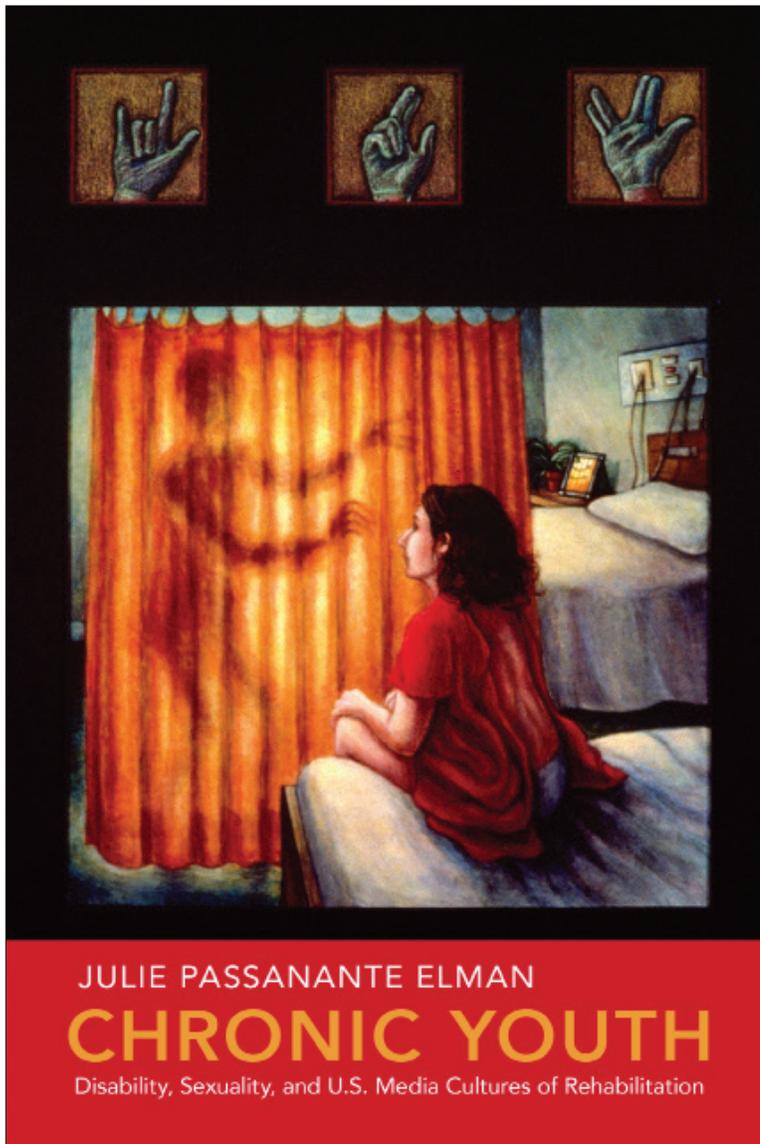


# CHRONIC YOUTH

## INSTRUCTOR'S GUIDE



Spotlighting the “troubled teen” as a site of pop cultural, medical, and governmental intervention, *Chronic Youth* traces the teenager as a figure through which broad threats to the normative order have been negotiated and contained.

Examining television, popular novels, new media, and public policy, Julie Passanante Elman shows how the teenager became a cultural touchstone for shifting notions of able-bodiedness, heteronormativity, and neoliberalism in the late twentieth century. By the late 1970s, media industries as well as policymakers began developing new problem-driven ‘edutainment’ prominently featuring narratives of disability—from the immunocompromised *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* to ABC’s *After School Specials* and teen sick-lit. Although this conjoining of disability and adolescence began as a storytelling convention, disability became much more than a metaphor as the process of medicalizing adolescence intensified by the 1990s, with parenting books containing neuro-scientific warnings about the volatile “teen brain.” Undertaking a cultural history of youth that combines disability, queer, feminist, and comparative media studies, Elman offers a provocative new account of how American cultural producers have mobilized discourses of disability to cast adolescence as a treatable “condition.” By tracing the teen’s uneven passage from postwar rebel to 21st century patient, *Chronic Youth* shows how teenagers became a lynchpin for a culture of perpetual rehabilitation and neoliberal governmentality.

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## Introduction

### *From Rebel to Patient*

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The introductory chapter undertakes two main tasks. First, it provides a history of the category of adolescence from its emergence at the turn of the twentieth century to its elaboration in sociological literature and popular media of the 1960s and beyond. Second, it elaborates a theory of “rehabilitative citizenship,” or the process through which endless physical and emotional self-surveillance becomes attached to what it means to be a good citizen, often through seemingly apolitical appeals for “health” or “growth.” As historians and sociologists have documented, the late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed an increasing embrace of therapeutic or “self-help” culture for adults amid a growing influence of psychology in American culture. A makeover culture took shape in this context and was also fueled by national values such as liberal individualism and entrepreneurialism. This chapter previews how the emergence of a new kind of popular and pedagogical “edutainment” format for addressing teen sexuality, which aimed to mold teen citizenship by teaching “lessons” for maturation, transmitted and popularized rehabilitative citizenship. By detailing how the teenager has transitioned from rebel to patient, this introduction shows how ideas about teen growth have participated in an ongoing normalization of a culture of rehabilitation.

#### WHY CONSIDER THIS BOOK FOR YOUR CLASS?

- Age is often a neglected category of analysis in classes, in spite of the fact that undergraduates are often grappling with the many challenges of their own coming-of-age processes! Instructors can use this book to facilitate fruitful conversations about ageism, sexuality, embodiment, and adolescence using popular culture that is fun to watch, read, and discuss. Students can reflect on generational differences between themselves and their instructors; think about issues of sexuality and coming of age; and critically analyze the popular culture that was considered “healthy” for them as teenagers. However, they can also understand their own experiences of adolescence in relation to a broader history of youth in the U.S.
- This book is an indispensable tool for introducing undergraduate and graduate students to disability media studies. Students will learn how to identify and critique common disability stereotypes and ableist narratives. For this reason, it would be an excellent addition to courses in U.S. media, cultural history, or television studies.
- The book employs many different methodological approaches to qualitative media analysis. Students can use it as an example of how to combine different methodological approaches: historical analysis, audience/reception studies, industry studies, political analysis, and close reading. In this way, the book would be useful in courses emphasizing interdisciplinary media or cultural studies methodologies.
- For women’s, gender and sexuality studies courses, this book is a valuable introduction to queer, disability, and feminist media studies. It uses fun and accessible pop cultural examples to illuminate the complex intersections of disability, sexuality, gender, age and race.

## Introduction

### *From Rebel to Patient*

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#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why do you think the author named this chapter “From Rebel to Patient?” What does that phrase mean?
- What is rehabilitative citizenship? What are some examples of it? How does it differ from other visions of citizenship?
- What is an “identity crisis?” When does it happen? Has it always existed as a concept? What does it mean to you?
- What emotions or attributes are typically used to describe teenagers? What commonalities do you see in representations of teenagers today with those in the past?
- What is rehabilitative edutainment? Can you think of any media you consumed as a teenager that fits this description? Can you think of any media that was not edutainment?

## Chapter One

### *Medicine is Magical and Magical is Art: Liberation and Overcoming in The Boy in the Plastic Bubble*

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This chapter analyzes the cultural significance of the “bubble boy” by surveying representations of “real” bubble boys (David Vetter III and Ted DeVita) alongside an early example of “disease-of-the-week” fictionalized television programming *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* (1976). Fusing narratives of science-fiction, romance, nationalism, and coming-of-age, the bubble boy became a key disabled cultural figure through which society negotiated ambivalence about scientific technology, masculinity, disability, and sexuality in a new sexually-liberated world. By considering how a medical interest story became reimagined as a teen romantic drama, the chapter questions whether or not rehabilitative edutainment offered an ethical critique of technology through its representation of sexual liberation. Moreover, thinking through the cultural requirements of achieving manhood reveals how heavily narratives of liberated sexuality in the 1970s relied upon ableist ideas of overcoming disability.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What does the author mean by “disabled martyrdom?”
- What is “technological triumphalism?” Can you cite any contemporary examples? How does a triumphant narrative of technology avoid or cover over ethical dilemmas regarding new technologies?
- What was “disease-of-the-week” television? Does it exist today? How does it differ from other types of shows featuring disability or disease?
- How is sexual liberation reliant on able-bodiedness and, particularly, on the sense of touch?
- How is sex discussed in terms of health?

#### ACTIVITIES

Screen the PBS documentary, *The Boy in the Bubble*, and discuss the ethical dilemmas posed by David Vetter’s treatment. Then, screen the made-for-TV movie, *The Boy in the Plastic Bubble* (available on YouTube). The author argues that the made-for-TV movie offers a “symbolic resolution to a concrete historical situation.” What does she mean? Do you think this movie was implicitly critiquing Vetter’s or DeVita’s treatment?

Have students bring in contemporary examples of “disease-of-the-week” television, either from medical dramas like *House* or family dramas. Discuss how they represent disability or illness. What problems are presented for the ill or disabled character? How are they resolved? Does the drama emphasize social problems, such as stigma, inaccessible spaces, or unaffordable health care? Or does the drama portray the problems as mainly individual, familial, or emotional?

## Chapter Two

### *After School Special Education: Sex, Tolerance, and Rehabilitative Television*

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This chapter examines representations of disability in ABC's famous *After School Specials*. Contextualizing the *Specials* within the history of television regulation, educational broadcasting, and concerns about teens' relationship to a new, post-sexual revolution sexual culture of the 1970s, this chapter shows how the series presented a disciplined vision of sexual liberation for teen viewers, combining educational value with sexual titillation. The series offered moral lessons about sexual responsibility without imagining teens as always inherently threatened by their own sexuality. While still relying heavily upon disability stereotypes, the series also ushered in a new openness about teen sexuality even as it reconsolidated heterosexist and ableist norms.

By linking heteronormativity and ability, the *Specials* presented coming-of-age stories of healthy overcoming of disability and linked this process to proper heterosexual development. However, the *Specials* were also engaged in another cultural project of rehabilitation: an effort to transform the popular image of television itself by countering older fears of TV's deleterious effects on youth came with a new form of entertaining *and* socially-responsible programming. In this way, rehabilitative edutainment established a means of conveying important moral lessons about self-management and citizenship through an entertaining and financially lucrative, commercial format.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- Why were the *After School Specials* considered "healthy?" How and why were they juxtaposed with "bad" television programming?
  - The author argues that networks "inoculated themselves against critique" by producing shows like the *Specials*. What does she mean? How can the promotion of certain content be a way of avoiding government regulation?
  - How did sexual liberation affect television?
  - What is compulsory able-bodiedness? How do the narratives link able-bodiedness with heterosexuality? How do they naturalize heterosexuality?
- How does gender affect the lessons offered to teenagers the *Specials*?
- What does it mean to be "tolerant?" How is that different from acceptance or love? Does tolerance require empathy?
  - Does the format of *After School Specials* live on in other contemporary forms?

## Chapter Two

### *After School Special Education:*

### *Sex, Tolerance, and Rehabilitative Television (continued)*

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#### ACTIVITIES

A selection of ABC's *After School Specials* are available on DVD (including the two episodes discussed in this chapter) and can be paired with this chapter for discussion.

Ask students to find clips of teen-oriented shows on YouTube and discuss what types of lessons they offer, how they construct "bad behavior" and "good behavior," and what penalties are offered for deviant behavior (i.e. drinking, drugs, etc.). Ask students how the shows they watched as teenagers represented societal problems.

## Chapter Three

### *Cryin' and Dyin' in the Age of Aliteracy:*

#### *Romancing Teen Sick-Lit*

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This chapter analyzes the proliferation in the 1980s and early 1990s of “teen sick-lit,” a subgenre of the young adult (YA) problem novel that featured love stories about teen girls and boys with life-threatening illnesses and targeted adolescent female readers. Proponents of teen sick-lit countered critiques of YA novels as vapid and, instead, cast teen sick-lit as socially-relevant and educational, especially as a tool of emotional instruction. Surveying the work of popular authors Lurlene McDaniel and Jean Ferris, this chapter asks: How and why youth consumption of sad popular culture has acquired cultural value as a form of citizenship-training? How has a cultural desire to build empathy required and valorized tragic stories of illness and disability? As they debated sad literature’s potential to instantiate teen readers’ emotional maturity through their exposure to the life’s “grim realities,” parents, policymakers, and cultural producers relied upon a familiar developmental narrative. They assumed youth had to “overcome” teen angst to achieve empathy and emotional management. Amid a campaign undertaken by the Library of Congress to conquer a crisis of “aliteracy,” its name for a uniquely American indifference toward reading, sad novels acquired new currency as a crucial affective antidote to apathetic citizenship. Finally, this chapter maintains that sad popular culture, teen empathy, and emotional intelligence gained even greater value in the 1980s and early 1990s. As a new “emotional style” of labor, reading sick-lit made sense during a global transition to a service-economy in which emotional performances, like happiness, ease, or concern, acquired new exchange value.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is teen sick-lit?
- How is emotional instruction gendered? For example, how are girls and boys taught, in gender-specific ways, to resolve conflicts?
- Why was aliteracy considered a crisis? What did it have to do with other media, such as television or video games?
- Have you ever intentionally watched or read something sad? What attracted you to it?
- Do you think sad literature for teenagers helps to develop empathy? Do you think it relies on stereotypical representations of disability as tragic or pitiable? How else might literature encourage the development of empathy?
- Is empathy essential to adulthood? To good citizenship?
- How is health linked to heterosexuality in teen sick-lit? Why is it important to think about this linkage?

## Chapter 3

*Cryin' and Dyin' in the Age of Aliteracy:*

*Romancing Teen Sick-Lit (continued)*

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### ACTIVITIES

Watch or read John Green's *The Fault in Our Stars*, and discuss whether or not the movie corresponds to or complicates the formula of teen sick-lit.

Examine the covers from Lurlene McDaniel's novels. How do they represent the stories and characters? (A Google Image search for "Lurlene McDaniel books" yields many results.)

Bring in your favorite "sad" story and talk about why it appeals to you.

## Chapter 4

### *Crazy by Design:*

### *Neuroparenting and Crisis in the Decade of the Brain*

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This chapter discusses the disability politics of the American cultural fascination with the human brain in the 1990s. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the rise of new neuroscientifically-influenced methods of parenting teenagers that incorporated new neuroscience discoveries to explain how “typical teen” attributes, such as impulsiveness or emotional explosiveness, were neurologically-rooted rather than culturally constructed. News media and parenting books translated scientific studies about the brain into proof that teens were inherently “brain damaged,” “temporarily disabled,” “crazy,” or otherwise incapacitated by their still-developing brains rather than just willfully misbehaved. Neuroscientific explanations for the mysteries of adolescence gained additional traction amid the first soundings of an American school shooting “epidemic,” racialized reportage of African American and Latino “superpredators,” and cultural debates about antidepressants. Thus, this chapter spotlights the crucial and particular ways in which larger discourses of genetics and neuroscience attempted to prove that race, class, gender, sexuality as well as violent behavior were neurologically and/or genetically rooted, rather than socially-constructed.

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- What is neuroparenting? Why was it appealing to parents?
- What does it mean to say that the brain is both physical and cultural?
- How is the teen brain represented as disabled?
- How does race play a role in the perception of school shootings and of adolescent violence more generally? How do media?
- What was eugenics? How is it related to modern-day genetics?

#### ACTIVITIES

Have students search for reportage in *TIME*, *Newsweek*, *National Geographic*, as well as major newspapers about neuroscience discoveries. Ask them to identify moments when an area in the brain is used to explain a particular behavior or character trait.

## Conclusion

### *Susceptible Citizens in the Age of Wiihabilitation*

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The concluding chapter discusses how rehabilitative citizenship expanded in relation to diagnostic media, a term that encompasses health-focused, consumer-oriented media that encourages self-diagnosis and treatment. Alongside these new media offerings, a new pathology, cyberchondria, emerged to describe an unhealthy obsession with decoding symptoms by using internet health search engines such as WebMD. The naturalization of self-surveillance that this book has detailed in relation to adolescence created a ready-made market of susceptible citizens for these new, entertaining, educational and highly lucrative technologies. The book concludes by asking what new forms of interdependence become possible by embracing shared vulnerability rather than endless individual improvement.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What is cyberchondria?
- How do you use online health information? Where else might you get health information? How might the source of your information affect the way you imagine yourself?
- What does Nikolas Rose mean by “susceptibility?” How does it change our relationships to our bodies to think of them as “always-already asymptotically ill?”
- How did rehabilitative edutainment create a market for WebMD? Or the Fitbit?

#### ACTIVITIES

Have students Google different symptoms (i.e. “headache,” “stomach pains”) to evaluate how the search engine ranks the potential causes of the symptoms.

Have students discuss what type of monitoring apps they use to index their exercise or other self-care regimens and how they use them.

# CONCLUSION