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I Think I Love You by Allison Pearson

Jenny Colgan finds a coming-of-age novel just misses its target

Jenny Colgan
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An ode to David

Cassidy . . . Allison Pearson. Photograph: Suzanne Plunkett/AP Photo
Allison Pearson's new novel has had a troubled gestation, to put it mildly. It's been seven years since the working-mother smash hit, *I Don't Know How She Does It*. There was talk of her being sued by Harvey Weinstein for non-delivery, and Pearson's touching confession of clinical depression in the pages of the Daily Mail.

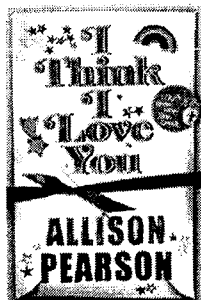
I Think I Love You

by Allison Pearson

368pp.

Chatto & Windus,

£12.99



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It is hard for writers not to worry about "second album syndrome", especially when you've already been the voice of a generation. It took Audrey Niffenegger, author of the similarly world-eating *Time Traveler's Wife*, six years to write the followup, during which time she couldn't figure out why her publishers kept taking her out to lunch and making pointed remarks about their share price. But finally, and literally wrapped up in a pretty bow, *I Think I Love You*, Pearson's ode to David Cassidy and adolescent dreams, has arrived.

Petra Williams is 13, growing up in Wales with a demanding German mother, trying to get in with the right crowd at school and deep in the throes of her very first pop star crush. Bill Finn is the young writer of Cassidy's fan magazine, who sets a quiz that Petra wins. Twenty-four years later Petra goes to claim her prize, and Petra and Bill's paths cross once more.

The book is half set in 1974, and half in 1998. Writing a coming-of-age novel set in the 1970s is difficult, because the bar is already so high – Jonathan Coe's *The Rotters' Club* did a wonderful job on school life then, while Phillip Hensher's *The Northern Clemency* feels like a 30-year-old found object. Mentioning cheesecloth shirts, Corona lemonade and Freeman Hardy Willis, as Pearson does, doesn't feel like much more than a checklist; nor is there much sense of how it felt to live through the 90s, which is so well evoked in David Nicholls's recent novel, *One Day*.

Cassidy-lovers will adore reliving their feather-cut youth; but fans of the passionate, funny, angry, heartbreaking Kate Reddy, of whom I am most assuredly one, may find the quiet Petra Williams a more muted proposition. The book is full of odd sections that feel stapled in – there is a music therapy write-up for a character we never encounter; and at one point Bill puzzlingly starts complaining about how men never read women's commercial fiction. More infuriatingly, Bill in the 1998 section starts typing up as a magazine article the story we have already read in the 1974 section – but this isn't the real problem, which is that the book is just a little slow. Pearson is normally the most engaging and readable of writers. In *I Don't Know How She Does It*, she was simply incapable of writing a dull sentence. Here, the school sections are far too long, and the romance too rushed. All the major events – deaths and divorces – take place offstage and are simply discussed or reflected on by the characters. The novel's most interesting people – Petra's mother, her husband, the school queen bee – vanish without warning. A wife is dispensed with so quickly neither the character nor I were quite sure they'd ever been married at all.

Of course Pearson can still turn a phrase ("Motherhood was like being in a play and only ever having the lines for the scene you were in at any given moment. By the time you figured out how to play the part, the curtain dropped and it was on to the next act"). The friendship between metropolitan, sophisticated Petra, and Sharon, who stayed behind in Wales, is funny and endearing. But at times I found myself urging this novel on, waiting vainly for it to take to its wings and soar.

Which it does, in fact, shortly after it ends. By far the best section of the novel is the afterword: the transcript of an interview Pearson did with the real David Cassidy in 2004, which set the idea for the book in motion. It is funny, touching, and incredibly insightful into the life of a young superstar. It reminds you just how good Pearson can be.

Jenny Colgan's *The Good, the Bad and the Dumped* is published by Sphere

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