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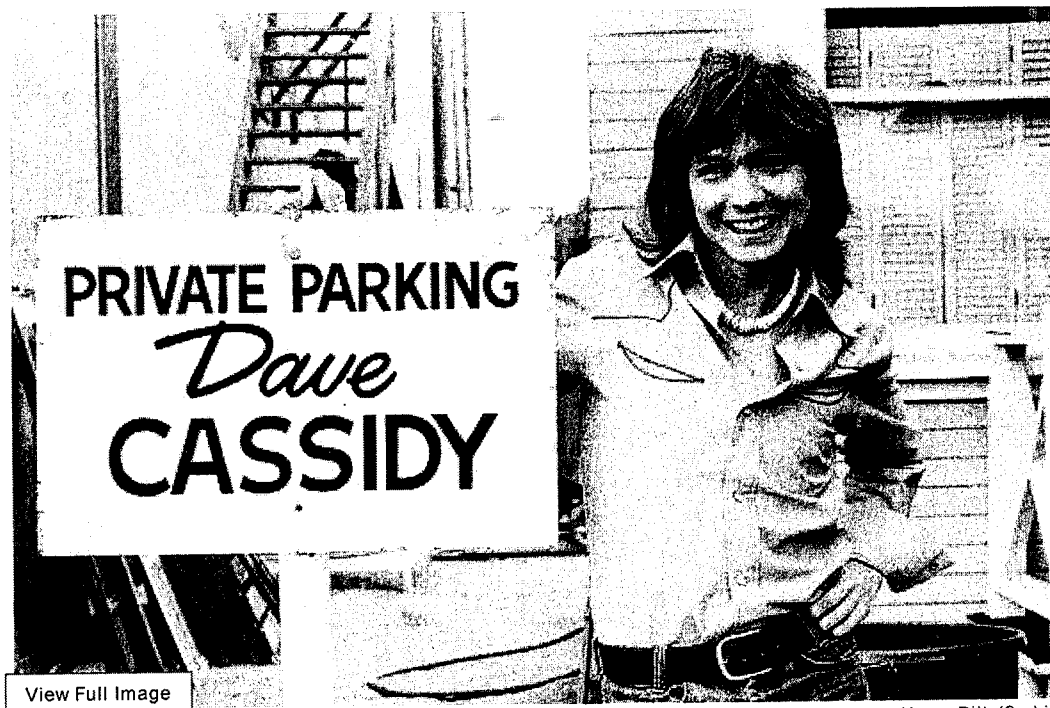
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Truly, Madly, Remotely

By CLARE MCHUGH



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David Cassidy in January 1974.

No one practices unquestioning adoration and romantic worship better than a young teenage girl. Pop stars from Frank Sinatra and the Beatles to the insipid Justin Bieber have ridden the wave of teenybopper love to riches and fame, their live appearances drowned out at times by the screams of

hysterical female fans. In the early 1970s, it was the turn of sweet-faced David Cassidy, the star of TV's "The Partridge Family," to earn the devotion of millions of girls world-wide—among them the writer Allison Pearson.

Ms. Pearson, born in South Wales, is best known in the U.S. for her acute and very funny 2002 novel, "I Don't Know How She Does It," about a woman who tries to have it all—kids, husband, big-time financial job—and watches her life whirl out of control. The author relied on her own balancing act as a busy British newspaper columnist and mother of two for that book; now she reaches further back into her personal history for "I Think I Love You," a novel about Petra Williams, a Welsh girl obsessed with Mr. Cassidy.

Petra is a stringy, short-sighted, flat-chested 13-year-old whose nasty mother makes no effort to conceal her own dissatisfaction with life. At school, Petra studies diligently and loves playing the cello but feels isolated. She longs for the approbation of an alpha girl named Gillian, but, as is typical of popular eighth-grade females, Gillian relishes undercutting and manipulating her court of supplicants.

I Think I Love You

By Allison Pearson
Knopf, 331 pages, \$24.95

Petra's strained existence is enriched by David Cassidy, as she explains: "Back then, I wasn't interested in the real world. Not really. I answered my parents' questions, I gave the appearance of doing homework, I lugged my cello into school. I went downtown on Saturday afternoons with girls who

sometimes felt like friends and sometimes didn't, but I was living for Him. Each night, I spread my long dark

hair out on the pillow and made sure to sleep on my back so my face was ready to receive a kiss in case he came in the night."

Ms. Pearson's rendering of Petra's voice and her deep connection with a celebrity living 5,000 miles away makes this novel not only entertaining but revelatory. So tempting is it to dismiss the emoting of silly, shrieking girls that one forgets how real this kind of intense love can be for those who experience it.

Petra learns everything she can about Mr. Cassidy—his birthday, his Zodiac sign, his favorite color, and his other alleged likes and dislikes, especially what he is looking for in a wife. To acquire all this information Petra and her classmate Sharon Lewis, a hearty and generous girl who also loves the "Partridge Family" star, pore over the Essential David Cassidy magazine. "It was brilliant, our Bible really. God's own truth," Petra says. "At 18p, it was way more expensive than any other mag."

While telling Petra's story, Ms. Pearson intersperses episodes from the life of Bill Finn, the copywriter who produces much of the Essential David Cassidy magazine. Bill fills out the pages of the magazine, we learn, by supplementing the record-company's handouts with made-up facts about the American star. Most humiliating to this university graduate, he is forced to write a monthly letter to the readers as if he were David, spinning paragraphs of affectionate nonsense out of nothing.

Hoping to boost circulation on the eve of Mr. Cassidy's 1974 British concert tour, Bill's bosses demand that he create the Ultimate David Cassidy Quiz to run as a contest in the magazine. The young fan who answers every question correctly will win a trip to Los Angeles with a friend to hang out on the set of "The Partridge Family." Petra and Sharon of course resolve that they will be the lucky winners, and they ransack their trivia-trove for the obscure particulars of the singer's life necessary to complete the quiz.

Meanwhile Petra and what seems like every girl in her class, led by queen-bee Gillian, buy tickets for a Cassidy concert, one that actually occurred at London's White City Stadium in May 1974. Petra lies to her disapproving mother, pretending that the girls are going to hear Handel's "Messiah." Provincial innocents, they walk into a mob scene that turns calamitous, as it did in real life. That night, a girl died and 30 were hospitalized when a stampede of fans crushed audience members near the stage. The concert scene is related in part from Bill's point of view, and at one point before the stampede, as he notices a girl on the cusp of becoming a beautiful young woman, we realize that he is describing Petra. This section of the book—its most affecting—ends with the girls' safe return home.

The action then shifts to 1998, and we meet the adult Petra, a soon-to-be-divorced music therapist with a 13-year-old daughter of her own. With Ms. Pearson writing the novel's second half in the third person, we lose the intimacy of Petra's voice, and "I Think I Love You" becomes a much more conventional novel. Unlikely plot points—including a meeting between Bill and Petra and a revelation about the winner of the long-ago quiz contest—diminish the impact of the story as it draws to a close. But Ms. Pearson's wise asides, so plentiful in "I Don't Know How She Does It," are much in evidence here as well and help compensate for the lagging narrative. Describing a hard-edged young magazine staffer, the author writes: "Like other women of her generation, Marie has told herself that love can wait. Love is out there in a holding pattern, flying around the wide blue yonder. This is the cruelest delusion . . . the idea that you can dictate to love, can schedule its arrivals and departures. Love has its own timetable."

"I Think I Love You" will have special resonance for baby boomers who experienced the early 1970s as young teens—I was one of those teens, and I remember the David Cassidy craze well, although at my school Donny Osmond was a bigger sensation. But Ms. Pearson's empathetic portrait of Petra transcends the era, as does Petra's tender recollection of her first, unobtainable love: "I was still grateful to David, always would be . . . for being there when no one else was; for giving voice to feelings in me that had barely been born; for helping me to grow up, which is so very, very hard to do."

—Ms. McHugh is the editor of All You magazine.

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