brink of adulthood in a state of permanent – and permanently subversive – adolescence.

Variations on Holden's themes: *Vernon God Little*

This is not the case for Vernon God Little, although there are enough echoes of *Catcher* in Pierre's novel that, by the time of – indeed, in spite of – its conclusion, most readers still find themselves rooting for him, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he has sold out to mainstream values. It helps too that his various misdemeanours pale into insignificance against the ghastliness of the community he lives in, whose petty greed, superficiality and dog-eat-dog attitude are best exemplified by the dysfunctional dynamics between Vernon's mother and her "so-called friends" (VGL, p. 23). As Vernon explains: "Until Tuesday, Mrs Lechuga was the leader of this pack; now she's indisposed until further notice. Leona Dunt shows up when she has at least two things to brag about: that's how you know your position in life. She needs about five things to go to the Lechugas', so we're junior league. Fetus league, even" (VGL, p. 23). To this noxious microcosm of society, add the systemic lack of integrity discernible in Vernon's persecution at the hands of the law and the media: in their need for a "skate-goat" (VGL, p. 36), these powerful institutions conduct a sensationalist witch-hunt, mistakenly identifying the young narrator as an accomplice to the school-shooting that triggers the entire plot. Vernon's hold on the readers' sympathy is further consolidated by the appeal of an idiosyncratic narrative voice, whose distinctive verbal tics include variations on Holden's own ("ole" for "old" and "it slays me" for "it kills me").<sup>12</sup> Another recurrent pattern in the story is Vernon's penchant for replacing his middle name Gregory with a series of ironic monikers that chime with his circumstances at the time: Genius (p. 4), Gonad (p. 48), Gucci (p. 89), Gridlock (p. 114), Gray-matter (p. 122), Gone-to-Hell (p. 162), Gates [as in "Bill Gates"] (p. 176), Godzilla (p. 181), Gonzalez (p. 183) and, in the title itself, God. This renaming too is an almost imperceptible reference to *Catcher*, where Holden plays on his initials when describing his diet: "H. V. Caulfield. Holden Vitamin Caulfield" (CR, p. 108).

Vernon is also reminiscent of Holden in the targets of his social critique, although the narrative mode is (often crudely) satirical rather than strictly realistic. Vernon's railings have a frenzied, cynical quality, in keeping with the increasing hopelessness of his predicament, and with Pierre's grotesque

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<sup>12</sup> The occurrences of "ole" in *Vernon* are too frequent to mention, but for variations on "it slays me" see pp. 48, 66, 147, 159, 193. Other recurrent speech habits shared by the two adolescent characters are "like hell" and "and all"; see also Costello (1959) for an insightful analysis of Holden's pattern of speech.

representation of present-day Texas as an overblown metonym of the worst of western society: a world of omnipresent fast-food joints and coveted brands, with the sound of Muzak and images from 24-hour newscasts or reality TV permanently in the background. As already hinted, the lure of consumerism is illustrated throughout the story by the sad competitiveness between Vernon's mother and her friends, all prone to invest their extravagant purchases with the power to boost their self-worth and social standing. This very same point about the connection between material goods and self-esteem is made much more subtly when Holden recalls his former roommate Dick Slagle, who was ashamed of his cheap suitcases and tried to pass off Holden's expensive ones as his own. By the same token, Pierre's relentless focus on the power of the media, the cult of celebrity and our obsession with appearances – to the point that the Lechugas, one of the bereaved families, send themselves flowers and cuddly toys so as not to look bad in the absence of a make-shift shrine (*VGL*, p. 27) – has a muted counterpart in Holden's contempt for the three star-struck Seattle girls in the Lavender Room (*CR*, p. 70 and ff.), and for Sally Hayes's "drooling" (*CR*, p. 116) admiration for the Lunts.

Sex, and its associations with (real or perceived) perversions, is painted in more lurid hues in *Vernon* than in *Catcher*, partly as a reflection of the different mores of the two historical periods. Growing up in what was on the surface a more homophobic, repressed culture than ours, Holden frequently observes that he is surrounded by "flits" and "perverts": at the Edmonton Hotel, in his conversation with Carl Luce and in his encounter with Mr Antolini, whose alleged "flitty pass" (*CR*, p. 194) at him is left open to interpretation, as the boy himself admits in retrospect. More disturbingly, the spectre of sexual harassment is foregrounded in two episodes featuring Jane Gallagher: her date with the predatory Stradlater, who has problems with taking "no" for an answer, and her difficult relationship with her "booze hound" (*CR*, p. 78) step-father who, Holden fears, might have "tried to get wise with her" (*CR*, p. 79). Jane denies this accusation, but Holden's testimony of the man's constant drinking is troubling: "all I ever saw him do was booze all the time ... And run around the goddam house, naked. With Jane around, and all" (*CR*, p. 32). Predictably more graphic, and intentionally crass, are Vernon's references to sex (see, for example, the several allusions to masturbation, or his lustful fantasies about Taylor). In his novel, Pierre creates characters whose track record as paedophiles is overt and ugly. Sex is represented as just another commodity, and sexual exploitation – from none other than supposedly



reputable figures such as the psychiatrist Dr Goosens or the teacher Marion Nuckles – is what causes Vernon’s best friend Jesus to crack and commit his atrocious crime. In a world of such monstrous corruption, Vernon’s sexual transgressions are on a different scale than Holden’s; the latter’s impulsive, chaste encounter with a prostitute is updated by Pierre as the more deliberate and exploitative, yet equally pathetic transactions carried out by his protagonist: Vernon peddles internet porn to the computer-less ole Silas, and uses the compliant Ella Bouchard as sexual bait to blackmail, half-heartedly, Mr Deutschman, a suspected child molester.<sup>13</sup> Yet, upon closer look, both adolescents ultimately come across as sexually innocent, because of their inexperience and their fundamental decency. In his mind “probably the biggest sex maniac you ever saw” (*CR*, p. 62), Holden turns out to be a virgin; unlike Stradlater, he is the kind of guy who stops when girls tell him to stop (*CR*, p. 92). Also a virgin, Vernon offers the clearest example of his non-predatory nature in an early meeting with Taylor who, under the influence of drugs, sends off what a less scrupulous boy would have probably interpreted as signs of consent (*VGL*, p. 48). Besides, at the risk of reading too much into his fixation with lingerie – a taxonomy of which *does* provide him with the key for an early, quick description of his home-town Martirio (*VGL*, p. 13) – Vernon insists on fantasizing about his dream girl as wearing “[s]imple cotton bikinis, like a girl wears when she doesn’t expect you to go there” (*VGL*, p. 160). This image is suggestive of a more wholesome, spontaneous sexuality, and forms a neat contrast with the sinister, manipulative relationships that are the norm in the novel.

Vernon’s desire for artlessness provides another important link to Holden, although in Pierre’s novel the ratio of cravings for authenticity to lapses into histrionic insincerity is proportionally the opposite of what we find in *Catcher*. Holden’s critique of cinematic phoniness is set against his admission that he “hate[s] the movies like poison but ... get[s] a bang out of imitating them” (*CR*, p. 29); we see him do that in a comically poignant scene, after he is beaten up by Maurice, the prostitute’s pimp, at the end of Chapter 14. For his part, Vernon is shown to experience or crave authenticity on several occasions. A case in point is his telling observation prompted by a Mexican kid busy playing a

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<sup>13</sup> Like other sexual predators in the novel, Mr. Deutschman is portrayed as a man taking advantage of his powerful, influential position: “He used to be a school principal or something, all righteous and upstanding, back in the days before they’d bust you for that type of thing [i.e. sexual abuse]” (*VGL*, p. 38).

simple game: “Imagine a regular ten-year-old doing this, back home. I don’t fucken think so” (VGL, p. 180). Childhood innocence is a rarity in the face of American materialism, and the culture of entitlement that often underpins it: consider “ten-year-ole Brad” with his “authorized *disorder* that works like a Get Out of Jail Free card” (VGL, p. 23), or the other ten-year-old who haggles with Vernon when asked to cover for him at a charity sale (VGL, p. 93). Time and again Vernon muses about self-awareness and authenticity, imparting some hard-earned lessons, like the following two examples: “That’s the learning, O Partner: that you’re cursed when you realize true things, because then you can’t act with the full confidence of dumbness anymore” (VGL, p. 154); and, “You can only really be yourself when you have nothing left to lose, see? That’s a learning I made” (VGL, p. 192). In fact, the novel’s conclusion will prove that the opposite is true: when you have nothing left to lose, it is time to stop being yourself, and start toeing the proverbial line. Meeting people’s expectations is a basic principle upheld by the media, as Vernon surmises from legal shows: “You have to quiver on TV, it’s a fucken law of nature. ... If you ask me, people who don’t eat your bowels are more likely to be impassive. But no, one learning I made is that ... [i]f you don’t quiver, you’re fucken guilty” (VGL, p. 33). Similarly, the role of the media as the new arbiters of authenticity provides a wealth of narrative material. Vernon’s clumsy arrival at a rendezvous with Taylor, when the knowledge that he has made a fool of himself relieves him of the burden to impress the girl, is used by Pierre to highlight a crucial paradox: “in this new depression a curious thing happens. A life thing. ... we establish a real kind of contact, like in a movie or something. ... It accidentally makes me genuine, I guess, and exposes me as an ole fuckaway dog, all beat up to hell” (VGL, p. 159). From the beginning of the narrative, Pierre has been making clear that Vernon perceives and lives life as if it were a TV-movie, with Jean Claude Van Damme as an ideal role model; the idea that authenticity itself ought to be measured up against the parameters of cinematic or, as is more likely in Vernon’s case, televisual conventions (“a *real* ... contact, like in a *movie*”) is but an extension of this logic, and an exemplification of the “precession of simulacra” that characterizes postmodernity, to use Jean Baudrillard’s famous turn of phrase (1994/1981, p.1).

This emphasis on simulation explains why the novel can afford to evade the obvious, emotionally-charged issue of gun control; instead, it exploits its tragic and topical premise as a mere plot-device for satirical purposes (see the closing scene, featuring eleven-year-old Brad brandishing his

birthday present: a toy gun).<sup>14</sup> The focus of the narrative shifts towards the excesses of a society where simulation has taken over the real; in this context, the existential scope of Huck's and Holden's loneliness is lost in what, for Vernon, becomes mere inspiration for a trivial performance: "Load my pack, and lope away is what I'll do; all crusty and lonely, like you see on TV" (*VGL*, p. 39 – see also pp. 59 and 148).<sup>15</sup> Vernon models his escape on trite TV movie conventions, which themselves reference the trope of the tragically lonely, misunderstood, resilient outsider. While Huck and Holden embody the adolescent version of this type, Vernon is but a pale imitation of their example, and makes a mockery of their profound feelings of isolation in the process. Pierre's irreverent flippancy cuts through matters of life and death too, as witnessed by his (scarily plausible) representation of a judicial system cannibalized by show-business. Unsurprisingly, it is Vernon's muddled yearning for authenticity that brings matters to a head: overruling the advice of his "overdog" attorney (*VGL*, p. 199), Vernon departs from the script to testify at his trial and tell his story in his own words. This rash decision to trust the unedited truth lands Vernon in jail and, in due course, to death row, which Pierre aptly reimagines as a competition for survival in the reality-TV "Big Brother" style.

#### "No gray areas": Vernon's bitter ending

The maximum security prison under 24/7 media surveillance constitutes a much more extreme version of social control than Holden's sanatorium, but Vernon's reaction to his – lest we forget it, unnecessary and unjust – incarceration is where Pierre's novel departs profoundly from its predecessor. In the final section of the text, Vernon gives up his role as the adolescent outsider, the (mostly) clear-sighted, besieged idealist who can point the finger at society's flaws because he has not yet caved in to its dictates to conform. Vernon's movement from the fringes of the establishment to contentment at the

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<sup>14</sup> For good measure, Pierre is careful to show how Jesus's intended victims are horrible bullies – but the main reason why he gets away with using a high-school massacre as a pretext for comic writing is his caricatural, over-the-top treatment of his subject, which desensitizes readers to its extreme violence and squalor.

<sup>15</sup> A recurrent refrain since its first mention at the beginning of the narrative – "I felt so lonesome I most wished I was dead" (*HF*, p. 16 – see also p. 37, p. 51, 53, 228, 229) – Huck's acute "streak of loneliness" is reprised by Holden, in remarkably similar terms: "I felt so lonesome, all of a sudden. I almost wished I was dead" (*CR*, p. 48 – see also p. 81, 90, 153 and 155).

prospect of settling down in Martirio is foreshadowed by a fleeting, implicit comparison with the Baby Boomers: in dismissing the authority of adult figures, Vernon's remarks that "the guy's over thirty" (VGL, p. 17) or "[d]efinitely over thirty" (VGL, p. 32) recall a popular slogan from the late sixties ("don't trust anybody over thirty"). This allusion to the Vietnam War generation – and, by extension, to their failure to change the world – summons the inevitable compromises, and the loss of idealism, that come with age, in what reads as an early warning about Vernon's less than revolutionary fate. As we have seen, Huck and Holden are rebels at times naively unaware of their own privileges and contradictions, but they nonetheless strive to retain a modicum of integrity and authenticity (when both qualities are typically the preserve of the marginalized, the powerless and the vulnerable). Their acquiescence to the idea that life is a game to be played by the rules is temporary and/or projected into a future that may never come, as generations of readers continue to hope. By contrast, Vernon learns to play the game, gets his prize and does not look back. In his about-turn from hapless underdog to master manipulator, Vernon is coached by a fellow convict, the axe-murderer Clarence Lasalle, whose advice proves to be life-changing and, literally, life-saving: "You're the God. Take responsibility. Exercise your power" (VGL, p. 260). In his role as the catalyst for the decision that brings the plot to a close, Lasalle ironically plays a similar function to Phoebe's in *Catcher*; in an understated allusion to the earlier novel, Lasalle challenges Vernon with the same exasperated observation that Phoebe had made to Holden, with exactly the same result: neither adolescent can mention one thing he likes (CR, p. 169) or loves (VGL, p. 251). (Incidentally, it is all too conceivable that, at a time when it is increasingly difficult to believe in childhood innocence, a serial killer should take the place of a disarming, ten-year-old little sister.)

While Holden comes to terms with the realization that he cannot "play god" and, at the carousel, renounces his fantasy of being the catcher in the rye, Vernon decides to embrace the megalomaniac, Machiavellian identity that Lasalle advocates, and admits: "In a world where you're *supposed* to be a psycho ... I was too darn embarrassed to play God" (VGL, p. 261). But no more: with a few phone calls ostensibly meant to grant the wishes of friends and enemies alike, Vernon triggers a series of events whereby the villains get their just deserts and he regains his freedom. Short of signalling a call for universal sympathy, like Holden's closing admission that he misses everybody (even the least savoury

characters he has come across, in a nudge to Huck's compassion for "them poor pitiful rascals"), Vernon's conciliatory gestures are predicated on Lasalle's lesson that catering to other people's needs is a guarantee that "they'll dance to any fucking tune you play" (*VGL*, p. 260). And, surely, they do – though Pierre adds to the manic final shoot-out a couple of other preposterously felicitous events: the original court-appointed attorney, a dud, comes up trumps with reliable proof of Vernon's innocence and Ella Bouchard replaces the scheming Taylor as Vernon's leading-lady, complete with new-found modesty and fresh beauty. Needless to say, the couple run off together into the sunset, to Mexico, otherwise characterized as a playground for rich tourists – a travesty of the frontier and its ambivalent, symbolic meaning. Besides, as Vernon promises, the two will be back because "[e]verything's back to normal" (*VGL*, p. 277). The novel thus gets a contrived, simplistic, neatly wrapped-up happy ending – nothing like the conclusion that Pierre initially had in mind. In that original scenario Vernon "was obviously going to die" (The Guardian Books Podcast, 2006) because a colossal miscarriage of justice is exactly what the entire narrative had been building up to, with its mood of mounting hysteria.<sup>16</sup> The author has given two reasons for this change of plan: his desire to follow the conventions of a B-movie, as is appropriate to the hyperreal logic of the novel and, crucially, the idea that "this [ending] was more bitter" than the alternative (The Guardian Books Podcast, 2006). Vernon's undeserved execution would have ratified his heroic status as an innocent martyr (etymologically, a "witness") to a terminally corrupt society, rather than signal his willingness to compromise and seek reintegration into a world where there are "[o]nly underdogs and psychos" (*VGL*, p. 33), and where being in the latter camp is the only way to survive and, indeed, thrive. Also of note is the source of the bitterness in Vernon's abrupt, twisted metamorphosis: what really sours the ending is its betrayal of our continuing attachment to the figure of the teenager as a relatively guileless, outspoken censor of societal corruption – an investment which, it ought to be said, flies in the face of the negative press that today's "youths" are often saddled with. This interesting contradiction warrants a few closing remarks about the actual place of *Vernon God*

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<sup>16</sup> Readers are prepared to witness a cruel and summary execution of "justice" already at the end of Chapter 1: "all I whiff, over the sweat and barbecue sauce, is school – the kind of pulse bullyboys give off when they spot a quiet one, a wordsmith, in a corner. The scent of lumber being cut for a fucken cross" (*VGL*, p. 11).

*Little* in the adolescent rebel narrative tradition, and about the contemporary text which, to all intents and purposes, has displaced it as the rightful heir to Salinger's and Twain's legacy.

### The real *Catcher* of the new millennium

Asked about his choice of a fifteen-year-old narrator, Pierre explains that adolescents are “much closer to the coalface of despair” because it is at this age that we realize the fallibility, or the tendentiousness, of adults, and the need to “sort out [for ourselves] what's real and what's false” instead of taking other people's guidance and beliefs at face value. Vernon's voice gives Pierre the “licence [...] for innocence” and the opportunity to be “genuinely dismayed and angry and to feel much more potent emotions” (The Guardian Books Podcast, 2006). In this revealing interview, Pierre subscribes to the notion of the adolescent rebel on the cusp of those first crushing disillusionments which mark the end of childhood as an age of innocence. It is no wonder that the reception of the novel has highlighted this aspect of the text, without dwelling on the happy ending where the price for justice being done is that the adolescent should lose his liminal, outsider status.<sup>17</sup> It would seem that we cannot let go of this much loved literary figure which – harking back to Huck and especially to Holden – continues to loom large over our collective imagination because its appeal works on an emotional, intellectual and moral level. The adolescent rebel is supremely sympathetic – even to those who can see through his contradictions and blind spots – in view of the vulnerability and angst traditionally ascribed to this stage in life. Intellectually, he provides a fresh, defamiliarizing view of the world rooted in his lack of experience and in his marginalized perspective, as a character whose integration into the adult world is still a work in progress. On the run (often literally) from the trappings of “sivilization,” the teenage misfit is also perceived to possess a fundamental innocence – a legacy of the Romantic view of childhood – that is further set out by its contrast with the moral bankruptcy and anomie of the society he lives in. Eulalio Ledesma, the wannabe media mogul and arch-villain in *Vernon*, knows what he is talking about when

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<sup>17</sup> Pierre knows that “eventually the thing that people like is to see justice being done”, though, as John Mullan retorts in the same interview, justice is “dished out” by Pierre and received by the readership in the same cheering spirit in which we respond to the demise of a “villain in a James Bond movie” (Guardian Book Club, 2006).

he declares that “the world loves an underdog” (*VGL*, p. 33) – with the proviso, we may add, that said underdog retains his moral integrity in his eventual triumph. In his devilish refusal to meet this condition, Pierre makes a bold departure from the conventions of the adolescent rebel narrative – a move which perhaps explains why his Booker Prize winner has failed to capture the public imagination to the degree that its initial reception might have led us to expect.

*Vernon* has cropped up as a recommended text for the A-level option “The Struggle for Identity in Modern Literature,” has been adapted for the stage by Tanya Ronder in 2007 and has been the subject of various plans for a film version (the latest rumours indicate Werner Herzog as the director attached to the project). Despite these signs of popularity and high sales figures, the book “is often referenced in polls as being the contemporary fiction novel which most readers fail to complete” (Penford, 2011, p. 15). Compare this relatively underwhelming performance with the phenomenal multimedia success of the story of another idiosyncratic, marginalized, first-person adolescent narrator. Published the same year as *Vernon*, Mark Haddon’s *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* (2003) features the fifteen-year-old Christopher Boone, whose deadpan voice unceremoniously reveals the petty foibles and shortcomings of supposedly responsible adults. Also a recommended text for A-level students, Haddon’s novel is no match for most literary titles of the new millennium when it comes to publication figures and cultural significance. Having sold “well over ten million copies in forty-five languages” (BBC World Bookclub, 2015), and with long theatrical runs at the National Theatre, in the West End and on Broadway, *Curious Incident* – and not *Vernon* – is the text that can claim to be the real *Catcher* of our times in terms of its wide-spread recognition, canonical potential and staying power. However, the popularity of this novel relies on highly selective critical approaches, which in their turn have led to common interpretative oversights. For instance, the general reception of *Curious Incident* has focussed on the particular condition that makes the protagonist’s experience unique, rather than (neuro)typical. While Holden’s bereavement is pushed to the side, Christopher’s autism is infallibly foregrounded in discussions of the text. It seems to me that if the 1950s were on the lookout for a representative adolescent, fifty years later, faced with contemporary reinterpretations of this dissenting literary type, we turn to characters who let us continue to romanticize this difficult developmental stage, precisely *because of* their eccentricity. As I have argued in greater detail in a previous article (Ciocia 2009), part

of Christopher's appeal is that his disability becomes a convenient handle for us to hold on to the fundamental innocence of the teenage rebel – in a way that we can only do with *Vernon* (and this is the key difference between the two texts) if we wilfully misread its ending. At the root of his piercing observations about social niceties and conventions, Christopher's disorder also allows us to write off the less palatable aspects of his behaviour, such as his unkind comments about other people or even his violent outbursts. Understandably, these traits are seldom dwelt on in examinations of the novel, which are more interested in highlighting Christopher's defamiliarizing gaze on adult society and its absurdities. Akin to the critical neglect over the ending of Pierre's novel, these silences testify to our emotional investment in the idea of the innocent adolescent rebel, even at a time when, in the real world, fifteen-year-old boys are unlikely to be thought of as inexperienced and unthreatening, as both *Vernon* and *Curious Incident* acknowledge only too clearly, if one cares to look.

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