

Pattee, Amy S. *Reading the Adolescent Romance: Sweet Valley High and the Popular Young Adult Romance Novel*. New York and London: Routledge (Taylor and Francis), 2011. £85.00; £80.00 (eBook); \$125.00; \$88.00 (eBook).

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As a pre-teen reader in suburban Virginia, Amy Pattee and her twin sister Ellie, like many of their contemporaries, were avid consumers of the *Sweet Valley High* series of romances. As an adult and a scholar, Pattee is Associate Professor of Library and Information Science at Simmons College, where she also teaches classes on children's and adolescent literature. In her study of the *Sweet Valley High* phenomenon, Pattee builds on her own early fascination with the imagined lives of twins Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield and evaluates the popularity and significance of the series in a multi-disciplinary context. Drawing on interviews with former readers as well as scholarship from romance studies, critical literary theory, publishing history and economics, studies of children's and adolescent literature, and popular commentary from published sources and the blogosphere, *Reading the Adolescent Romance* is a comprehensive and valuable addition to our knowledge of the cultural meanings of this enormously popular phenomenon.

Sweet Valley High, which began in 1983, was a publishing and media empire created and directed by Francine Pascal, who conceived the series, structured the plots, and worked with the actual writers of the franchise. Although the characters were in high school, the initial target audience was girls in late elementary or middle school. Set in California, the books featured gorgeous and popular identical twins Elizabeth, the good girl, and Jessica, the bad (or mischievous and self-absorbed) girl, along with a large supporting cast of their friends, competitors, and adversaries. The plots focused on such teenage concerns as popularity, dating behavior, personal appearance, drugs and other temptations, romantic relationships, rivalries, and jealousy. In addition to the original series, Pascal also created several spin-offs describing the twins' lives before and after high school, along with a television series featuring the characters. Some of the original books from the 1980s have been updated and reissued.

The *Sweet Valley High* books belong to two categories that are often devalued by critics: romance fiction and teen series books (for example, Nancy Drew and others published by the Stratemeyer Syndicate). Unlike scholars who study literary or canonical writers, many critics who analyze romances and adolescent series do not read or never have read these books for their own pleasure, which may lead to condescension toward the books and their readers. In addition, romance scholarship often suffers from a small sample size or randomly chosen texts for analysis as a corollary to the assumption by some critics that all romances are alike. Scholarship on fiction for children and adolescents, inevitably written by adult authority figures, usually privileges “realistic” novels with an acceptable message over the novels that teenagers may choose for themselves. For critics who value originality in literature, the repetitive reading in both genres may be viewed as limiting or negative, rather than as a source of pleasure, as it surely is. Pattee’s approach to her subject overcomes many of these problems. Because her sample is both finite and comprehensive (that is, she knows the entire *Sweet Valley* corpus thoroughly), her conclusions are based on extensive evidence from a coherent body of work to which she brings multiple perspectives. Because she interrogates her own former pleasure in reading the series, she effectively bridges the gap between readers’ self-selection of books they enjoy and the values of adult critics. Within the theoretical contexts she uses, her close readings of many of the texts are deft and illuminating.

An important contribution of this fine study comes from Pattee’s in-depth interviews with a small group of former readers, including her sister. The interviews focused on why readers found such pleasure in the series and why and when they stopped reading them, thus examining not only the stated reasons why the *Sweet Valley* books appealed to pre-teen and adolescent girls but also how reading tastes (and adult reinterpretations of their own experiences) change with age. Former readers reported that they initially read *Sweet Valley High* in part as a kind of preview of what high school would be like. Because the books were about girls who were older than they, reading gave younger girls the illusion of being mature and sophisticated. While adult critics, teachers, librarians, and parents often discouraged girls from their interest in *Sweet Valley High*, the former readers experienced reading the books as subtly subversive or as a mild rebellion against adult authority. As readers grew in ability to read critically, they too began to see the series as formulaic; and when the promised glamour of high school failed to materialize, most moved on to other kinds of books. In the interviews, they describe both their initial pleasure and their subsequent more negative attitude. In retrospect, some say they would not recommend that girls read the books, despite their own pleasurable experience with them.

The responses of Pattee’s interviewees, however, are not the only model for adult reinterpretation of the reading experiences of childhood and adolescence. Pattee notes that some other former readers have started web sites in the blogosphere in which they can rail against the series. In a recent article in *The Irish Times Magazine*, published after Pattee’s book appeared, writer Anna Carey reports that some former readers have returned to the *Sweet Valley* books and now read them for their “comic potential.” “Indeed, the awfulness is part of what makes the books so entertaining to the many grown-up fans who write hilariously snarky recaps of the books on websites,” she writes.

Finally, Pattee’s study provides valuable groundwork for pursuing the larger question of how reading patterns change as readers change and grow. We do not know

enough about how individual readers (or interpretive communities of readers) develop over time, or even if certain kinds of reading for pleasure lead to the choice of other predictable genres. Do readers of Nancy Drew become avid consumers of crime fiction? If so, which of the many varieties of crime fiction do they favor? Do readers of *Sweet Valley High* become readers of adult romances? If so, which of the many romance genres are most appealing? What insights can we find in longitudinal studies of reading for pleasure? Amy Pattee's book points toward ways of posing and answering questions such as these.

Works Cited

Carey, Anna. "So Bad They're Good." *The Irish Times Magazine* June 25, 2011. Print.