

Features

Even the sweetest girls have a bully inside them, as best-selling author Allison Pearson discovered when her daughter was targeted. Here, she explains why revenge is best served up in a romantic novel about female friendship

Men may break your heart, but few betrayals endure like being dropped by your best friend. In the early Seventies, Paula and I were closer than sisters. We hung out in a group – Jane, Lynne, Christine and Moira – but Paula was special. We always sat together in class and on the bus home. Paula was Disney-princess pretty with tabby-cat eyes and wavy dark hair. I was proud of her, but mainly I was grateful that I, cursed with NHS specs and skinny as a pipe-cleaner, with shamefully little to put in my new training bra, could command such a glamorous and popular friend. Back then, you were either a Donny or a David girl. Paula loved Donny Osmond. I loved David Cassidy and was planning to marry him on a beach in Hawaii, once my oily T-section had been dried up by Anne French Deep Cleansing Milk, obviously. But Paula and I always listened to Osmonds records because Paula was a Donny girl so I maintained a tactful silence about my idol. You see, I was 13 years old. I couldn't imagine the luxury of having a friend you could disagree with. Dancing to Paula's tune – the deafeningly awful *Crazy Horses* – was a small price to pay for belonging to her group. When the PE teacher asked us to get into pairs, I knew I could rely on Paula to pick me. Belonging, being chosen. They mattered more than anything else in the whole world. What a relief it was not to be one of those poor wretches who had to be allocated a partner after all the sporty and pretty girls had been taken. "Those whose names were never called when choosing sides for basketball," as Janis Ian put it in *At Seventeen*, the anthem for ugly-duckling girls everywhere.

Being Paula's friend made me feel safe. A feeling that is hard to come by when you're a painfully awkward teenage girl in one of the biggest comprehensive schools in the country. Then, suddenly, one blameless summer afternoon, I wasn't safe anymore.

BULLYING THE DARK SIDE OF GIRL POWER

'At school, the hierarchy of girls was so much more brutal than that of boys. The boys battled for supremacy out on the pitch, and afterwards they showered away the harm.

The girls played dirtier. For girls, it was never just a game...'

FROM ALLISON PEARSON'S NEW NOVEL, 'I THINK I LOVE YOU'

choice but to relive those painful years, only this time we are on the other side of the slammed door, listening to the sobbing into the pillow. When my own sweet, trusting daughter became the victim of an unhappy child at school, my husband said: "Don't get so worked up. It's just girls being girls."

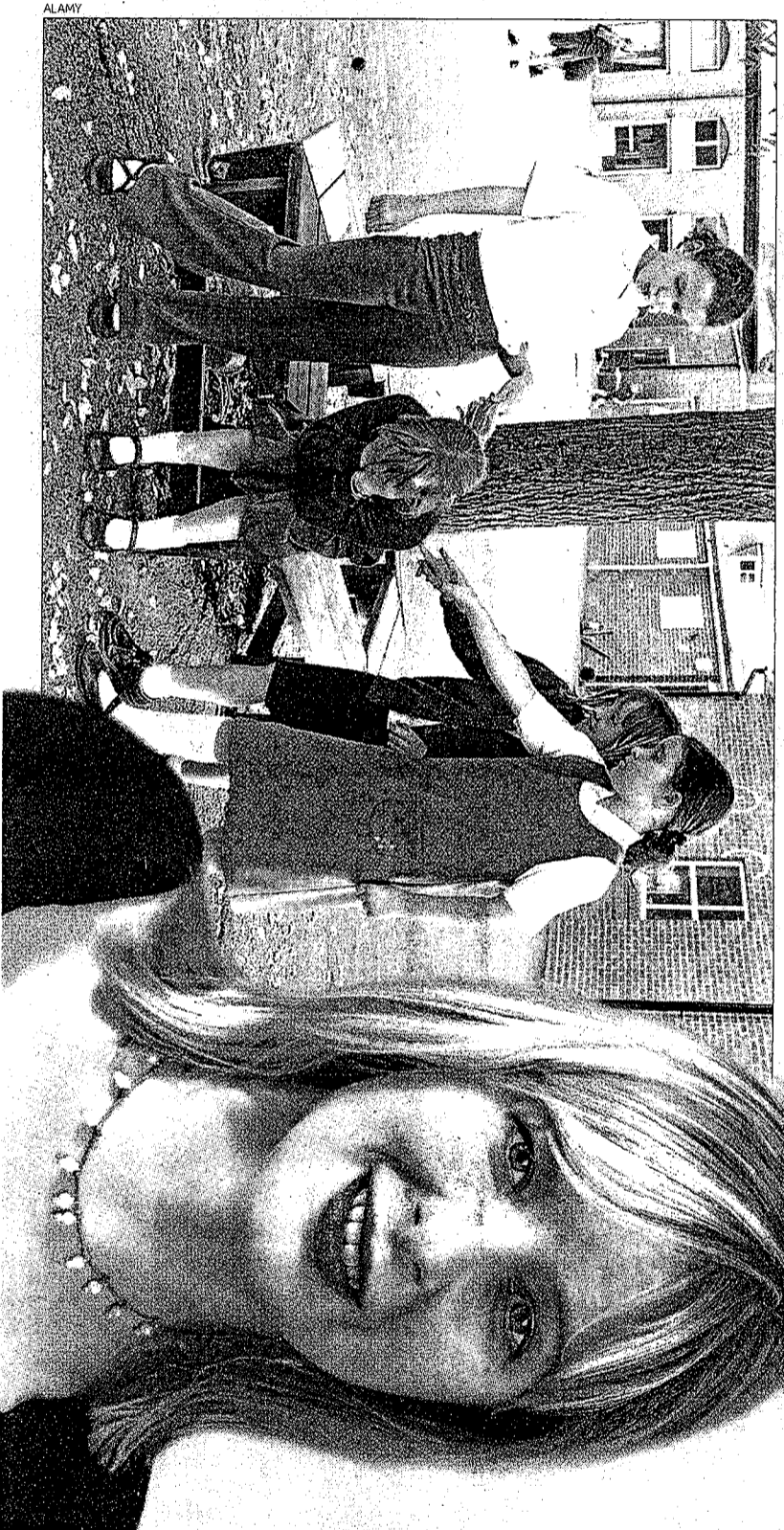
Well, I knew what girls being girls could be like, didn't I? As the dark circles deepened under my daughter's eyes and school became a source of dread instead of pleasure, maternal anger raged through me like a forest fire. I had been unable to protect myself against Paula, but I was damned if Evie was going to suffer in the same way. I sent an email to her headmistress. It was like one of those flying misses in Harry Potter that arrives with a demeaned shriek. Why, I demanded, should some unkind kid be allowed to destroy my girl's happiness?

The school's bullying procedure swung into action. Evie's tormentor – let's call her Jezebel – and her glum acolytes were made to list their cruelties on paper. The pieces of paper were handed to my daughter and she was given the option of tearing them up and putting them in the bin. To let bygones be bygones.

Did it work? Did it hell. School protocol is no match for the poisonous teenage girl. Jezebel just became a bit more careful not to do things to my daughter when she could be observed. Whenever I glimpsed Jezebel across the playground, I had to restrain myself from running over and throttling her.

One by one, members of Jezebel's group dropped her as they saw what kind of girl she really was. Almost as if the bullying was a kind of madness that had blinded them. My daughter was lucky. She moved away to senior school, where she has made some really good friends. But Jezebel and her kind leave their scars. All my life, the name Paula, even attached to a really nice woman, has provoked a stomach-churning dislike. Forever

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and her kind leave their scars. All my life, the name Paula, even attached to a really nice woman, has provoked stomach-churning dislike. Forever after, the bullied girl approaches friendship like a bomb-disposal expert, primed for devastation.

It would be naive to claim that the female capacity to inflict hurt on her own sex fades with age. Penny, a mother of three boys, told me recently that she sobbed on her husband's shoulder when a dear friend she had helped through a particularly vicious divorce suddenly cut her dead. Penny's best mate palled up immediately with one of their mutual school-gate acquaintances, another single parent. "My husband simply didn't get why I was so upset," says Penny, "he thought it was just silly women's stuff."

And yet, the older women get, the more they come to rely on and rejoice in their female friends. Once the rivalry for men has abated, we seem more able to stop ourselves fustling jealously for position. Is it because we see that men are not worth fighting over? Perhaps it's because the years teach us that life is a dance whose twists and turns are a pleasure all the keener for being shared.

As it turned out, there was nothing I could do to protect my own darling girl from her bully. History repeated herself. But recently, when I was finishing a novel whose 13-year-old heroine has her own struggles in the hierarchy of girls, I explained something to my daughter. Those girls only have power over you if you let them. And revenge, I said, is a dish best served in a really good book. She nodded and announced that, in her first book, all the really horrible characters would be named after Jezebel. We laughed so much. Eve and I. Laughing away all the harm that beastly girls can do.

'I Think I Love You' by Allison Pearson, published by Chatto & Windus, is available from Telegraph Books for £11.99 plus £1.25 p&p. Call 0844 871 1515 or visit books.telegraph.co.uk

Allison Pearson and Rachel Billington will be discussing Teenage Lives and Traumas at the Telegraph Ways With Words Festival on July 13 at 11.30am, Great Hall, Dartington Hall, Devon. See www.wayswithwords.co.uk. 01803 867 373

Then, suddenly, one blameless summer afternoon, I wasn't safe anymore. As usual, we ate our lunchtime cheese salads together, then I lost her. Our next lesson was domestic science. That July day, I came into the cookery room and walked towards our bench, Paula's and mine. In an instant, I saw what had happened, saw instantly what my future would be. Paula was sitting there, all right, but the stool next to her - my stool - was occupied by Lindsey, recently arrived from Australia. Lindsey of the perfect Caramac tan and killer-shark dentistry. The two girls saw me and turned away, laughing.

It felt as if the world had tilted and I was sure I would fall. Somehow, I must have found a place to sit, but I don't remember where or how. Separating out egg yolks from whites to make Queen of Puddings, my heart felt as irreparably broken as the shells I held in my hands.

More than 30 years later, I still can't eat Queen of Puddings. The meringue turns to ash in my mouth. That moment in the cookery room comes back to me with what George Eliot called "the tingle of a remembered shame". Cast out from Paradise Paula, I felt orphaned. Not only had I been dropped by my best friend, I was excluded with brutal efficiency by the others in our group who were scared of her. Even sweet-natured Moira hardly dared give me a sympathetic glance.

In the adolescent female jungle, once you have lost the herd's protection, you are fair game for any passing predator. Ann-Marie, a brutish bully with a cruel mouth, slapped me across the face. Just because she could.

As we enter middle age, we may mourn the slender limbs and self-replenishing skin of our lost youth, but, tell me honestly, how many of us could bear to be 13 again? It's a question I found myself asking when I began to research a novel about an insecure young Welsh girl who falls foul of a teenage Queen Bee. All the women I asked positively whimpered with dismay before saying exactly the same thing: "Dear God, I wouldn't go back to being 13 for a million pounds!" I was astonished to discover that each word turns out to have had a... now a cancer

specialist, recalled the soul-shrivelling moment she found out that a bottle of Charlie perfume she had bought with all her savings to impress her best friend had been passed on, with indecent haste, as a birthday gift to another girl in their group. Nicky didn't realise that the post of Helen's Best Friend was being re-advertised until she was unceremoniously sacked from that role soon after. Ouch.

It was Kipling who observed that the female of the species is deadlier than the male. It's lucky that old Rudyard didn't live to see Facebook, which offers a whole new virtual playground in which horrid little girls can play their vile exclusion games. "Keeley is going to murder the bitch... Emily F---head Moore," wrote the charming Keeley

Houghton on her Facebook page. In August 2009, Houghton became the first person to be jailed for cyber harassment after conducting a merciless internet campaign against her schoolmate, Emily Moore, which started when the girls were 14.

When I was growing up, friendship felt like a matter of life and death. Now, it really can be. Tragically, Phoebe Prince, a 15-year-old Irish girl, killed herself back in January after enduring months of torment, by text and online, from her American classmates.

Friendship - the need to stay in, and share information with, the group - feels hardwired into the female brain, which is why the loss of it can be so devastating. As Kate Fives points out in *The Big Fat Bitch Book*, teenage girls

bitch to bond when they feel vulnerable. Badmouthing a weaker or plainer classmate can be a comforting, shared hobby for girls who are going through puberty, that rocket-fuelled Cape Canaveral of the hormones.

According to a report last weekend, bullying and violent attacks are far more common at all-girls schools than at those with pupils of mixed sexes. The National Centre for Social Research found that by the time they are 16, pupils at girls' schools are "20 per cent more likely to have experienced violent bullying than those in mixed or all-boys' schools".

Can that be true? Are boys really nicer than girls? Or is it that girls are more likely to cry out when something goes wrong? If a boy and

his best mate fell out, how long would it take for either of them to notice?

Your average teenage male is unlikely to waste precious Xbox time worrying about whether Matthew likes Harry more than him. Thus, bullying among boys is a comparatively innocent, punch-on-the-nose activity compared to the lethal, long-term stratagems of girls. When it comes to cruelty, boys are mere amateurs, which perhaps explains why the first man to read *I Think I Love You* put it down, shook his head ruefully and said: "It's so much simpler being a boy."

As grown women, we can console ourselves that at least we never have to go back to swimming in those shark-infested teenage waters. And then God gives us a daughter. So we have no