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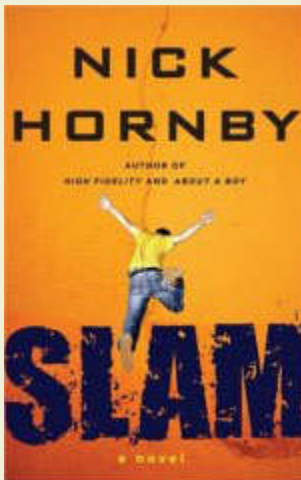
LITTLE LAD LIT

Authors Nick Hornby and Roddy Doyle invade the teen market

By Al Kaufman

In response to the huge success of the chick lit genre, publishers, desperately trying to get men into bookstores, created the counterpart, lad lit. Led by its patron saint, Nick Hornby, but also including authors Tony Parsons, Mike Gayle and Mil Millington, lad lit examined the lives of vacuous males, who meandered around going from girl to girl, job to job and couch to couch. Hornby's books, such as *HIGH FIDELITY* and *ABOUT A BOY*, had a certain innocent sweetness about them that garnered them some crossover appeal. But most lad lit books went down in flames, as it was quickly determined that guys didn't want to read about other loser guys (and women certainly did not either). Instead, guys, being guys, chose to read glossy magazines like *MAXIM* and *FHM*, with scantily clad women on their covers and articles about gadgets, cars and action movies inside.

Much like men, teenage boys are another unreachable base for publishers. Walk into the teen section of any bookstore and the shelves are covered with teen versions of Harlequin Romances. Boys don't want to read about their awkward teen years. They, being future men, want to live in denial of their problems and want to find something to help them escape. Most boys who read to any extent make the jump from kid to adult books, like those from Stephen King, without bothering to read about acne, bullying and first sexual experiences (at least those told in first person, present day time).



Nick Hornby
SLAM
Putnam Juvenile

Hornby, the only author to find real commercial success in lad lit (a label he despises), tries to give it a go for the teen boy market as well. In *SLAM*, Sam is a 16-year-old skateboarder who worships skater legend Tony Hawk so much that he liberally quotes from his autobiography and talks to his poster to get advice on life. He chooses to opt out of responsibility every chance he gets. Instead of breaking up with his girlfriend, he stops calling. When he finds out she's pregnant, he tries to move to another town. In short, he's basically the drifting teen version of the Will Lightman

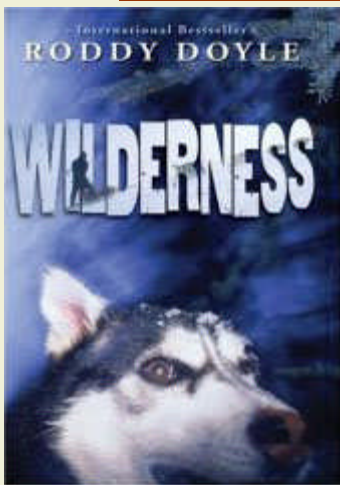
character in ABOUT A BOY. And, like Lightman, Sam has a certain amount of boyish charm to him that is utterly irresistible. For guys, we can see part of our younger (or maybe current) selves in him, while girls see someone they want to mother and protect. It's simple and stereotypical, but it works. Fans of Hornby's adult novels should enjoy SLAM, which is basically an adult novel that treads very lightly on the curse words and sex scenes. This is difficult, because Sam and his girlfriend Alicia have a lot of sex. Hornby, writing in first person, usually covers this just with one line or so, saying things like, "Then we went up to her room and had sex."

With SLAM, Hornby has created yet another perfectly believable, endearing despite his numerous faults, character. However, the scenes in which Sam is dropped into the future are a bit of a stretch and seem totally unnecessary. Perhaps Hornby was trying to remind us that this is still essentially a boy with a strong fantasy life, or he needed the device to show us that everything was going to turn out all right in the end. Either way, the scenes take away from the simultaneously hilarious and dramatic real life as it unfolds around Sam, which Hornby does so well.

So, this is a great book. That's been established. But who is going to read it? Are teenage boys who can relate to getting their girlfriend pregnant the type to go out and buy young adult books? Are the guys who read Hornby's novels going to brave walking into the young adult section to pick up this one? Will teenage girls, searching for clues as to the workings of the teenage boy mind, flock to it?

The immediate response to all these questions is a resounding "no," and that's too bad, because this book is too good to not find an audience. Penguin, the book's publisher, has the clout to push this book hard, and if they do so, it will be one instance of the product actually living up to the hype.

- **SLAM -- Hardcover \$13.49 at Amazon**



Roddy Doyle
WILDERNESS
Arthur A. Levine Books

While not necessarily lumped in with the lad lit authors, Roddy Doyle has definitely written his share of masculine books. His Henry Smart character from A STAR CALLED HENRY and OH PLAY THAT THING is walking testosterone. But he is also equally adept at writing from a woman's point of view, as he did so wonderfully in THE WOMAN WHO WALKED INTO DOORS and, its sequel, the recently released PAULA SPENCER. He has also written from the point of view of a 10-year-old boy in the Booker Prize-winning PADDY CLARKE HA HA HA and his children's book trilogy about the Mack family—THE GIGGLER TREATMENT, THE MEANWHILE ADVENTURES and ROVER SAVES CHRISTMAS—are some of the funniest kids'

books around. So it's not too surprising that Doyle would next try to capture the teen market.

Doyle offers the rowdy adventure, *WILDERNESS*, in which two boys from Dublin, Tom and Johnnie Griffin, go on a dog-sledding adventure holiday in Finland with their mom. Everything is great fun until their mother's sled shows up at the cabin without their mother on it. The obligatory rescue by the brothers is delivered in such a way that every boy will be able to see himself in the role.

But Doyle understands that a tale of two boys' heroic rescue of their mother would entirely leave out half of the teen audience. So he gave the boys an older half-sister, Grainne. Grainne drops out of high school and removes herself from her family as much as possible. Her dad stays home with her while she awaits a visit from her mother, of whom she has no memory.

Grainne thinks her mother will save her from her awful existence, but soon realizes she's not the savior she thought she would be. She's not an evil person, she's just not the answer.

Yes, the parallels are easy. While the boys go through their outdoor adventure, Grainne goes through her own inner version. But Doyle's greatest gift, like Hornby's, has always been that he creates characters that are so human but likable that anyone from the age of 10 to 100 will find something or someone they like in this book. Most will find many.