

The last taboo: toy boys

As Stephen Vizinczey's era-transcending novel, 'In Praise of Older Women', is re-published, Celia Walden asks why older women with toy boys are still taboo.

By Celia Walden

Published: 9:00PM GMT 03 Mar 2010



Sam Taylor-Wood, 42, and Aaron Johnson, 22 Photo: MARTIN POPE

On the red carpet at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts Awards last month, one couple drew more attention than most. The subtle swell of her belly denoting early pregnancy, a middle-aged woman in white reached instinctively for the young man at her side. He, placing a protective hand on her lower back, stood silently by as she gave interviews. They might have been mother and son but they were lovers, soon-to-be husband and wife: they were the 42-year-old film director Sam Taylor-Wood and her 22-year-old actor fiancé Aaron Johnson. "Yikes," one camera-woman winced, "here comes the cradle-snatcher."

The sentiment might have been more eloquently expressed, certainly by a member of Taylor-Wood's own sex, but older women and their boy toys have a tendency to prompt voluble – even crude – reactions. As the film director worked her way down the red carpet, birch-haired male executives with 19-year-old models on their arms ambled past, but the absurdity of those couplings passes unnoticed. Only the Older Woman, it seems, is taboo in a world where precious few remain.

Despite marrying her young boyfriend, actor Ashton Kutcher, five years ago, actress Demi Moore still provokes catty headlines for the 15-year age gap. Madonna is

widely derided for her relationship with 22-year-old model Jesus Luz, as was designer Sadie Frost, who dated a succession of young men after her split from Jude Law.

Then there is 52-year-old Kim Cattrall, who was accused of playing up to her *Sex and the City* alter ego, Samantha, when she began a relationship with a 28-year-old chef, Alan Wyse, which – surprise, surprise, sneer the cynics – didn't last the course. In the celebrity world a toy boy may be *de rigueur*, but in reality, the pairing remains as rare as it is controversial.

Literature and film would have us believe otherwise. Bergman's *Torment*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *The Last Picture Show*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone* and, of course, *The Graduate*, have kept young male cinema-goers titillated by the notion for years. Byron did the same in *Don Juan*, as did Stendhal in *Scarlet and Black*, and Bernard Schlink in *The Reader*. The dynamic has always inspired the artistic imagination, but no written account goes into as much depth as Stephen Vizinczey's era-transcending, *In Praise of Older Women*, re-released this week as a Penguin Classic.

The best-selling book, which was originally published in 1965 and has sold more than five million copies worldwide, must have provoked a veritable glut of misalliances after its narrator, Andras Vajda, described in enchanting detail his discovery that the embraces of older women are infinitely preferable to those of younger girls.

"One of my chief irritations at the time was the blankness of the faces of my young girl friends," says the young Vajda of one married lover, Maya. "But Maya's face, with the fine lines of her 40 some years, expressed all the shades of her thoughts and emotions."

Forty-five years after penning those lines, the Hungarian-born Vizinczey, now 76, remains ardent on the subject. "To be a young man and have a grown woman as your lover is not just sexy, it is paradise," he says. "That's what my novel is about. Women start at 30 and just get better."

Putting any condemnation of the pairing down to "people hating to see other people happy," Vizinczey lambasts the idea that women with children should no longer be sexual beings.

"If anything, a woman who has had children can be even sexier than before, because childbirth gives her a profound experience. The sexiest thing about a woman is her intelligence. The older women in the book were intelligent enough to learn from their experiences. An older woman who is an idiot is clearly inferior to an intelligent 20-year-old, but the intelligent 20-year-old will be even more interesting and exciting when she's 40 or 60."

Our modern day deification of youth may push an increasing amount of young men into the arms of older women, he feels. "The sex appeal of a woman has very little to do with the kind of things magazines talk about. It doesn't have much to do with big breasts, small breasts, figure – the most important part of sex appeal is humanity, an affectionate nature, intelligence. Allure certainly has very little to do with clothes. Isn't a woman best dressed when she is naked?"

"If you take the evolutionary argument," agrees psychologist Oliver James, author of *Affluenza*, "there is a great deal more sense in a younger man being with an older woman than the other way around, because a younger man can be more vigorous and useful to the woman."

It is a theory Germaine Greer supported in her contentious book, *The Boy*, a thesis on "why boys have always been the world's pin-ups". "Historically," the author of *The Female Eunuch* explained, "older women were expected to introduce boys to the refinement and excitement of sex. They were lovers, but they were also teachers."

Besides sex, Greer maintains, "older men sit in judgment, but boys don't do that. They are able to admire a woman for what she has achieved." Thirty years ago, Paul Theroux put his love of older women down to their ability to give men "something that is very nearly incomparable, the chance to complete in adulthood what was impossible to complete as a child, a blameless gift of lechery that combines the best of youth, a maturity, romance, and realism in equal parts".

But if the appeal from the young man's perspective is obvious, so are the pitfalls. Writer Oscar Humphries, the son of comedian Barry Humphries who enjoyed a liaison with Jimmy Choo founder Tamara Mellon when he was 22 and she was 40, remembers assuming a submissive role in the relationship. "The first time we had dinner together in London," he wrote at the time, "I half-heartedly reached for my overburdened Switch card when the bill arrived. I feigned hurt when she brushed it aside with her corporate Amex... Can there be equality in our relationship? Well, there is sexual equality, but, I have to admit, little else."

A mutually enjoyable game of dominance and submission is what drives the dynamic, adds James. "But whether it is love or sex spurring on the people involved, there will always be a large measure of desire on the part of the older person for the younger, which is where the "older woman" dynamic is not straightforward, because women, on the whole, are not attracted by nubility in younger members of the opposite sex – whereas men are."

So are these older women liberated or damaged? Where the celebrity contingent are concerned, James believes, narcissism and the search for eternal youth may play a big part, reducing the toy boy to a pick-me-up not unlike a new handbag. "There probably is something wrong with women who persist in going for very large age gaps," he claims. "The real problem starts when the younger person grows up."

Women in the public eye, Vizinczey shrugs, "are financially independent and therefore can defy convention, but women who cannot afford to defy convention have to do it in secret or be labelled predators, even put in jail, thanks to our puritanical laws. Predatory relationships exist, but they can exist even between people of the same age."

So long as the relationships are fictional, it seems, we are able to enjoy them. We all regret Benjamin's decision not to elope with Mrs Robinson, but how long would such a coupling have lasted? Not long, according to Theroux, which should mean no great sadness for either party. "The classic situation is nothing long-term; indeed, she might not particularly want to see you afterwards. The preliminaries, the half-truths, the

confidences, the wooing – all these are dispensed with. There isn't time; she comes straight to the point and then goes back to her life. She is doing what older men do to younger women."

Vizinczey vehemently disagrees. "Most relationships don't last, regardless of the age of the couples. Enduring relationships depend not only on the ages of the couples, but whether or not they are people on the same wavelength, which is why I think mine will go on lasting." Because his particular older woman...? She's Canadian, she's called Gloria – and he's been married to her for 45 years.

* *'In Praise of Older Women'* by Stephen Vizinczey (*Penguin Modern paperback*) is available from *Telegraph Books* at £9.99 + 99p p&p. Call 0844 871 1515 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk