Seeing Double: Collecting *Sweet Valley High*

Robin Hershkowitz

Introduction

For women who were adolescents in the mid-1980s, the *Sweet Valley High* young adult (YA) books series was an all-important part of their world. The fictional adventures of identical twins Jessica and Elizabeth Wakefield and their wealthy, attractive friends who lived in the idyllic upper-class beach town of Sweet Valley, California personified the quintessential high school experience that female tween and teen readers yearned for. Despite commercial success, *Sweet Valley High* (*SVH*) was dismissed by educators and critics as having "formulaic plots, one-dimensional characters, and simplistic prose writing styles" (D'Amico viii), and was not considered reputable literature for prepubescent readers. The world presented in these YA books promoted wealth, beauty, popularity, and dating as markers of success; they also provided a blueprint for high school that could be considered harmful to girls' self-esteem. This article examines motivations behind collecting *Sweet Valley High* novels as an adult. The adult appeal of collecting and rereading *SVH* books arises from acknowledging the chasm between the aspirational reading by our younger selves and our adult knowledge that the books contain false promises of high school life. Using my experience in creating communal digital space, via my blog *The Dairi Burger*, and concepts of feminist camp and postfeminist theory, I explore the ways in which collecting the books allow for a re-inscription of meaning and appreciation of the comparison of self as young adult collector to an adult collector.

For adult women, collecting the *SVH* books serves a dual purpose. First is the desire to recapture the nostalgic enjoyment of becoming reacquainted with Sweet Valley's perfect California teens. The second motivation to collect is to reengage with the books in order to recognize the ways in which they influenced the readers' childhood, and to reassign a new meaning to the text. In 2007, I decided to collect physical copies of the books. Despite the availability of digital copies, I had a desire to be in the physical presence of the books. However, just owning the series was not enough—I wanted to reread them and document my experience with a community of mature women who also had read them in the 1980s. It was at this time I created *The Dairi Burger*, a blog in which I wrote humorous recaps of the books. At its peak, the blog had 10,000 visitors a week, which was substantial. The blog's success was due to the comments section of the posts where readers could comment and interact with each other, sharing memories and opinions of the books. In 2013, I turned these blog posts into a self-published book, *If You Lived Here, You'd Be Perfect by Now: The Unofficial Guide to Sweet Valley High*, written under the pseudonym of Robin Hardwick. To date, this book has sold over 8,000 copies.

Robin Hershkowitz is a doctoral student in American Culture Studies at Bowling Green State University. The Popular Culture Association is also fortunate to have her as PCA's graduate assistant and technology expert.

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About The Books

The *Sweet Valley High* series was launched by Random House in 1983. Strongly influenced by the commercial success of the popular paperback romance novel, publishers saw an opportunity to capture the adolescent market. "The paperback—inexpensive, attractively designed and easily found on the shelves of mall bookstores, became the format of choice for young readers" (Pattee 16). Conceived by author Francine Pascal, the series eventually was written by numerous authors all using the pseudonym Kate William; new installments were released monthly. The series follows the adventures of the enigmatic identical twins, Jessica and Elizabeth Wakefield, and their friends in the fictional upscale southern California beach town of Sweet Valley. In the introduction to my book, I write sarcastically, "Sweet Valley is the most perfect place in the world. This is noted multiple times in almost every book. From the perfect beaches, to the adorable downtown, to the sprawling mansions, everyone else should be jealous that they don't live there" (Hardwick 6). The twins, as every book emphasizes within its first few pages, are beautiful with silky blond hair, aquamarine eyes, and perfect size six figures. However, that is "where the similarities end." Personality-wise, Elizabeth and Jessica are polar opposites.

Elizabeth is studious, dresses conservatively, and prefers a monogamous, serious relationship. Jessica is impulsive, flirtatious, and loves to socialize. This dichotomy is ripe for basic Freudian analysis (Swanston 187), placing hedonistic Jessica as the id and responsible Elizabeth as the superego. In the introduction to the *Unofficial Guide*, I state, "As a child, my friends and I preferred to be Jessica. In reality, we were all probably more like Elizabeth. The teenage social narrative dictates that being fun and a party girl is what we all aspired to" (Hardwick 5). As Janice Radway's *Reading the Romance* explores in a study of an adult romance community, the familiar formula was a space for imagination and exploration for teens, in which they could find a character they wished to emulate. Sweet Valley is populated by teen archetypes: the rich snob, the handsome quarterback, the annoying nerd, and the popular cheerleader. Those who were not popular were in stark contrast to the world of the twins: overweight, unattractive, awkward, and economically disadvantaged students who were always troubled and flawed, unless, of course, they became more like the twins.

In *Reading the Adolescent Romance*, Amy Pattee connects the *Sweet Valley High* series to the sociocultural sentiments of the 1980s: "For the first decade of its life, Sweet Valley's narrative form was as conventional as the politics it portrayed. It offered a timelier portrayal of conservative 'family values' than its predecessors, perhaps, but in terms of genre it remained safely ensconced within the teen romance, which is to say within class-conscious Americana" (36). Written in the 1980s, the wealthy teenagers of Sweet Valley High have values and hobbies that actually mirror the 1950s. *SVH* students hung out after school at The Dairi Burger, the local hamburger joint, went to make out with dates at Lookout Point, and attended school dances almost every Friday. Rather than an accurate depiction of 1980s teen life, the books reflect values from the 1950s that were collectively idealized in the 1980s. Just like sitcoms, a moral lesson is embedded into the story. Pattee states:

> The books often introduced morality tales in which Jessica, being the more adventurous twin, often finds herself with dangerous men or in the presence of drugs, alcohol, or rule breaking *(sic)*. Ultimately, she is saved by the good twin Elizabeth, whose devotion to her sister always triumphs. The story is reset in each volume of the book, as Jessica appears to never learn from her mistakes and the characters conveniently have no apparent memory of other incidents. This allows for the repeated emphasis on striving for a stable family, money, and attractiveness. (Pattee 27)

Unlike the darker themes of YA books of the same period, such as Christopher Pike's *Slumber Party*, alcohol and drugs are frowned upon in the world of Sweet Valley. Drug use (even experimenting once), economic disadvantage, or coming from a broken home is coded as being part of "the bad crowd." Antisocial behavior is frequently

linked to the child of a single parent or working-class parents. The Wakefield twins, their longtime married parents (an interior designer and a lawyer) and older brother Steven are all beautiful and together form a paradigm of the ideal family, associated with the "pro-family" politics of the time.

How much of this ideology influenced young readers is hard to measure, but personal anecdotes, as I will share, show that *SVH* did make an impact on readers. Sherron Killingsworth Roberts, in her article "Twenty-Five Years and Counting of Sweet Valley: Jessica and Elizabeth in Romance Novels for Young Children?" states that *SVH* books "perpetuate artificial stereotypes of bad girls and innocent angels, rather than portrayals of strong females solving problems. Real female characters whose interactions and accomplishments are not dependent upon either conniving or scheming or being put high on a pedestal would be preferable. Positive role models would be girls who can solve problems through their own intellect, creative and nurturing spirit, or cooperative efforts" (126). The content of the books is ripe for a feminist critique, based on the false portrayal of young women and the potential influence of these values on the socialization of girls. Physical attractiveness and socioeconomic status are uniformly lauded in the books and success of achieving one or the other is paramount to the plot resolution.

Race is poorly handled in the books. It is essential to note that the major characters in the book are white, and race is treated as an occasional storyline about a side character who is described as "just like everyone else." In *Friend Against Friend* [#69], Andy is a Black student who is targeted by a bully. The story is not only told through Elizabeth's perspective, but centers on her feelings about race:

> Elizabeth felt a surge of warmth when she looked at her friends. They all wanted to reassure Andy that they liked him. And it wasn't just because of his race. That would be reverse discrimination, which was just as bad. They all genuinely liked him because he was a likable guy, and he seemed to recognize their friendship for what it was. (William and Pascal, Kindle ed., location 964)

Whereas many of the *SVH* books acknowledge that prejudice exists, the resolution is that of assimilation. Once the person of color is accepted by the main characters as "just like them," the major conflict of the story is resolved. In *Out of Reach* [#50], Elizabeth helps Jade, a Chinese American student, confront her conservative parents, only to help the student gain self-confidence and a boyfriend. In *Are We in Love?* [#94] Steven Wakefield dates Cheryl, a new African-American student, to the horror of the Sweet Valley locals. They break up because of a difference in interests, and never discuss the prejudice that befalls them. In fact, Cheryl starts dating one of Steven's friends who is also Black and like most side characters in the series, is never mentioned again.

The disconnect between the dubious realism of the Sweet Valley world is justified because readers are not yet in high school and provides an aspirational model for girls on what is to come. Pattee writes,

> In spite of the differences between their lives and the lives of the *Sweet Valley High* characters that the readers recognized and even described as "fantastic," the readers noted enough congruence between the fictional situation of the texts and their understanding of the older adolescent world to consider aspects of the novels realistic. As such, they used the books to inform their fantasies about adolescent life, casting themselves in the role of future high school heroine. (Pattee 110)

Not surprisingly, girls abandoned the series when they entered high school, both because of the realization that the books did not accurately depict their experience and from their desire to read more advanced texts. Thus, a lot of the books' appeal was for readers to feel like they were getting a peek into a mature universe.

Just as formulaic as the romance novel paperbacks they were modeled on, *SVH* story lines centered on characters being rewarded with a boyfriend, a makeover, weight loss, or acceptance from the crowd that once taunted them. Pattee explains that "the heroine's status as girlfriend results in both her public recognition and reconsideration. No longer is she just a face in the crowd, once her 'accessories' include a good-looking boy, her fellow students and friends admire the beauty and sociability that seems to be revealed through her romantic partnership" (59). To have a boyfriend to is "win." This is reinforced literally by the tie-in *Sweet Valley High* board

game introduced in 1988. The goal of the game is to secure a boyfriend, a dress, and other items needed for a date to the dance. Date options are Bruce, the richest boy in town, Todd, the star basketball player, Ken, the quarterback of the football team, and Winston, the class clown and designated nerd. It is heavily implied that winning Winston as one's date is the least desirable. In one TV commercial, a young girl playing the game exclaims, "Jessica, you stole my boyfriend!" and her friend replies, "Just like in the books!" To win the board game, you must find the ideal boyfriend.

Although a boyfriend is the reward, these relationships are all superficial and not very instructive. In the introduction to *The Unofficial Guide*, my annoyance is apparent:

> Dating is an essential tenet of the Sweet Valley world, but God forbid, anyone in a relationship talk about anything OTHER than the relationship. The couples are either whispering sweet nothings to each other, talking about where they are going on a date, fighting over cheating, or fighting over not spending enough time together. There is never a conversation about movies, everyday events, or classes. I, and I'm sure others, read teen books as an instruction manual for dating. According to *SVH*, a boyfriend is not someone you can have a normal conversation with. (Hardwick 2013)

This taught me that relationships between genders were completely different. With female friendships, I could be myself. With a boyfriend, I had to conform to the rules and boundaries that were prescribed in the books. This also reflected my need, like that of other readers, to receive directions from the books on how to act in high school, using the *SVH* books as a blueprint for the type of romance that girls thought they wanted. In *SVH* and romance literature, the escapist notion depicted in the narrative is not necessarily the relationship desired in real life. The presumed need for instruction is a major part of Radway's study on why women seek out romance novels. Both adult and YA romance literature regularly presents the dichotomy between escapism and deliberate prescriptive behavior.

The reward of a boyfriend symbolizes overcoming the physical or cultural flaws of being overweight, an outsider, or just different. Once a female character assimilates, she is also accepted a member of the Wakefield twins' inner circle of friends. In *Wrong Kind of Girl* [#10], Annie, a flirtatious girl who runs with a rough crowd, is labeled "easy" and berated by Jessica and her friends. Annie is so distraught by these rumors that she attempts suicide. Jessica and her friends interpret this as an act of remorse and allow Annie to join the cheerleading squad. In *Power Play* [#4], Robin Wilson is socially awkward and overweight, and her humiliation enables her to lose a substantial amount of weight in what is seemingly only two weeks. She is then deemed attractive and voted homecoming queen and invited to join an exclusive high school sorority (run by Jessica Wakefield, of course).

When the reader reaches high school, the age of the *SVH* characters, they come to realize that what, at first, had "seemed so attractive and attainable is far more complex and less desirable than they had imagined" (Pattee 123). Not surprisingly, girls abandoned the series both because of the realization that it does not accurately depict their experience and also their desire to read more advanced books.

Feminized Collecting

Although the *Sweet Valley High* books are out of print, they are easily obtainable on the internet, either individually or in whole collections. When I decided to embark on my rereading project, I reclaimed the few that I had in storage from my childhood; I then bought the individual volumes needed through Amazon, at about $4 each. The idea of selling a collection is an interesting one, as it indicates that the original collector does not need or want her collection anymore. One of the joys of collecting is obtaining coveted items one by one, so purchasing a whole collection at once is antithetical to the act of collecting. For the consummate collector, accumulating *SVH* artifacts is both the physical activity of compiling the paperbacks and related memorabilia, such as games, dolls, stationary, and so forth, and the experience

of rereading the narratives. The more significant action is rereading and reassigning meaning to the text on both a literal and figurative level.

Collecting objects associated with childhood, such as toys, is often assumed to be a male-dominated activity. In the *Cult of Collecting*, Lincoln Geraghty compares collecting to performing fandom: "Female fans are seen as more productive and transformative in practices such as fan fiction writing, and male fans affirm their fandom through the buying and collecting of memorabilia" (60). Female fans are more interested in the meaning of the collected items and male fans are more interested in the acquisition and cataloging of items. Research on vinyl record collecting has also touched on this dichotomy. Russell W. Belk, in *Collecting in a Consumer Society,* argues that in collecting, "'masculine' means aggressiveness, competitiveness, and desire for mastery, and 'feminine' preservationism, creativity, and nurturance" (Belk 97). Masculine collecting denotes competition among collectors about acquiring items and feminine collecting denotes interest in the cultural meaning of the items. *Sweet Valley High* is a feminized product of mass culture, and like other feminized popular culture texts, such as paperback romances and soap operas, has been devalued until recent reexamination. In traditional literary circles, *SVH* is not currently considered elite culture, nor does it reflect absolute reality. However, if there were no relationship to real-life experience, the desire to reread *SVH* texts would not exist. Perhaps not coincidentally, since the 1980s, Jessica-type characters appear in numerous fictional depictions of teenage social circles, offering a truthful, although exaggerated, view of teenage life.

Geraghty further frames gender and collecting as "the fanboy and fangirl, with the former perceived as being more affirmational and celebratory of media texts while the latter is more likely to transform them and reconstitute them for the needs of the wider fan community" (54). In other words, male fans care about collecting as honoring the original texts and female fans are more interested in sharing personal meanings within a social community. My decision to build my collection was motivated by the desire to network with other women who experienced a connection with *Sweet Valley High*. The interaction with a community was inextricable from collecting the object.

Understanding the importance of collecting is inherent in the way they are organized and displayed in the home. As Susan Peirce explains in *Collecting in Contemporary Practice*, there are two ways in which items exist in the collector's space. One is the specific area where one displays the objects. The public display serves as an extension of the collector's identity. In my own experience, when I first started my (re)collection, I kept the books in a storage box not visible to guests in my home. This was not a major part of my identity; it was an occasional dalliance. As I continued writing my blog, I accumulated more books. I placed them on my bookshelf, alongside books I deemed as more respectable. The collection became a vital part of my self-concept as I spent more time amassing titles and writing about my collection. With the increase in my blog's popularity, leisure time was taken up by reading comments and interacting with the community I had created. My collection of *SVH* books soon moved to my main bookshelf. This was both for ease of access and to proudly display the collection to guests in my home.

The second way in which Pierce explains that collections are formed in "spatial organization of the objects in a juxtaposition which create meaning" (159). This is taken to mean that the way the items are displayed comes from the collector's intentional organization. One way I displayed the *SVH* books was in series order. This was pleasing to me because it evoked the way I viewed the volumes in the bookstore. The erratic linear nature of the narrative in alternative ordering becomes an exercise in scrutiny and discussion among collectors. Along with the individually numbered books, several "Super Specials" and "Super Thrillers" are also part of the series. These can be placed before, at the end of the series, or in the order they were released. This exercise can be deemed futile when the collector attempts to make sense of the chronological timeline. In a

section on my blog called "It's Always Sunny in Sweet Valley" I write, "The gals have been sixteen for about 15 years, and have seen their share of Christmases, Halloweens, and summer vacations… .The twins are kidnapped, stalked, held hostage, attacked multiple times and are never traumatized for more than one book." A list of 409 comments ponder how some of the books seem to be on an alternate timeline, ignoring and disregarding the actions of a previous book, such as how sports tryouts happen in the middle of a semester or how the family dog seems to exist only in certain books. This is usually blamed on some "ghost writer" who "had one job," which was to remember all the previous activities in every book. This allows for not just a spatial reordering, but a theoretical juxtaposition, and never-ending quest to make sense of the timelines despite knowing there is never going to be a solution.

Like other collectibles, there is some debate which *SVH* books comprise the "authentic" collection. As the high school series was the first and most prolific, it is seen as the true and original series, despite the same publisher releasing other series with ghost writers, including *Sweet Valley University*, *Sweet Valley Junior High*, and *Sweet Valley Kids*. These also had commercial success. I propose that the authenticity is based on the relationship one had to the books in adolescence. The question of authenticity is often discussed in the *SVH* blog community. Book 100, *The Evil Twin*, released in 1993, kicked off a change in direction for the series: stories now occurred over three book arcs, the covers were updated with more modern illustrations, and the action sometimes took place off the school property. Locales included vacation spots, college campus visits, and national cheerleading competition venues. The authors tried to make the themes and language more current; the tone shifted to what many perceived as trying too hard to be topical. This certainly reflected the influence of television—daytime soap operas had already been using multiple show arcs for decades. In the late 1990s, teen nighttime serials, such as *Dawson's Creek*, used the same practice. The post-100 books contain the same flavor as their predecessors; however, since they deviate in style, and would not be considered truly authentic. Collectors often differentiate those who collect the original 99 from those who collect past book 100.

Recreating Meaning Through Camp

As mentioned earlier, collecting *Sweet Valley High* serves a dual purpose: first is the physical acquisition and second is critiquing the text. Simply collecting the physical copy of the books does not serve the purpose that critiquing the content of the texts does. What, ultimately, was my motivation to reread the *SVH* series? Simply reading to negatively critique is not enough. I previously made the exaggerated claim of how "*SVH* gave me a false and misguided view of high school life, and life in general. In fact, there was I time when I blamed all my insecurities, problems, and worries on these books" ("About," Thedairiburger.com). As a girl, I did not act in the way that was prescribed by the books. Rereading them as an adult exposes the illusion of the excessiveness and desires of the 1980s.

The 1980s was a decade of the haves living in excess and the have-nots trying to become successful by acquiring and consuming items thought to make them successful or look that way (Bartholome). The *SVH* books defined characters by their looks, identifying them by hair, eye color, and popularity status every time they appeared. In order for the reader to jump in at any number in the series, characters were constantly being reintroduced, so the repetition of hearing about Lila's palatial mansion and chic French fashion, or Bruce Patman's Porsche, only reinforced the emphasis on wealth and social status. By trying to mimic these quests for status, I was doomed to fail. Now as an adult, demystifying the messages is a way to forgive myself for what I perceived as failures and shortcomings. Success and meaningful relationships are not just an inherent, arbitrary reward; different kinds of friendship are obtained

through my own behavior, decisions, and active participation. The pleasure of rereading comes from my current vantage point, armed with the cultural milieu of present day and the clearer, mature adult understanding of my world.

Pattee identifies this relationship to *SVH* as "anti-fan" and examines the work of many anti-fan bloggers. "As they interrogate the series. . . the bloggers position themselves within an interpretive community. . .that constructs a text distinctly different than authored by the series fans" (127). Pattee describes my blog as an "ideological hammer" that is "in contrast to the harmlessly and pleasurable escapist texts the readers recall" (127). The exercise of rereading the text is also not as pleasurable when done in isolation. The interactive nature of blog comments enables the rereading to be a communal experience in which other anti-fans use the comments section to share their innocence and ignorance of the meanings of *SVH* books from their first read as a young adult. Shared commiseration makes this newfound anti-fandom enjoyable. However, just commiserating and identifying the dubious nature of the series is not enough. There is a way to observe this through a new lens—the evaluative sensibility known as camp.

To uncover a single definition of the term camp is difficult. Whereas, many scholars point to Susan Sontag's popular 1963 essay, "Notes on Camp," the lack of connections to queer theory and feminism omits opportunities to understand the why of camp and not just the enjoyment of it. Camp performance and esthetic is often associated with excessiveness, with high emotionality, and with gay men. Camp was a way of introducing a homosexual subtext to a conservative public before it was acceptable to do so. In other words, camp could be considered an act of resistance against current provincial values. Camp also challenged ideas about mass culture and taste, usually being relegated to the enjoyment of unsophistication and garishness.

In "Uses of Camp," Andrew Ross contextualizes camp as reliant on its time and place in culture. "The camp effect. . . is created not simply by a change in the mode of cultural production, but rather when the products. of a much earlier mode of production, which has lost its power to dominate cultural meanings, become available, in the present, for redefinition of codes of taste" (139). In other words, an audience can read something as camp when the connection to its time becomes outdated. The codes of taste change, and something liberated from the past can be celebrated through a camp reading. Thus, it is the reader, not the original authorial intent, that makes something camp. The temporal distance from the initial response increases the potential for camp. Something that was an accepted style can become camp because of its outdatedness. For example, melodrama of the 1950s or after-school specials of the 1980s, although considered stylized at the time, can be watched now for enjoyment because of their camp qualities. Other texts, such as Science Fiction B-movies, were camp in their time but time has heightened and transformed the camp sensibility. The camp acknowledgment of the low budgets, bad acting and amateur special effects has long clouded any political allegories the B-movies may have been trying to espouse at the time of release.

Ross continues, "In liberating the objects and discourses of the past from disdain and neglect, camp generates its own kind of economy. Camp, in this respect, is the re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor" (151). To laugh at the cringe-worthy actions of characters and melodrama is to bring to light the flawed social messages through a form of entertainment. The surplus value of the *Sweet Valley High* books, then, is the opportunity for the current reader to reform and re-experience what were once earnest morality tales. This discovery of a former naive sense of reality creates camp value. In the books, the camp value comes from the familiar tropes of high school that act as parody: teenagers obsessing over a dance, Elizabeth constantly helping the less fortunate, Jessica trying to outsmart her rival, and the rich Lila Fowler all seem to be from a playbook of common tropes.

I read much of the text as camp in its incongruity with any sort of realistic contemporary teen behavior. Identifying the most improbable

actions, the most cringe-worthy dialogue, and the most excessive character traits become an opportunity for a camp reading. In *On the Edge* [#40], Regina Morrow, a secondary character who has been deaf since birth and accepted by the twins and their friends because she is beautiful and a model, experiments with cocaine at a party. Her brother, Nicholas, rushes to stop her:

> Nicholas Morrow gets word about the party and jumps in his car and speeds towards the party. He gets stopped by cops because he was doing, I think, a hundred in a thirty-mile-an-hour zone and doesn't have his license. He's says, "but there's teenagers having a party! We must stop them!" Instead of cuffing him right then, the cops decide "we MUST get to that party! You're right!" My head is in my hands. (Hardwick 68)

Identifying the parts where the writers seem to do a poor job in describing teenagers results in other camp moments. Elizabeth is not just a do-gooder; she is such a do-gooder that she instructs the police on what to do. The direct attention given to these passages provides an opportunity to examine the way in which readers react to that dialogue and then contrast that reaction to the way in which it reads currently:

> Todd grinned. "Your wish is my command."
>
> "Then I wish you and I will never have such a pointless argument ever again. . .And I wish you'd give me the biggest, best kiss ever, right this very instant!"
>
> "One Todd Wilkins Deluxe Smooch, coming right up!" Todd promised as he pulled Elizabeth close. (William and Pascal, *The Love Bet*, Kindle ed., loc 1261)

This sequence feels more at home in vaudeville then in the lives of California teens. The dialogue also reads as a parody of teen love. The camp reading is not just from dialogue, but from the ways in which the characters act so unlike teenagers. In the book *A Night to Remember*, the characters attend a beach party:

> Later the gang is at a beach party and they CAN'T STOP TALKING ABOUT HOW AWESOME THEIR SCHOOL IS. And here is the description of how happenin' this party is: "DeeDee Gordon and Bill Chase, the drama club president and top surfer, respectively, are doing the twist. Amy Sutton, whose knockout legs look longer than ever thanks to a hot pink lycra mini skirt, shimmies up to her boyfriend, Barry Rork. Tall, well-built Ken Matthews grasps his petite girlfriend, Terri Adams, by the waist; she squeals with delight as he lifts her high over his head. April Dawson and Michael Harris are hopping around, clapping their hands and singing along to the music. (Hardwick 150)

This scene calls to mind a sitcom version of a party, with the actors being instructed to "act like you are at a party." Here, the surplus labor that comprises the camp is the detailed description of the part-attending behavior that feels completely alienated from any teenage behavior.

As mentioned previously, camp is intricately tied to a queer sensitivity, often with a focus on gay men. Camp's common quality is an exaggerated performance of femininity. In *Guilty Pleasures*, Pamela Robertson criticizes camp as often being at the expense of femininity. Despite being a tool of resistance for members of the gay community, it is often at the expense of women. Camp often includes "women's image of excess" and that "women are used [in camp] because they are marginalized." Where, then, can the gayness be located within *Sweet Valley High*? To identify camp in the rereading of the books, I do not intend to separate camp from its queer influences. I do, however, intend to expand the role of queerness in camp to include a text that is already feminized in both original form and rereading. Robertson argues that camp can be used within a feminist context to "redefine and historicize. . . cultural products not just nostalgically but with a critical recognition of the temptation to nostalgia, rendering both the object and nostalgia outmoded through an ironic, laughing distanciation" (5). Thus, using camp to critically analyze *SVH* is a way to criticize antifeminist qualities, yet still acknowledging that for a time, I was also an enthusiastic consumer. "The camp spectator, in a sense, ironically enacts the female spectator's mobility through a double identification that is simultaneously critical of and complicit with the patriarchal organization of vision and narration" (Robertson 14). Camp can be used as a tool of feminist resistance as it recodes and redefines a cultural product that, in its inception, may have been a target for feminist criticism. It allows for a forgiveness of oneself for "buying in" to the antifeminist origins by recognizing it through irony and enjoyment.

The mock seriousness of the morality tales which may be intended to teach a lesson now seem to be yet another collection of tropes. In *Don't Go Home with John* [#90], Jessica's best friend, Lila, is attacked on a date by John, a popular classmate. She sinks into isolation and depression. We know this because she no longer cares about fashion or parties. Jessica hatches a plan to publicly shame John and takes Lila to the mall to get her spark back. In one of my blog posts, I write:

> Let me get on my soapbox. It seems that these teen stories of sexual assault follow the same pattern: girl likes guy, they go out, guy attacks girl, girl sinks into deep depression and blames herself, guy manipulates situation and terrorizes girl; girl confronts guy and overcomes, only with the assistance of a savior (Jessica). Sure, it may help in some PSA about assault, but it doesn't always happen this way. There is a HUGE array of emotions that occur after an assault, and all of them are valid. Some girls may not get upset; they may channel it in other ways or report it immediately. Some girls often stay in a relationship with the guy. I just don't remember seeing any deviation from the standard plot. (Hardwick 144)

Here, I comment on how Lila's only recourse is to experience trauma, a problem because she is no longer her usual rich snobby self. Jessica and the rest of their friends notice that Lila is not her usual sardonic, bitchy self, thus the revenge plot is inserted to restore Lila to her normal role of rich fashionista. The resolution is not to care for her trauma. By the next book, she is fully recovered.

The reflection of how the books treat sexual assault is a critique that demonstrates the ways in which collecting the books can be a pleasurable activity because of an opportunity to critique the handling of social problems. Here, this "double identification" allows for an evaluation without a complete rejection of the text. Because of recent cultural progression, such as inquiries into Title IX violations and the #metoo movement, conversations about sexual assault and sexual harassment have drastically changed. As adults, the reader/collector has been able to have a more developed understanding of sexual assault that has developed as a grown-up. The camp here, is not to debase the act of assault, but the way in which it is handled within the fantastical world of Sweet Valley. In the *Unofficial Guide*, I write,

> Another non-recurring character, Susan Wyler, admits to Lila that she went out with John and he also assaulted her. Susan and Lila both confront John in the Dairi Burger, telling him that he needs help. Suddenly John's friends realize what happened and leaving him sitting all along, to ponder the error of his ways. (Hardwick 152)

The actual assault is not what is read as camp. Rather, the ways in which I point out how the book handles it in recognizable and unrealistic tropes, can make this a feminist camp reading. The conflict, of course, is resolved in their favorite hangout joint. However, there is no social or cultural evolution here. Once the specific issue is resolved, the status is restored in the Sweet Valley worldview, with no lessons learned.

Robertson further explains that a feminist camp reading is political in that it challenges and confronts ideas of "gender construction, performance, enactment and emotionality." Just as drag articulates the performative nature of gender, *Sweet Valley High* presents a strong case for gender parody. With their archetypes and melodrama, *SVH* is also a strong parody of teenage heterosexuality. Its pattern of good-looking cheerleaders, nerdy unpopular kids, and rich debutants is now realized, in revisiting, a parody of teen gender roles. Just as in the roots of popular romance, the books equate transformation with the ability to attract a boyfriend. Masculinity is rewarded—playing sports, attracting girls, driving expensive cars—and femininity is often defined by those who are not sufficiently feminine by high school standards (i.e., the overweight, socially awkward and studious editor in chief of the student newspaper, Penny Ayala). The Wakefield twins, however, are free to act outside the borders of their gender because of their astonishing beauty, which is always at the forefront. Elizabeth, besides excelling in her scholastics, is still rewarded with a boyfriend who is on the basketball team. Jessica, despite scheming and deceiving everyone, is always forgiven because of her unexplainable charisma. The twins' untouchable perfection is steadfast, as if they have the superpower of invincibility.

Additionally, camp comes from the melodrama of impossibly unbelievable storylines, also found in soap operas. Neighbors are kidnapped and

every interpersonal crisis always includes one or both of the twins. There are endless surfing competitions, modeling contests, drug scares, bullies, school plays, and cheating scandals that pepper their eternally long junior year. Characters recover almost instantaneously after a traumatic incident, such as falling into a coma after a motorcycle accident (*Dear Sister*, #7), often celebrating the miraculous recovery at the Dairi Burger with an extra-large plate of fries. Trauma is not long-lasting in the fabricated world of Sweet Valley. There are no long-term consequences for the twins' actions; this, however, all changes with the arrival of the evil twins.

Intentional Camp: The Evil Twins

Even though *Sweet Valley High* had a successful formula, eventually changes had to be made to keep it relevant and on bookshelves. After 100 books, the series introduced the first "magna edition," *The Evil Twin* (1993) and its later sequel, *Return of the Evil Twin* (1995). From a publishing standpoint, these served to rejuvenate the series and to "up the stakes" of the characters. To collectors, this represents the "turning point," when, during their first read, they suddenly felt that the curtain had been pulled back. Whereas the relatability of the first 99 books was dubious, *The Evil Twin* descended into heights of the fantastic. Lisa Swanstrom observes that the sudden switch in genre is transformative: "The switch from melodrama to horror betrays the cherished social conventions that the teen melodrama holds as sacrosanct, and the differences between the two bring these social conventions into relief, exposing the faulty assumptions upon which they rest" (193). If the actions of the characters were socially unrealistic, the events in *The Evil Twin*, and its later inevitable sequel, *Return of the Evil Twin*, are outlandish. Swanstrom states that with the acceptance of the twins' doppelgänger who, as we find out in the sequel, has *her* own twin separated from her at birth, the "books enter the domain of the truly uncanny, with all its malicious, supernatural, and horrific import" (129). Using one of the most infamous soap opera twists, an evil lookalike, is delightfully self-aware.

As discussed earlier, the campiness of a text is ultimately decided by the reader, especially when comparing past texts with the current culture. However, it is possible that the (unnamed) author is intentional here about creating camp. It is difficult to say if this is an esthetic choice or a purposeful acknowledgment of the series' own unrealistic plots. In *The Evil Twin*, Margo is a troubled teenager who suffers abuse while being shuffled through a series of foster homes. Remember that in the world of *SVH*, an unstable family life is a damning character flaw. When Margo sees a picture of the twins in a newspaper article and realizes she has an exact resemblance, she begins a homicidal killing spree across the country with the purpose of murdering one twin and taking over her life. Death was always present in the books, but never did the reader experience it through the main character and in such unflinching detail. Margo immediately kills anyone in her way, including a child who is in her care. When Margo reaches Sweet Valley, she stalks the twins in order to gain information about them and to seamlessly take over their identity. In her observations, she notes the cloying, patronizing personality of Elizabeth Wakefield and the selfish, spoiled personality of Jessica Wakefield. Margo finally thinks and says what the readers have been pondering for decades.

Margo has thus become a fan favorite, as she is someone who breaks the usual outsider mold and sees the twins in a different light. "The evil twins' ability to cause confusion and sow mayhem far outpaces the Wakefield twins' abilities to restore order to the realm. We do not see Jessica's conniving nor Liz's fretting about how to get them in line" (Swanstrom 96). This shift from the twins' constant point of view to Margo's (and later, her twin Nora) serves as a stand-in for the reader and the (re)reader in a rare moment of meta self-acknowledgment. Margo is the stand-in for the readers who are so exasperated by the worship of the Wakefield twins that she literally wants to murder them. *The Evil Twin* marks a moment of high

camp and a self-acknowledgment of previous gender parodies. Margo creates a moment in which collectors and (re)readers feel validated. This occurs despite the lack of a single authorship of the books; although Francine Pascal still lent her name to the books, at this point, it was well-accepted that ghost writers were penning the series.

Even though after *The Evil Twin,* the series returned to its sincerity and usual tropes, the element of a possible intentional camp is still present. Book #101 (*The Boyfriend War*) was published in 1993, at a time when the cultural landscape for teens was changing. The morality tales and "just say no" toward drugs was no longer realistic to long-time readers and their present experiences. However, the books upped the stakes in their storylines, and take the Wakefield twins out of Sweet Valley and send them to London as reporters being hunted by a werewolf, to getting lost hunting for treasure in the desert, to competing in a national cheerleading competition and visiting Sweet Valley University. The original run of the *Sweet Valley High* series ends with the book *Aftershock*, in which a devastating earthquake hits Sweet Valley and some secondary characters perish. This also leads the way for the less successful series *Sweet Valley High: Senior Year*, in which the tone turns to more gritty realities of "teenhood." The *SVH: Senior Year*, comprised of 183 books, never reached the success the original series, nor did it become a focus for collectors. *The Senior Year* series is more calibrated to current issues and the authors make additional efforts to represent the real. Rereading them would yield much less criticism and delight, thus the absence of camp.

Collecting *SVH* As Postfeminism Response To Popular Culture

Assigning camp meaning *to Sweet Valley High* is one of several feminist approaches used to interpret texts from the recent past. The critical re-evaluation through anti-fan blogs represents a postfeminist sensibility. According to Angela McRobbie, postfeminism "draws on and evokes feminism in ways that can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved, in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings, which emphasize that [traditional feminism] is no longer needed, that it is a spent force" (255). McRobbie's definition of postfeminism could be interpreted to mean that previous iterations of feminist theory are no longer needed because gender equality has been achieved. Postfeminist analysis, then, does not need to address any instances of gender inequalities. Thus, representations of women no longer require the scrutiny they once needed. In a postfeminist framework, women's choices are validated without consideration of the origins or larger cultural underpinnings of their decisions. My contention is that although McRobbie's assertion is well-established, it is immaterial for purposes of this study. Postfeminism can persist alongside the continued struggle for equality.

Postfeminism does, however, illustrates how the era-specific waves of feminism are no longer adequate for the current cultural landscape. Applying a traditional feminist critique to popular culture, even from the recent past, results in an overwhelming dismissal of the texts as arbitrarily harmful. For example, Lila Fowler is portrayed as a shallow, wealthy friend of Jessica's. However, in later reexamination, she is one of the more celebrated characters of the series due to her ability to challenge Jessica's spoiled behavior. Lila's descriptive features speak to a harmful stereotype, but her actions are one that shows an agency to speak her mind. As an adult, I now feel that she exudes confidence and an assertive independence that was so foreign to me as a tween. Postfeminism suggests that past feminism is open to critique and feminism needs to be intricately involved with ideas of race, class, and the global experiences of women. An evaluation of past popular culture is part of this exercise. Postfeminism also acknowledges that the notion of female empowerment is often used to sell products. Collecting and rereading may or may not be an intentional postfeminist act by the individual, but the way in which new meaning is ascribed is one that postfeminism encapsulates.

McRobbie describes postfeminism as a "double entanglement." Postfeminism contends that self-objectification is one of many choices women can make. However, some of these choices can also lead back to actions that feminism would condemn. McRobbie states, "sexualizing women is now 'taking feminism into account' by showing it to be a thing of the past, by provocatively enacting sexism while at the same time playing with those debates about women as the gaze and an object of female desire" (258). My criticism of the sexist nature of the books, then, is juxtaposed with my enjoyment of the (re)reading. Postfeminism takes this contradiction into account as it allows for a range of critiques to exist within the same feminist space. Despite criticizing it, I am still consuming it, both literally and metaphorically. As McRobbie describes, "relations of power are made and remade within texts of enjoyment and rituals of relaxation and abandonment" (262). To collect *Sweet Valley High*, despite being critical, is antithetical to condemning it completely. In the decade since I started my blog, there has been a proliferation of rediscovery of texts from the past and dissecting them, ostensibly for enjoyment of the exercise. The result is still to be critical of artifacts from the past in hopes of seeing more accurate representations of femininity in current and future popular culture. One could argue that the prestige shows of today, such as *13 Reasons Why* or *Riverdale*, have much in common with *Sweet Valley High*. Yet, the characters and narratives have been updated to fit current cultural norms.

Postfeminism is also tied to consumption, with special attention to how advertising, and the mass production of products reflect gender inequality. Even though the *SVH* books are out of print, the collection of these books is still contributing to mass consumption. This is due to a proliferation of third-party sellers such as Amazon or eBay. However, in the last few years, the *SVH* books have been available on official digital outlets, trading among collectors, and collectors transcribing the books for other fans. Although this provides the (re)reading of the text, the lack of physical items loses one important facet of the collecting experience.

Resurrecting Sweet Valley

A significant part of collecting the *Sweet Valley High* series is its inherent link to the past and the ability to reread and reassign meaning. This argument is strengthened by the failure of a series resurrection in recent years. Of late, popular media has been dominated by 1980s and 1990s cultural nostalgia. *Sweet Valley High*, along with other paperback series of the 1980s and 1990s are getting a second life because of digital spaces such as blogs, podcasts, and discussion forums. Through these digital spaces, nostalgia has propelled consumerism. My blog, *The Dairi Burger* and others like it, have seemingly created a need for new products. A new incarnation of the original series, in which the Wakefield twins and their friends are adults, was inevitable.

Sweet Valley Confidential: Ten Years Later was published in 2011. The lack of its commercial success was due, in part, to the inability of adult readers to find camp enjoyment in the books. Written by Francine Pascal, the narrative begins ten years after the twins graduate high school. This science fiction-like temporality is even more baffling: it seems to ignore the *Senior Year* and *Sweet Valley University* timelines. Furthermore, the setting is the present day despite being only ten years since the series conclusion. Bad reviews and lackluster sales indicated that readers of the original series were not interested in new content. Sweet Valley exists in its own sphere. The original series was far more pleasurable to reread and lampoon; the new series lacked both irony and hindsight. Collecting *Sweet Valley High* is an exercise of resignifying older reading experiences—we want the twins to stay in the past. Culture writer Roxane Gay, in an essay from her collection, *Bad Feminist,* laments the failure of the new book. As an adolescent, enjoying the *SVH*

books was her guilty pleasure. In the essay, she writes:

> The twins and their friends are all a decade older, but there is little evidence of any emotional maturity. You would expect that the twins, as women in their late twenties, would have sex lives, but most of the sex in the book is strangely antiseptic, eroticism from another room, as if the audience is still tween and teen girls. . .The whole enterprise has the feel of caricature. The twins have been written in such a way that makes you think Pascal (who created the series but didn't write any of the original books) has no idea who the Wakefield twins are. Elizabeth and Jessica display behaviors so uncharacteristic that the simplest explanation is that Elizabeth and Jessica have both been lobotomized. (66)

Gay points out that the failure of *Sweet Valley Confidential: Ten Years Later* is due to the inability to depart from the outrageous behavior and unrealistic stories that formed the world of the original books. In those books, the characters' actions made sense within its context. It is enjoyable to laugh at the campiness and enjoy the absurdity. We collect the past because that is the only way we want to see the Wakefields. To bring them to the future obliterates any chance of reflection. Camp enjoyment thrives on the incongruity of cultural context. Adults who are former childhood readers of *Sweet Valley High* want to remember the surreality of the series, and do not want it too close to their own actuality. To the true collector, the thrill is the process of collecting and then ascribing meaning, and it is almost impossible to create that process inorganically.

Overall, collecting *Sweet Valley High* novels has a dual role that reveals motivations of the adult collectors. Collectors seek the physical books to incite memories of reading them. The second, and more significant reason, is to have the opportunity to reread and to acknowledge one's own personal maturation. For collectors, the temporal shift in how we relate to the books allows for both camp and postfeminist interpretations. Creating a communal space has informed me about the experiences of other adult collectors. Future investigation of the subject can explore how the *SVH* series reflects the assumed values of 1980s teenagers. Since the series ran for more than a decade, there is opportunity to observe how these values changed in the 1990s. Although the adventures of the perfect Wakefield twins and their impeccably drawn friends seems outdated, *SVH* storylines contains tropes and archetypes that still populate our uber-postmodern twenty-first century literature, television and film. Certainly, collectors will continue to seek out older, iconic texts to celebrate, critique, and unpack our own *vox populi*.

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