

READING THE ADOLESCENT ROMANCE

Sweet Valley High and the Popular
Young Adult Romance Novel



Amy S. Pattee



READING THE
ADOLESCENT
ROMANCE

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AMY S. PATTEE

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*To my family, with love: Judy Pattee, Ben Florin,
Ellie Pattee Esmond and Kevin Esmond*

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Series Editor's Foreword

Dedicated to furthering original research in children's literature and culture, the Children's Literature and Culture series includes monographs on individual authors and illustrators, historical examinations of different periods, literary analyses of genres, and comparative studies on literature and the mass media. The series is international in scope and is intended to encourage innovative research in children's literature with a focus on interdisciplinary methodology.

Children's literature and culture are understood in the broadest sense of the term children to encompass the period of childhood up through adolescence. Owing to the fact that the notion of childhood has changed so much since the origination of children's literature, this Routledge series is particularly concerned with transformations in children's culture and how they have affected the representation and socialization of children. While the emphasis of the series is on children's literature, all types of studies that deal with children's radio, film, television, and art are included in an endeavor to grasp the aesthetics and values of children's culture. Not only have there been momentous changes in children's culture in the last fifty years, but there have been radical shifts in the scholarship that deals with these changes. In this regard, the goal of the Children's Literature and Culture series is to enhance research in this field and, at the same time, point to new directions that bring together the best scholarly work throughout the world.

Jack Zipes

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Introduction

Francine Pascal's "Sweet Valley High" series of novels for older girls and young adults was one of the most protracted and successful series of the twentieth century. The romance-themed novels followed gorgeous and popular sixteen-year-old Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield, twin sisters whose identical appearance belied their opposing personalities. In spite of its cool reception by teachers and librarians, the series developed a large fan base of young readers whose purchasing power pushed one volume of the series—a "super edition" called *Perfect Summer*—to a position on the *New York Times* list of best-selling paperback fiction. While today this seems commonplace, the 1985 appearance of a teen paperback on the *Times*' list marked the first time in history that a young adult novel reached these best-seller heights. As the series grew in popularity, it spawned a television show and a number of spin-off book series: "Sweet Valley Twins" for younger independent readers, "Sweet Valley Kids," for newly independent readers, and "Sweet Valley University," for "graduates" of the high school series, are but three of even more sub-series associated with Pascal's first serial. "Sweet Valley High"'s association with a contested form of youth literature—series fiction—and its relationship to the romance genre and popular reading practices has kept the series from critical consideration; however, the success and subsequent ubiquity of "Sweet Valley High" and Pascal's literary domain deserves attention. An examination of the series' history, content, structure and reception reveals the series to be an influential marketing and literary phenomenon and offers opportunities to interrogate the intersecting influences of history, audience positioning and readability that allowed "Sweet Valley High" to flourish.

Considering Popular Fiction

While librarians' booklists, class assigned reading and literary reviews may delineate a canon of young adult literary classics or touchstones, popular fiction

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for young adults—that adolescent literature written in the popular vein that is picked up and popularized further by readers—occupies a different, equally important, but often overlooked canon. Interestingly, although this popular fiction is created to appeal to a mass audience, its popularity is never certain. Popular literary and cultural researchers have long attributed a popular text's popular status not just to its compelling or conventional narrative, but also to the relationship between narrative and audience. A text does not become popular because it adheres to a specific set of formal criteria, these critics argue, but because it engages with its audience and, perhaps more importantly, with an audience's experiences, in a specific way. Stuart Hall writes, "popular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and everyday experiences of ordinary folks" (1996, p. 469). Popular texts, as formal articulations of an idea of popular culture, produced, to some degree, to appeal to a mass audience in hopes of solidifying the texts' status as artifacts of popular culture, must also have the same connections to the "local hopes and local aspirations," the "pleasures, the memories, the traditions of the people" that Hall describes.

While a text might be written to adhere to the formulae associated with a popular genre and might be designed and marketed like other works that have proved popular, this is only a minor informant of a text's popularity. Literature that becomes popular does not just capture what Hall calls "local hopes and local aspirations," but also depicts these hopes and aspirations in accordance with audience sensibilities. Elizabeth Long's argument related to the historical and cultural significance of popular fiction further supports Hall's claim. Long writes:

[N]ovels, and especially popular novels . . . are built in part on a set of perceptions about the world that are shared with their audiences. This does not mean that novels provide a mirror of the external world, or should be judged as useful cultural evidence according to how accurate a reflection of the world they generate. But novels imply a community of shared meaning (1985, p. 4).

Long continues, "Not only the author's own perception of the world, but the perceptions of the hypothetical audience to whom the author writes, are implicated in every novel" (1985, p. 4). In Long's view, it is the perceptual familiarity of the best-selling novel that makes it a popular text. John Fiske calls popular novels "producerly texts," books that neither "challenge the reader to make sense out of it [nor] faze the reader with its sense of shocking difference both from other texts and from the everyday" and, further, argues that these texts "do not impose laws of [their] own construction that readers have to decipher in order to read [them]" (1989, pp. 103–104). In essence, novels that become popular tend to be easy to read, not because they employ simple or

easily decoded language, but because they rely on familiar conventions and representations of everyday life analogous to those found in the social world and because their depictions of fictional reality do not deviate far from the reality understood by a reading community.

Popular novels are not just invested in implying “communit[ies] of shared meaning,” as Long argues, they are also complicit in the reproduction and maintenance of these communities. Fiske contends that “a popular text, to be popular, must have points of relevance to a variety of readers in a variety of social contexts,” furthermore, he continues, the taste for such popular texts is “formed by the conditions of subordination, and the commodities out of which it makes popular culture are ones that are relevant both to the readers’ experience of those conditions and, more generally, to the conditions themselves” (1989, p. 141). That is, while a popular text’s popularity is contingent on a judgment (or judgments) of relevance made by its readership, its popularity also depends on its perpetuation of the social conditions that make it popular. To this end, popular texts are invested not only in their own production and presentation as preferred media, but also in the correspondence of their content with the social status quo. The “Sweet Valley High” series is an excellent example of the confluence Fiske, Long and Hall describe. Pascal’s series has what Fiske might call literary, social and cultural “points of reference”: the novels are clear articulations and expansions of an established popular tradition in adolescent fiction and, as reflections—in terms of political and social ideology—of the time period in which they were produced, do not, as Fiske would argue “challenge the reader to make sense . . . [nor] faze the reader with [a] sense of shocking difference” from both the popular romance novels they appeared beside nor the everyday world in which they were situated (1989, pp. 103–104).

Considering “Sweet Valley High”

While the success of the “Sweet Valley High” series was not guaranteed, the series’ canny production and position in what was then a growing popular literary market for youth certainly contributed to its ascendancy. Although most young adult literature published during the previous decade had aspired to greater realism than those first junior novels for adolescents published in the mid-century, by the late 1970s and early 1980s adolescent literary focus had returned to light novels of romance. Pascal’s romance-themed series entered a market primed for such a product; the first Sweet Valley novel, *Double Love*, debuted at a time during which stand-alone teen romance novels issued in brand-name series—like Bantam’s “Sweet Dreams” or Scholastic’s “Wildfire”—were in high demand. *Double Love*—and subsequent installments of the “Sweet Valley High” series—expanded upon the literal model these romance series provided, and, as such, distinguished Pascal’s series from the publishers’ novels.

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New installments of Pascal's paperback series—the novels were issued as paperback originals—were, like the publishers' romance novels, released on an approximate monthly calendar and fed what was becoming an adolescent paperback revolution. While, prior to the late 1970s, publishers had focused the sale of novels for adolescents to the adults who served teens—teachers, librarians and other youth advocates—and had concentrated on the production of hardback novels that may or may not be reissued as less expensive paperback reprints, economic recession reduced many public budgets and forced publishers to expand their client lists. Ironically, while public institutions faced cut budgets, young adults were relatively flush with cash and publishing companies targeted these new consumers with inexpensive and stylish-looking paperback novels, many of which were produced as media tie-ins and were sold through school book clubs. With new volumes appearing as often—if not more often—as school book club catalogs and featuring low prices and attractive and formalized covers that encouraged collection, the “Sweet Valley High” paperbacks used the form to advantage.

Although the series distinguished itself as a literary soap-opera by featuring cliff-hanger endings and teasing advertisements for successive volumes following the climax of each installment, the Sweet Valley novels adhered to the generic romantic formula associated with the publishers' romance novels published contemporaneously. Unlike the more realistic and even frank adolescent fiction of the previous decade, the “Sweet Valley High” novels were decidedly “clean.” Plots of the individual novels concerned heterosexual romantic relationships and depicted male and female characters' searches for love and “deep” and “searching” but mostly chaste kisses. As in the publishers' romance novels, the action in “Sweet Valley High” took place in the distinctly adolescent environments of the high school, the home—the kitchen and the bedroom in particular—and in whatever commercial establishment teenagers might have adopted as a hangout. Visible in both the series' romantic storylines and in the plots involving conflict between the central heroines, Elizabeth and Jessica, “Sweet Valley High,” like traditional romance, maintained that true love—either romantic or familial—was a reward worth work and sacrifice.

Although in marked contrast to the more overtly challenging realistic fiction of the previous decade, the “Sweet Valley High” series mined familiar ideological territory. The series' similarity—in content and tone—to the stand-alone popular romance novels that were its competitors underscores Pascal's novels' adherence to the generic romance traditions critics argue are ideologically conservative. That these novels rose to popularity at an historical moment during which traditional and politically conservative values were being emphasized in the American political, social and cultural worlds was a coincidence noted by literary and cultural critics. While the “Sweet Valley High” novels published during this conservative ascendancy may not have been created as tools of propaganda, the novels did reflect the ideology of what was, at the time of their publication, the “ruling” class.

With these conclusions in mind, the “Sweet Valley High” television show theme song proves surprisingly prescient and relevant to an investigation of the series as a publishing phenomenon. Where the theme song intends to capitalize on the ubiquity of the series’ identical twin heroines, I feel that the question asked in the lyrics, “Is she really everywhere, or a reflection,” is an inquiry one might pose about Sweet Valley itself. The full lyrics are as follows:

Look down any crowded hall
 You’ll see there’s a beauty standing
 Is she really everywhere, or a reflection?
 One always calls out to you
 The other’s shy and quiet
 Could there really be two girls
 Who look the same at
 Sweet Valley, Sweet Valley High . . .
 You can never really tell
 Which one you’re standing next to
 One thing is for sure, you can be sure of nothing
 Lots of gossip going ’round
 About this one or that one
 Not too many secrets kept in the world of
 Sweet Valley, Sweet Valley High . . . (Fisher and Hromodka, 1995)

Although grand philosophical statements are seldom found in the lyrics of television theme songs, the *Sweet Valley High* theme manages to incorporate a few thoughtful truths. If, as Fiske, Hall and Long argue, a literary work (or a media product) becomes popular because of its ability to reflect an ideal—or, at least an agreed-upon—version of the world back to its audience, the lyric to the theme song asking if “a beauty” could ever possibly be “everywhere” or if this beauty is a mere “reflection” of something hidden or just out of sight, is rich with meaning. As the novels flooded the market (at the rate of about one per month) and rose to popularity, their presence became—for a period of time—ubiquitous. The series that began as a “reflection”—of the romance novels enjoying a popular renaissance at the time of Sweet Valley’s first publication, of the idealistic but traditional and conservative world in which the novels were set and in which they literally appeared—was soon “everywhere” and, in its omnipresence, was soon reflected in both the popular series that spun-off of “Sweet Valley High” and in the popular romance series Pascal’s novels influenced.

This investigation of Francine Pascal’s “Sweet Valley High” begins with a brief and historical discussion of adolescent literature that describes the series’ appearance as part of the evolution of the literary form. Following a description of Sweet Valley’s literary situation, I describe the historical milieu in which the series was produced and which the novels reflect, noting generically

and historically significant themes as they evince the conservative historical moment that gave birth to the series. Since before Sweet Valley's ascendancy, professional and academic critics have decried adult and adolescent romance, noting what seem to be intersections between generic convention and ideology; as Pascal's series makes clear use of both adult and adolescent tropes of romance, I draw from the primarily feminist academic work critical of the adult and young adult articulations of the genre and demonstrate how "Sweet Valley High" operates as a distinctly political wish-fulfillment narrative.

Because their remembered readings of the novels differ so strikingly from contemporary critiques of the series and its generic sisters, I follow my feminist critique of the novels with the memories of the series' erstwhile readers and compare the meanings these young fans recall making of the series to the contemporary interpretations of the texts authored by adult re-readers of the same. As the initial Sweet Valley readers describe their introduction to the series and their investment in Pascal's novels, a cohesive image of the Sweet Valley reader emerges. This reader encountered Pascal's series in late elementary school and considered her Sweet Valley reading to be evidence of her maturity, described the novels in terms of the fantasies of adolescent life they inspired, and detailed an eventual disinterest in the novels that grew as she aged. Although ambivalent about the original series' contemporary resonance and reluctant to recommend the novels for present-day readers, the Sweet Valley reader associates her period of engagement with pleasure and escape, acknowledging the novels' value as "cultural capital" in her world of early adolescence. The former readers' responses to the series stand in contrast to the contemporary readings offered by these readers' peers, women of similar age who are reading, re-reading and responding to Pascal's series in adulthood. These re-readers emerge as what Jonathan Gray (2005) calls "anti-fans" of the novels as they, as popular bloggers, construct public identities in opposition to Pascal's series. The anti-fans, who acknowledge their adolescent investment in "Sweet Valley High," call their childhood readings into question as they re-evaluate the novels as adults, taking new pleasure in criticizing the texts they enjoyed as young people.

The professional and academic critiques of "Sweet Valley High," in concert with the series' fans' remembered readings and contemporary re-readings, work to characterize Pascal's novels as both fantastic and problematic. While many of the novels' more troublesome features have been attributed to the series' historical situation and adherence to generic romantic tropes, an examination of one of the series' more unconventionally structured spin-offs, "SVH: Senior Year," reveals the extent of these historical and literary influences. This investigation concludes with a discussion of "SVH," as well as of the 2008 publication of revised editions of the original "Sweet Valley High" novels. Although the new novels feature new cover art as well as updated language and cultural references, the new Sweet Valley novels' adherence to the original novels' romantic sensibilities works ironically to underscore the series' historicity.