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The Paperback Romance

James S. Jacobs

"Sweet Valley High" was the turning point. I had been vaguely aware that series of romances for youth are taking over entire sections of bookstores, but hadn't thought much about them—or even picked up one of the love-and-kisses paperbacks. "Sweet Valley High" caught me. "Is someone playing a joke?" I thought as I reached for it. "Obviously this is poking fun at the teen love trend."

No such luck. "Sweet Valley High," it turned out, is not a satirical title—or even a title at all—but the honest-to-goodness name of a whole series which scrutinizes the intertwined hearts of students at guess where. As one of the latest offerings for starry-eyed adolescents, it is representative of the love series which are proliferating like rabbits.

"Proliferating" is more understatement than exaggeration. In that same bookstore, I started counting series (not titles, mind you). Oozing from racks and shelves were "Dawn of Love," "Follow Your Heart," "Wildfire," "Magic Moments," "Wishing Star," "Windswept," "Sweet Dreams," "Young Love," "Cheerleaders," "The Roots of Love," and five others, for a total of fifteen different series. From the buyer, I learned that at least fifteen more were available which she did not carry. Thirty series? "And," she added, "that doesn't include the adult romance lines. Teens read them, too."

My initial impulse, aside from snickering at the sea of corny titles like Too Hot to Handle and Tender Beginnings, was to smile benignly at the largely female readers who pursue this harmless diversion. I am familiar with human nature which discovers, indulges to excess, and then moves on. A neighbor, for instance, spent six months consumed with astronomy, then turned his full attention to all-terrain vehicles for a summer, is now devoted to archery, and within a year surely will find something else. Reading habits frequently follow the same pattern. Adults often read exclusively in one area of interest and then, after a time, move to another. Children chew through whole piles of biographies, then spend time with nothing but mysteries, and after a while absorb every dog book (boys) or horse story (girls) in the library.

The smile began to fade a week later during a casual hallway discussion with a student. She offhandedly mentioned her roommate who reads nothing but romances, often one a day and sometimes more, and supplies her habit by trading paperbacks with a group of girls in her dorm who follow a similar regimen. The roommate started five years ago in high school and shows no sign of slowing down. This was not the usual discover-indulge-abandon pattern typical of adolescent reading habits.

The smile faded even more when I thumbed through a sampling of the popular new books. While some series limited the contact between boy and girl to innocent hugging and kissing, others were far more explicit. It seemed from my quick homework that each series held to a
consistent standard. If the only romantic contact in a "Sweet Dreams" title, for instance, was hugging and kissing, other "Sweet Dreams" books kept that same level. If more involved physical contact was described in one "Roots of Love" book, another title in the series would chronicle its romance the same way.

That observation was confirmed by the tip-sheets publishers of romance series give to aspiring authors. In addition to guidelines covering the ages and general personalities of the young couple, types of problems in their lives, and subplots, "Windswept" tells its would-be authors to include "no explicit sex and, in fact, no sexual involvement between the couple except kissing and feelings of attraction." Another series directs its writers to produce novels which "trace the sensuous, though not graphic detail, the development of this first love." And so on.

The smile disappeared altogether when I spent an hour at the romance rack in a grocery store. If teen readers frequently turned to heart-throb stories written for adults, I thought I should take a look at those. What I learned at one grocery store:

1. The series romances outnumbered by miles any other category of paperback book.

2. More series were available for adults in the grocery store (22) than for young readers in the bookstore (15).

3. The content was much more explicit overall than in books for young readers.

4. Numbers on the cover (each title in a series is tallied consecutively) indicate almost 6,000 different books had been published in those 22 series.

As a long-time advocate of not interfering with people's reading choices, why am I concerned about these romances?

1. The move to explicitness. Content of the previously innocent romance now includes writing which would have gone to court twenty years ago. I am aware that explicit stories are not new, and flourished under the counter even in staid Victorian times. Displayed-at-the-checkout-counter is a bold move from under-the-counter, however.

2. The staggering numbers. The most successful series for children is the Bobbsey Twins, which has fewer than 100 titles. Even the most devoted reader soon finds them all, and eventually has to move on to other fare. When the romance books in one grocery store show almost 6,000 having been printed, and new series are springing up like weeds, the romance reader is not going to exhaust the possibilities soon. If the romance presses stopped belching forth books immediately, a reader sailing through a title-a-day habit still has enough fodder for more than sixteen years of vicarious cuddles and kisses.

3. The addiction. Publishers are in business to turn a dollar, and someone out there is making it worth their while to print over 7,000 titles in series romances (including those aimed at youth). The reader of an occasional series romance does nothing more than dally away part
of an afternoon, but series readers tend not to stop with an occasional title. Something about the raven-haired beauty and the jut-jawed hero fresh from the nautilus machine sends those who are caught up in the tale to another, where only the locale and hair color have changed, and then another, and on and on.

So what is the harm in popping these books like chocolates? Love is perhaps the most profound human emotion — and the most universal. Everyone wants in on a private, powerful, electric relationship that lights up the skies and then matures and endures in a way the heavens have never before witnessed. Serious and honest writers have offered insight into this wonderful and painful complexity for centuries, and readers close the covers of those books with feelings of enlightenment and lingering reward.

The cookie-cutter romances, however, trivialize and even corrupt our deep link to love, reducing it from life to a stage set. Readers finish them with a thirst which will not be slaked because the emotion has been pandered instead of explored. Romance series are in the business of wishful thinking, not consequences, and wishful thinking has no power to satisfy or sustain, as Lloyd Alexander explains.

Wishful thinking, at no matter what age we do it, is basically passive, withdrawn, and isolated. It implies no effort beyond the wish itself. The wishful thinker says, "If only . . ." and retreats farther and farther from the real world. He gives himself no chance whatever to have his wish granted.

He contrasts wishful thinking with hopeful dreaming:

Hopeful dreaming is an active process. The hopeful dreamer is willing to take his tumbles with the world, not insisting on the immediate gratification typical of infantile demands, but with the patience that is one sign of growing up. The hopeful dreamer says, "If not now, maybe someday . . ."

Honest romance, which stretches the soul and the heart, is alive and well in a host of today's titles. But none of them has descriptions like "In the frozen loneliness of Alaska, a burning love is born" on the front cover. Nor are they numbered consecutively.