



June 2010

Print | Close

POLITICS • CULTURE • POLLS

FOREIGN POLICY • CURRENT EVENTS • TECHNOLOGY • TRAVEL • BOOKS

the Atlantic

LIKE THIS ARTICLE?

ENJOY 2 FREE ISSUES!

CLICK HERE OR CALL 1-800-234-2411

# Love, Actually

HOW GIRLS RELUCTANTLY ENDURE THE HOOKUP CULTURE

By Caitlin Flanagan



IMAGE CREDIT: ELLEN WEINSTEIN

This article has been [corrected](#) since it was published in the print magazine.

IN CASE YOU haven't noticed, millions of girls are in the midst of a cultural insurrection. Armed with the pocket money that has made them a powerful consumer force since the 1920s, girls have set their communal sights on a particular kind of entertainment, and when they find it, they transform it into a commercial phenomenon that leaves even the creators and marketers of that entertainment dumbfounded. What do these girls—with such different backgrounds and aspirations, foreign to one another in so many respects—demand right now? The old story, the one they were forced to abandon for a while, but will be denied no longer: the Boyfriend Story.

They find it in *High School Musical* and in the *Twilight* series; in the music of [Taylor Swift](#), and even in *Glee*, which goes to the greatest lengths to prove itself a convention-defying, diversity-championing

instrument of the Now, but which only proves, episode after episode, that the reason many teenyboppers and gay boys form such fast friendships is that their hearts are in the same place: in the gossamer-wrapped quest for true and perfect love. Rachel may have two daddies, but when she crushes hard on her dreamy chorus teacher and expresses it in a duet of “Endless Love” with him—and when an equally besotted guidance teacher airs her own feelings for the man in the form of “I Could Have Danced All Night”—well, when that happens, we are definitely back in Kansas. Taylor Swift’s songbook, filled with lyrics composed by the enchantingly shy 19-year-old, might have been written for Doris Day. One of her biggest hits is about unreturned love for a boy who has fallen not just for the wrong girl, but for the wrong kind of girl—a Veronica, not a Betty; a Ginger, not a Mary Ann:

She wears high heels, I wear sneakers;  
She’s cheer captain, and I’m on the bleachers.

As for *High School Musical*, you have to chew through four solid hours of the trilogy—and an imagined year and a half of the main players’ secondary education—before the star-crossed lovers even share a kiss. It is supposed to be a modern version of *Romeo and Juliet*, but in the 400-year-old original, the main characters take only four days (and, theatrically, three and half hours, tops) to fornicate, initiate a murder spree, run away from home, break their parents’ hearts, secretly marry, and then off themselves. Compared with *High School Musical*, *Romeo and Juliet* is a Tarantino spectacular.

Why are so many teenage girls so interested in the kind of super-reactionary love stories that would have been perfectly at home during the Eisenhower administration? The answer lies—as does the answer to so much teenage behavior—in the mores and values of the generation (no, of the decade) immediately preceding their own. This tiny unit of time is always at the heart of what adolescents do, because as much as each group imagines itself to be carving new territory out of nothing more than its own inspired creativity, the youngsters don’t have enough experience to make anything new—or even to recognize what might be clichéd. All they know is the world they began to take notice of when they turned 12 or 13; all they can imagine doing to put their mark on that world is to either advance or retreat along the lines that were already drawn for them.

Even Woodstock is an example of kids getting together to do the next, precisely logical thing based on exactly what came just before them. The most transgressive moment on Yasgar’s farm wasn’t the moment when Country Joe got the kids to scream “Fuck the war” (while the Army choppers bombed them with blankets, water, food, and flowers). It was when Sha Na Na took the stage in gold jumpsuits and confused everyone by playing “At the Hop.” Sha Na Na understood what the freaks didn’t: that they all were already being usurped, that youth is a river that can’t be stopped, and that right in the middle of Woodstock, the next new thing was already struggling to be born. Music is the prow of popular culture, and Hollywood follows as fast as it can. Only four years after the orgy in the New York mud bath, George Lucas gave the next crop of kids *American Graffiti*, and the youngest once again turned. What else could have followed Woodstock—the total embrace of free love, and everything good and (especially for girls) bad that came with it—other than a full embrace of the supposedly most sexually boring and intellectually repressed time and place of the 20th century, 1950s America?

What might we expect as the next thing for today's girls? They just spent the better part of a decade being hectored—via the post-porn, Internet-driven world—toward a self-concept centering on the expectation that the very most they could or should expect from a boy is a hookup. We didn't particularly stand in the way of that culture; we left the girls alone with it, sat idly by while they pulled it into their brains through their ubiquitous earbuds and their endless Facebook photo albums and text messages. We said, more or less, "Do your best." And then we gave them iTunes gift cards and Wi-Fi connections in their bedrooms, and we warned them about dangerous online trends only after those trends had become so passé that we could learn about them on *Dateline*. And now the girls have had enough. We've sunk pretty low, culturally speaking, when we've left it to the 14- and 15-year-old girls of the nation to make one of the last, great stands for human dignity. But they're making it, by God.

A book that can help us understand the world that girls are trying to destroy—or least escape—is the novel *Testimony* by Anita Shreve, the events of which resemble a notorious incident that took place in the ancient world all the way back in 2005.\* The location was Milton Academy, outside Boston, and the incident in question was a sex party, one that involved five boys and one girl in a locker room. Understanding the exact nature of what transpired would require the combined talents of Caligula, Atticus Finch, and Naomi Wolf. On a less teleological level, suffice it to say that the encounter was brief, was (in practical terms, if not in legal ones) consensual, involved oral sex, and seemed to suggest—both to the administrators of Milton and then to the millions of other adults who followed the story once it became national news—that the end of the world was at hand.

The Milton incident had been addressed in a nonfiction work with the unlovely title *Restless Virgins*, written by two young women, Abigail Jones and Marissa Miley, who had themselves graduated from Milton only six and seven years earlier, respectively, and who were so shocked by the particular incident—and by the subsequent revelation that it represented a new pattern of behavior at their alma mater—that they spent two years conducting interviews with a number of Milton students on the periphery of the event, including several members of the ice-hockey team.\* Their book shed little light on what had really taken place, however, in part because of the narrow focus that its authors adopted. Still young themselves, they centered their attention almost entirely on the perspectives of the students, as though by plumbing the narcissistic reaches of the pubescent mind, one might discover anything beyond the faintest echo of the larger forces that shape adolescent behavior. Furthermore, the kids whom they endlessly interviewed seem to have been eager to spin some wild yarns for their two attractive adult inquisitors. Even if all of the stories in *Restless Virgins* are true—a supposition that requires you to believe it was common practice for a typical Milton girl to have group sex with an audience watching—their cumulative effect is neither illuminating nor even terribly interesting. Shreve's novel is a different matter.

Written by a bona fide grown-up (the author turned 63 last fall), *Testimony* gives us not just the lurid description of what a teen sex party looks like, but also an exploration of the ways that extremely casual sex can shape and even define an adolescent's emotional life. One-night stands may be perfectly enjoyable exercises for two consenting adults, but teenagers aren't adults; in many respects, they are closer to their childhoods than to the adult lives they will eventually lead. Their understanding of affection and friendship, and most of all their innocent belief, so carefully nurtured

by parents and teachers, that the world rewards kindness and fairness, that there is always someone in authority to appeal to if you are being treated cruelly or not included in something—all of these forces are very much at play in their minds as they begin their sexual lives.

In *Testimony*, the sex party occurs at the fictional Avery Academy; Shreve imagines Siena, the girl at the center of the event, as a grifter, eager to exploit her new status as victim so that she can write a killer college essay about it, or perhaps even appear on *Oprah*. For the most part, the boys are callous and self-serving.

Shreve writes boldly about the ways that male adolescence differs from female, especially in the way that boys suddenly become so much larger and stronger than girls, lending every sexual encounter the potential for menace and domination. As the headmaster muses about his charges,

There was a subtle moment in time when boys turned into men, and it had nothing to do with age or facial hair or voice timbre. It had to do, he had decided—and he had seen this happen hundreds of times over the course of nearly twenty years in a secondary-school setting—with musculature, the set of the jaw, the way the male held himself.

Boys spend their middle-school years being dominated by the lionesses of their class, who are taller and bigger and who establish the social order and harass the boys with their endless flirtations, which half the time the boys couldn't care about any less. But things change in high school, dramatically. One of the main reasons we object so strenuously to events like the one at Milton is that we don't want hulking boys manhandling girls. We want them to know better.

When I was a teenager, in the late 1970s, part of my mother's ongoing plan to keep our relationship in a state of maximum anxiety included sneaking up on me and then delivering some report on the nature of human sexuality. I'd be shampooing the dog or pouring glass beads into a groovy Makeit & Bakeit window ornament, and all of a sudden—from right behind my shoulder, and in the same conversational, non-insane tone of voice in which a normal person might have asked, "Do you want me to get the flea dip?"—she would announce, "Never marry a man because you want to have sex with him. Just have sex with him."

If she had attempted to pull out one of my molars with a pair of pliers, I could not have greeted these advances with more hostility and undisguised horror. The dog would bound out of the sink or the beads would spill, I'd say something wounding to my mother, she would sigh, and an hour or two later, she'd track me down and look out the window in a vague, troubled way, and then let me have it, really show me how it felt to have such a rude and ungrateful daughter:

"I thought I'd make stir-fry tonight," she'd say. "In the wok."

I'd hand it right back to her, let her know exactly how frightened and confused I was about sex and how furious I was that she hadn't found a way to talk to me that wasn't so uncomfortable and incomprehensible:

"Okay."

This was how it was, during that endless, unhappy adolescence: my mother desperately trying to warn me of all the heartbreaks and dangers of womanhood but being too ambivalent about her mission to

undertake it in a rational manner; my freaking out; and then the two of us working to turn back the clock, to bind ourselves back together as little girl and mother. She would cook me up a special treat or plan an excursion or let me pick out new wallpaper for my bedroom. For my own part, each stir-fry and trip to the Concord Mall for nightgowns or sandals felt like a betrayal of the worst sort, because in those days I really was thinking a lot (as my mother suspected) about initiating a sexual life, which made taking her gifts seem like an act of deceit. Could I have the secrecy, adulthood, and risk of sex and also the pink dotted-Swiss dressing gowns and special blueberry-pancake breakfasts of girlhood?

I could. That's what she was trying, so unsuccessfully, to tell me. She wanted me to know that she would still love me, and still be my mom, even after I started having sex. A new time had come in the history of American girlhood; we were going to be part of it—we were going to help build it, even with our miscues and quarrels and thwarted attempts at communication. I was going to get to be a daughter living at home, studying for algebra quizzes and putting Gee, Your Hair Smells Terrific shampoo on my mother's grocery list, and also a young woman beginning a private and womanly sex life. I was born in 1961: girlhood had come to a brand-new moment.

I grew up, I went to college and then moved on into adult life, and my mother became one of those kindly, kooky older ladies whose dedication to volunteering at Planned Parenthood bordered on the unseemly, given the distance between their age and their own need for the services provided. She was part of a generation of women who helped build an infrastructure not just of attitudes but of medical services (from birth control to abortion) rendered to teenage girls and built on a host of assumptions: that a girl is capable of great sexual desire, and that this desire should not cause her to lose her chance at an education or an independent life; that a huge number of modern mothers were committed to helping their daughters incorporate sexual lives within a normal teenage girlhood, one in which sex did not cleave the girl instantly and permanently from her home and her family. These mothers were willing to run as much interference as was needed to make these things possible—with dads, who tended not to be as enthusiastic about the prospect of a cherished daughter's becoming sexual; with PTAs, which often balked at the kind of sex education these beliefs would require; with the long-entrenched double standard that said a boy could have sex and retain his good reputation, but a girl who went all the way was ruined.

But no matter how forward-thinking, no matter how progressive, those long-ago women might seem to us now, they shared one unquestioned assumption about girls and sex, a premise that, if expressed today, might cast doubt on one's commitment to girls' sexual liberation: all of them, to a woman, believed in the Boyfriend Story. This set wasn't in the business of providing girls and young women the necessary information and services to allow boys and men to use and discard them sexually. Their reaction to the kinds of sexual experiences that so many American girls are now having would have been horror and indignation.

Today's teenage girl—as much designed for closely held, romantic relationships as were the girls of every other era—is having to broker a life for herself in which she is, on the one hand, a card-carrying member of the over-parented generation, her extended girlhood made into a frantically observed and constantly commemorated possession of her parents, wrought into being with elaborate Sweet 16 parties, and heart-tugging video montages, and senior proms of mawkish, Cinderella-dream dimensions—and on the other hand she has also been forced into a sexual knowingness, brought

upon her by the fact that, beginning at a relatively tender age, she has been exposed to the kind of hard-core pornography that her own mother has probably never seen; that her earliest textbooks on puberty have included, perforce, eye-opening and often upsetting information on everything from the transmission of HIV to the range and expression of sexual orientations; that she has been taught by her peer culture that hookups are what stolen, spin-the-bottle kisses were to girls a quarter century ago. She is a little girl; she is a person as wise in the ways of sexual expression as an old woman.

Two divergent cultural tracks regarding girls and sexuality have developed in this country. At one extreme, in not-insignificant numbers, you have evangelical Christians who have decided to demand that their children—and in particular their daughters—remain virgins until marriage. Until very recently, this would not have even needed to be put into words; it was the shared assumption of most Americans, and everything in the culture—from mainstream entertainment to religious doctrine to the most casual remarks passed from mother to daughter—supported it. But by now it is a minority opinion, and so the evangelicals have created a vast, explicit, and (from the outside, anyway) somewhat unseemly culture to communicate the goal to the teenagers of the community. At [Purity Balls](#), fathers pledge themselves to the protection of their daughters' virginity; [True Love Waits](#) campaigns carry the message from teens to teens; abstinence-only education programs flourish in parts of the country where there are high numbers of evangelicals, because of the value they place on virginity.

At the other extreme—with very little middle ground—are girls growing up with scant direction or guidance about their sexual lives, other than the most clinical. Is it any wonder that so many girls are binge-drinking and reporting, quite candidly, that this kind of drinking is a necessary part of their preparation for sexual activity? Unlike the girls of my era, who looked forward to sex, not as a physical pleasure (although it would—eventually—become that for most of us), but as a way of becoming ever closer to our boyfriends, these girls are preparing themselves for acts and experiences that are frightening, embarrassing, uncomfortable at best, painful at worst. These girls aren't embracing sex, all evidence to the contrary. They're terrified of it.

And for all of these reasons, we can hail *Testimony* as a book that bridges the values of girls' desire for committed relationships with the realities of the sexual era in which we live. Because at its real center isn't the sex party, but rather a lovely relationship, one between characters named Silas and Noelle. They are good students, well-liked by their teachers, and perfectly suited to fall in love, which they do. *Testimony*, it turns out, is a Boyfriend Story. In fact, its weakest prose—of the kind associated with the teen novels I devoured as a girl, not with the mature fiction of a major American novelist—is also its most compelling, as it describes the shy beginnings of their love affair and the careful ways in which they earn each other's trust. And unlike the forever-chaste characters in *High School Musical* and Taylor Swift's songs, they have sex.

As Noelle recounts it:

I discover that making love is not one moment or two. It is a hundred moments, a hundred doors that open, doors to rooms you have never been inside before ... Even the soreness is a door, one that I have never been through ... I lie in Silas's arms, feeling the soreness, and I think that I have crossed over into being a woman.

The mystery at the heart of *Testimony* is that Silas ends up destroying his relationship with Noelle—and much more than that—by taking part in the sex party. The reason for this turns out to be a bit overdetermined (wresting a novel out of ugly incidents like that at Milton would have been impossible without some bit of business like this\*), but lends the book an element of real tragedy, which is what the current hookup culture seems to be, at least for the girls growing up in it. I would encourage every parent of a teenage girl to give her a copy of *Testimony*. Certainly, it contains several passages that are bleakly obscene. But it also offers girls the exact kind of story they want to read, and it sets that story not in the arcadia of a sanitized high school where emotion is sublimated into show tunes and production numbers, but in the midst of the very real pressures and temptations that they are trying so hard—and with so little help from us—to resist.

There might seem something wan, even pitiable, about all these young girls pining for boyfriends instead of hookups. But the wishes of girls, you have to remember, have always been among the most powerful motivators in the lives of young men. They still are.

**Correction:** The print version of this piece incorrectly stated that Anita Shreve's novel *Testimony* was based on the 2005 sex scandal at Milton Academy in Massachusetts. According to Ms. Shreve, the novel was not based on that incident. We regret the error.

This article available online at:

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2010/06/love-actually/8094/>

Copyright © 2010 by The Atlantic Monthly Group. All Rights Reserved.