

Fictional teenagers fare better than real ones

I think it was Alice Munro who once said that the way to get started writing fiction is to imagine that you're 14 again.

She was implying that writers must have a fresh take on things and that adolescents are a good model in that regard.

They tend to fixate on details, are obsessed with the truth and can't help but notice all the surreal, bizarre and contradictory aspects of adult behavior.

They also can make a religion out of coincidences, feeding their souls with all manner of symbolic portent.

All of which sounds like a typical writer.

Adolescents, in other words, treat the ordinary as if it were extraordinary and the extraordinary as if it were ordinary, which just happens to be the advice of another writer — Scott Fitzgerald — about writing fiction.

But it's not just the point of view of adolescents that is useful to remember, it's also useful to remember what it was like to be a teenager.

For most of us, adolescence was so raw, so painful, so intense and exciting that every once in a while we want to go back there and remember — in tiny, eye-dropper doses — what it was like.

Hence the appeal of coming-of-age stories and such TV series as *My So-Called Life* and *Straight Up*.

The appeal of *My So-Called Life* had nothing to do with real-

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ism: It was neither a portrait of contemporary teenagers, nor of parents of contemporary teens.

Rather, the series worked on an emotional level, luxuriating in the possibility of human connection. The writers created situations in which characters longed to be understood.

If many of us experienced adolescence as a desert of understanding, as adults we could watch *My So-Called Life* and re-experience that longing, with the added benefit that it sometimes would be fulfilled. That's what was so poignant and touching about the show.

On the other hand, *Straight Up* — the series produced by Janis Lundman and Adrienne Mitchell, which has just concluded on CBC — inhabited an aesthetic dimension all its own. There never has been anything like it on television.

In a mock-documentary style, using hand-held cameras and stylistic editing, the half-hour show pulsed with the fear, anxiety, errant attractions and repulsions of the teenage psyche.

And yet, in most of the linked



STRAIGHT UP: Sarah Polley in series that pulsed with teens' fears, anxieties, attractions and repulsions.

episodes, there was an emotional core where all the characters were treated with respect and empathy.

There were no judgments and the respect was for how adolescents struggle through their difficulties using whatever means are available to them.

Sometimes, an episode was true to the characters' aimlessness and unapologetic as to the banality of its epiphanies.

At other times, the show transcended its own aims, which seemed to centre on notions of authenticity.

The first episode, for in-

stance, presented one of the best vignettes I've ever seen on how a relationship breaks down. The fact that it involved teenagers became immaterial.

In this episode, a young woman is trying to communicate her emotional and sexual needs to a partner who is too emotionally and sexually insecure to hear what she has to say.

The tug between her struggle to express herself and his defensiveness is so accurately written and acted that we feel for both of them.

Interestingly enough, it would seem that, in our society, we reserve our empathy and under-

standing for fictionalized teenagers. The real thing tends to become demonized pretty quickly, especially if the real thing happens to be of the working-class variety.

How else to explain some of the media reaction to *Tough Assignment*, John Walker's documentary on the year he spent shooting at Oakwood Collegiate?

The tough assignment of the title refers to how difficult it is for teachers to teach teenagers, and anyone who sees the documentary is bound to feel a great deal of admiration for some of the teachers featured in it.

But that doesn't mean that these kids are "bad." In fact, the good teachers shown here express dismay that some of their students are considered troublemakers in other classes.

In his introduction to the documentary on TVO's *View From Here* series, Ian Brown was shocked by these students, calling them "hormone-crazed louts and slackers."

The greatest crime of these teens, however, is that "the majority of them have no intention of going to college, dooming themselves to the economic margins of society."

And why is this? "Because their parents didn't go to university." Tsk, tsk.

Globe And Mail columnist Robert Fulford, on the other hand, who is one of those people who has done rather well without going to university, was

troubled by the fact that kids are slumping in the halls, that they're not interested in post-secondary education and that they're "so relaxed that they're nearly comatose."

In fact, the documentary shows that in classes in which the teacher is respectful and devoted, students are attentive participants.

Being nearly comatose hour upon hour is, in fact, my memory of high school, except for history and literature classes taught by teachers whom I liked. Like many others, I spent most of my time staring out the window, wanting to be outside, or succumbing to semi-erotic trances.

Other occupations included cooking up elaborate schemes in which I would totally redesign the educational system so it would take into account my need to make things or participate in events upon which I could have an impact.

Sarah Polley, one of the stars of *Straight Up*, is to be a speaker at a rally to save public schools, scheduled for noon today at Queen's Park.

Sponsored by a coalition of parents and children, the rally also is to feature performers Nancy White, Taborah Johnson and Eric Peterson.

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