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The Blurred Lines of Consent in YA

Sex remains controversial even in Young Adult fiction marketed at an audience who is discovering and experimenting with their newly found sexuality. The abundant presence of sex in YA fiction betrays a deep need to address issues of sexuality for a young audience. As found by Roberta Seelinger Trites (1998), Lydia Kokkola (2013), as well as Michelle Fine (1988), Amy Pattee (2006) and Sara Hutchinson (2016), sexual desire is both a source of angst and pleasure for young adults, as well as a cause of fear for adults. The #MeToo movement foregrounded issues of consent on social media platforms, which play a central role in the lives of many adolescents, and forced philosophical debates on sex. Now, the conversation started by this movement rages on in different forms as well. This new anxiety concerning consent is a new expression of fear surrounding sex in general, and is thus reflected in YA fiction. In this paper I analyse Tjibbe Veldkamp's *De Lovebus* (2017), focusing specifically on the impact of multi-focalisation on the treatment of consent. The novel has four focalisers (two women and two men) whose main concerns are to do with sex with another focaliser. All have different interpretations of consent. There are no explicit conversations about where the limits of the "contract" proposed by their giving or receiving of consent lie. Instead, they act and reflect on ambiguity and confusion. The contrasts between these focalisers provides an insight into the moral and emotional confusion at the core of the debate on consent with adolescents. Particularly in conversation with social media movements like #MeToo, #SilenceIsViolence, and #MeAt14, narratively and morally complex novels like *Lovebus* challenge adult understandings of adolescent (and adult) conceptualisations of consent and what constitutes healthy approaches to sex.

Vera Veldhuizen is Assistant Professor in European Languages and Cultures at the University of Groningen, the Netherlands. She is also affiliated with the Groningen Culture & Cognition research group and OSL, The Netherlands Research School for Literary Studies. Her research focus lies on cognitive narratological approaches to children's literature, which was the focus of her doctoral thesis at the University of Cambridge (2020), supervised by Professor Maria Nikolajeva. Her current research project is on a cognitive narratological reading of conflicting

truth narratives in children's war literature, with an added lens of populism and conspiratorial narratives. She is kick starting this project with a research fellowship (Stipo) at the International Youth Library (IJB) in München this summer. Her most recent publications are "Empathy Across Time in Speculative Children's Shoah Fiction" in *English Association: Issues in English* (2019) and "Narrative Ethics in Robert Westall's *The Machine Gunners*" in *Children's Literature in Education* (2020).