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## Soft Lyrics Set in Motion a Mad Crush

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

### I THINK I LOVE YOU

By Allison Pearson

331 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$24.95.

Just as Allison Pearson's 2002 best seller, "I Don't Know How She Does It," proved she had perfect pitch for channeling a stressed-out working mom in hedge-fund-crazy London, so her new novel, "I Think I Love You," shows she has the same gift for channeling an insecure 13-year-old in 1974 with a mad crush on the pop star David Cassidy. You know, David Cassidy of "The Partridge Family" — he with the Bambi eyes and feathered mop top, who was the love object of millions of young girls in that era of bell-bottom pants, platform shoes and Mary Quant eye shadow.

A romantic comedy tailor-made for the movies, "I Think I Love You" is a sort of witty mash-up of "Mean Girls," "Bridget Jones's Diary" and one of Nancy Meyers's fairy tales for the middle aged, with a little nod along the way to "Cyrano de Bergerac." Though we know after two dozen pages or so exactly where this novel is headed, Ms. Pearson writes with such humor and affection for her characters that we're perfectly happy to sit back and see how she steers her people toward that happy ending. It's a novel that's as light and sugary as a pop song, but if its plot is a little too predictable and jerry-built, the book still easily transcends the chick-lit genre. It showcases its author's skills as an observer and her uncanny ability to render on the page exactly what it's like to be a teenage girl, trying to navigate the merciless social hierarchy at school, while pouring all her yearnings into the impossible dream of somehow, someday becoming Mrs. David Cassidy and moving to Los Angeles.

In the first half of the book, Ms. Pearson — a staff writer for The Daily Telegraph in London, who, as the book's afterword makes clear, once had a teenage crush on David Cassidy herself — allows her heroine, Petra, to talk to us directly. Petra, who lives in a small town in Wales, tells us about sending a poem to David, and taking more time choosing the right color note paper than writing the actual poem:

“I settled on yellow, because it seemed more mature than pink. I thought all the other girls would choose pink, and part of loving him was finding better ways to please him, so he would know how much more I cared.”

Petra tells us how she hated smutty jokes about David: “I suppose they were an unwelcome reminder that he was common property. Stupid, really. I don’t know how you can get the idea that someone who has the biggest fan club in history, bigger than Elvis’s or the Beatles’, is yours and yours alone, but you can, you really can.”

Petra also tells us how she felt his song “I Am a Clown” was full of secret coded messages that she alone could decipher: “David felt lonely and trapped in his pop-star life, and only I could hear him. And you’d never have guessed it, but being able to feel a bit sorry for him was even better than thinking he was perfect.”

Intercut with Petra’s lovelorn reminiscences are chapters about a decent but somewhat hapless young fellow named Bill — a recent college grad, who has the job of ghost-writing letters from David to his fans, which appear in a publication called The Essential David Cassidy Magazine. Bill loathes his job, and lives in fear that his girlfriend, Ruth — who thinks he is a serious rock journalist — will discover his secret.

Needless to say, Petra and Bill are placed on a collision course. They will not only cross paths at a big Cassidy concert in London — an insanely chaotic event at which a girl dies in the crush of fans — but, as these things go in this sort of romantic comedy, they will also meet again as adults, many years and emotional miles later. Petra, by then, is 38, with a 13-year-old daughter who’s got her own teenage crush (on Leonardo DiCaprio); Petra’s husband has recently left her for a younger woman. As for Bill, he oversees a large stable of magazines and is conveniently divorced and melancholy about finding anything like true love.

Clunky as this plot machinery might be, Ms. Pearson does a winning job of making Petra and Bill, and Petra’s best friend and fellow David worshipper — the sunny, good-hearted and slightly ditsy Sharon — as funny and incisive as characters created by, say, Nick Hornby or Stephen Fry, though with considerably more tenderness and felt emotion. Her portraits somehow manage to combine effervescence with earnestness, a finely tuned sense of absurdity with nostalgia, satiric wit with genuine warmth.

Ms. Pearson captures the awful weight of groupthink that can make high school miserable for teenage girls (and the unforgiving notions of beauty and cool, which determine the pecking order there) with the same authority that she brought to bear on office politics and the politics of motherhood in “I Don’t Know How She Does It.”

She shows how Petra’s crush on David Cassidy is really a kind of rehearsal for the love and passion she wants to one day lavish on a real boy in real life, and how those youthful emotions both endure — and are transformed — as the years and decades tick by. And somehow, along the way, she also manages to reinvent the clichés of the midlife crisis novel, recounting how both Petra and David find a way to alter the trajectories of their lives, which they thought had stalled or plateaued for good. In doing so, Ms. Pearson has written a groovy little novel whose charms easily erase any objections the reader might have to the prepackaged and heavily borrowed plot.