

FOR THE LOVE OF READING

Oh Reader

SO MANY
DAMN BOOKS

UNCERTAINLY
EVER AFTER

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MIDDLEMARCH



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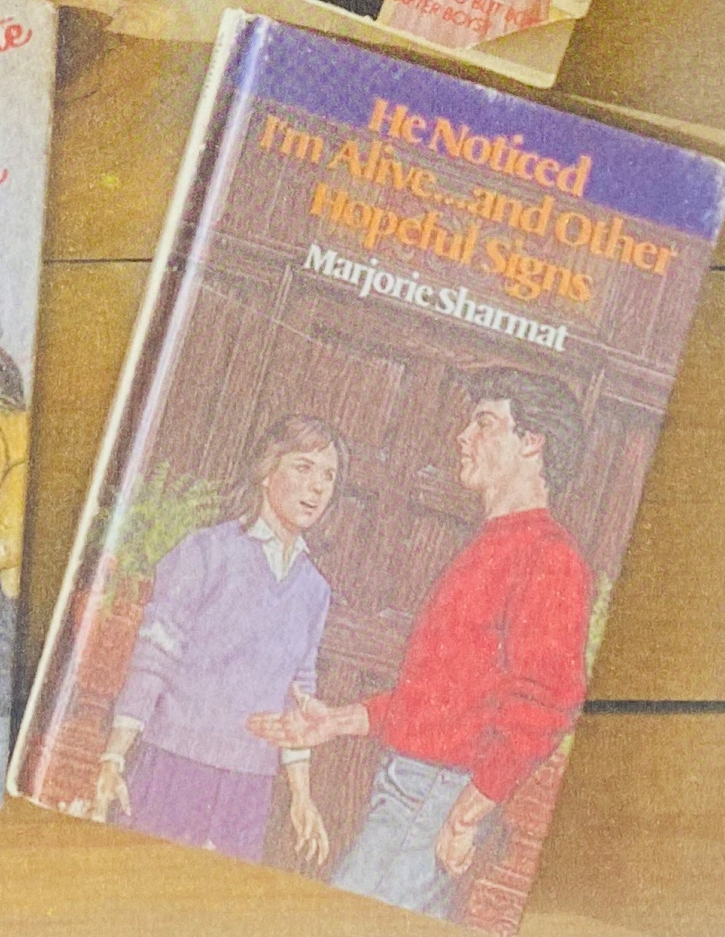
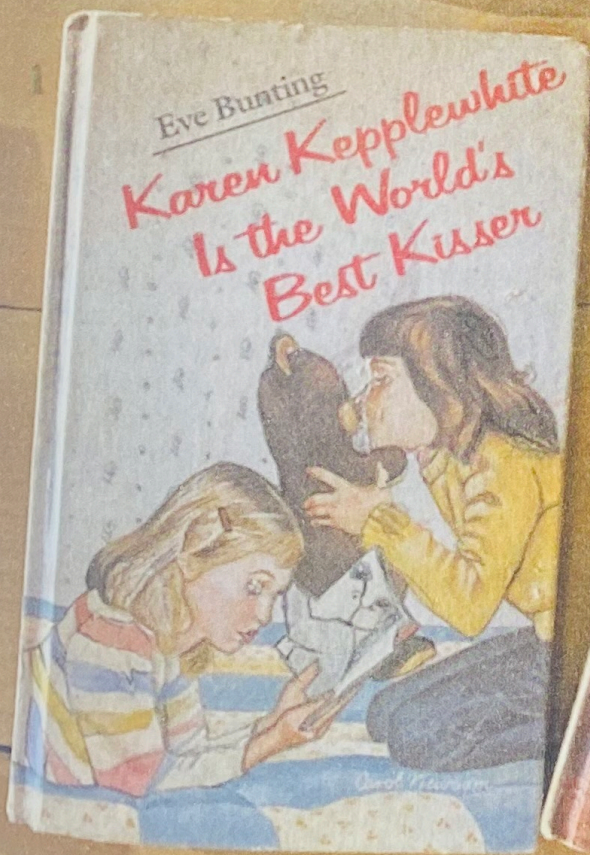
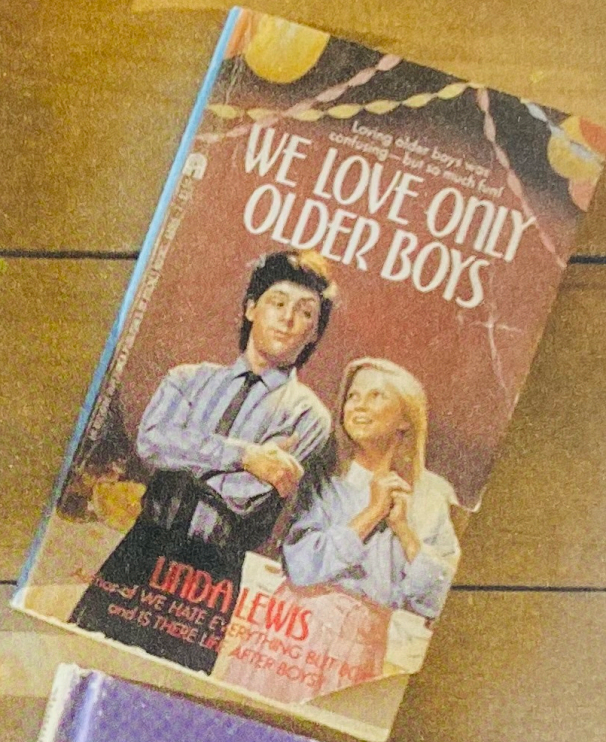
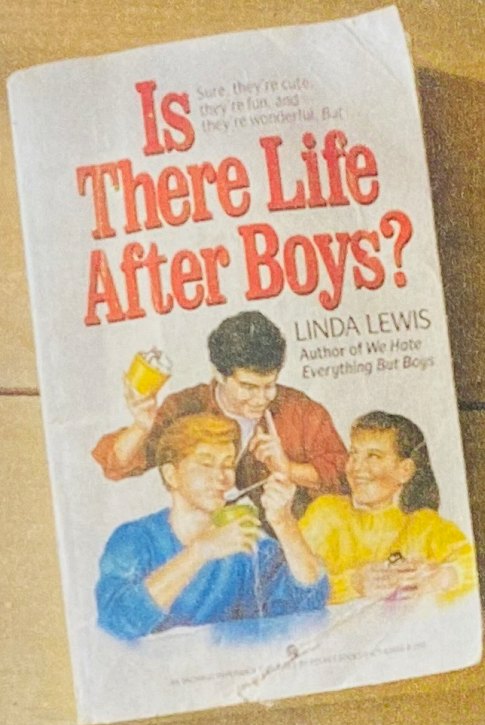


ISSUE 003

All for the Love of That Boy

BY JOHANNA GOHMANN

After rediscovering the boy-crazy books of my adolescence, I was left wondering why the hell these novels ever existed—and, more importantly, why I ever read them.



IN MY EARLY ADOLESCENCE, I could most often be found huddled in a corner of the living room, my nose buried in a ratty paperback. I would be lost in some YA reverie, reading about a girl buying her first ever training bra, while around me, my six brothers watched Rocky slam his fist into the side of Apollo Creed's face. Or watched the Predator chase Apollo Creed through the jungle.

I'd eagerly flip the pages, dying to see if Darlene would finally get her period, while from the TV, Jesse Ventura would shout that he "ain't got time to bleed!"

Growing up in my sleepy Indiana town, the middle child of a large Catholic brood, I often felt at odds with my family. My many brothers were a rowdy swarm of flying fists, while my only sister was five years older, and therefore existed to me mainly as a mysterious plume of Marlboro smoke and looks of disdain. I was—to put it kindly—a rather awkward kid. I wore pink-rimmed glasses to correct my "lazy eye," kept my hair in twin braids, and was often clad in a plaid school jumper. To fully complete this picture of Super All-Star Nerd-dom, I also loved to read.

As a tween bookworm of the 1980s, I of course knew the Judy Blume canon in its entirety, and likely could have recited the passage on Margaret attempting to "increase her bust" as easily as Sir Ian McKellen could summon Hamlet's soliloquy. But along with Blume's wise, coming-of-age literature, there was another genre of books I pored over just as vehemently. And it's a genre that can only be described as: "I really, really want boys to like me!"

I had largely forgotten about these books, but on a recent visit home, I discovered a dusty old crate of paperbacks in my mom's attic. As I pawed through them, I was swept away in nostalgia at the sight of their battered, illustrated covers, most of which featured girls in pastel sweaters staring dreamily at some bored-looking hunk... a hunk who more often than not would be staring in the opposite direction. In fact, on one of the covers, the hunk's stare was so distant and vacant that I actually paused and tried to remember if it was a tale of dating someone who was blind.

But no. A quick scan of the titles told me exactly what these books were about: *Karen Kepplewhite Is the World's Best Kisser*. *Two Guys Noticed Me... and Other Miracles*. And the trilogy: *We Hate Everything But Boys*, *We Love Only Older Boys*, and *Is There Life After Boys?*

Seeing those books again as a forty-something adult, my first instinct was to laugh. And then to

cringe. And then to feel a feminist flash of anger that made me want to track down the heads of these now defunct publishing houses and ask: Why? Why were these books—with their ridiculous stories of girls seeking validation via even the slightest hint of male attention—ever peddled to little girls? *Two Guys Noticed Me... and Other Miracles*? The book might as well have been called: *Someone with a Penis Acknowledged I Exist as a Person—Maybe I Am Real After All!* And I loved these books! Loved them. I read them over and over and over, staining their pages with my devoted, Dorito-dusted fingers.

Standing in the attic next to deflated basketballs and a six-foot-tall Christmas nutcracker, I peered at the books, and for the first time, I wondered how they might have shaped me as a woman. Did *He Noticed I'm Alive... and Other Hopeful Signs* by Marjorie W. Sharmat play any role in that bad breakup in college? I glanced up at the nutcracker and he stared back at me, his teeth clenched as if he, too, was locked in a cringe.

I brought the books back to Brooklyn with me, and displayed them on a shelf. My husband did raise an eyebrow at *We Hate Everything But Boys* now being part of our bedroom décor, but said nothing.

Each time I passed the books, I found myself grappling with a different question. Notably: Why did I gravitate to these stories of girls desperately practicing kissing by making out with baseballs? Why was I so gripped by descriptions of "Matt Green... the kind of guy you sometimes see at a distance, but know you'll never be lucky enough to meet"? I mean, it wasn't like I didn't have other stories to choose from. My mom brought home all kinds of books about resourceful, clever young women breaking in wild horses or learning to make their own medicine. I had all of the *Green Gables*, and the entire *Little House on the Prairie* collection. But when scanning my bookcase as a kid, my gaze never failed to slide right over tales of girl protagonists rebuilding a burnt-out barn, and instead zeroed in on the candy-colored hues of *All for the Love of That Boy*.

What power did these books hold over me? Was it some weird Freudian response of trying to find my place in a family of so many Apollo Creed-loving males? Was it the simple biology of my young body being a roiling, sebum-filled cauldron of teen hormones? Or was it all more innocent than that? Was I just some starry-eyed, lazy-eyed romantic?

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I was “boy crazy” from a very young age. I even wrote my first love letter in kindergarten. Or rather, I had my mom write it, as I was, at the time, learning the alphabet via the aid of giant inflatable letters that our kindergarten teacher hauled into the classroom every morning. But I sat with my mom, and essentially had her Cyrano a letter from five-year-old me in which I proclaimed my affections for classmate Michael Kapfhammer. A boy whose name sounds like if a machine gun sneezed, yes. But a boy whom I adored...

I never actually gave Michael the letter; instead, I spent the day coyly showing it to my fellow kindergartners—children who also could not read, and to whom I may as well have been showing the title and registration to my mom’s minivan. But nevertheless, they tittered excitedly when I explained what the words on the piece of construction paper meant.

Ultimately, my letter became so disruptive that it was confiscated by the teacher, and I wanted to bury myself in a mountain of inflatable vowels and die a thousand deaths. But beneath my embarrassment, I think I also understood something else in that moment. That those letter people—Mr. F and Miss A, and all the rest—when aligned the right way... they held real power.

I like to think that a sense of power was also at the heart of my obsession with those boy-obsessed books. The Huey Lewis-sanctioned power of love, of course. But also, the power of female friendships, and the importance of having supportive pals who will press



their lips to sports equipment with you. The power to be aggressive and proactive, and go after what you want. Even if what you “want” is “Mark Ritchie, the best-looking boy in 7th grade.”

And, of course, I was drawn to the power of the boys themselves. To the power they held over those girls. Fortunately, as I grew older, I did eventually learn that power is not something that rests solely with the male species. And I did learn to find my own power.

Still, I think if I could travel back in time to that living room, to where my brothers sat before the television and its endless blast of testosterone, I think I would march to where eleven-year-old me sat nestled in the corner. And I would reach down, and gently pluck the copy of *Is There Life After Boys?* out of my little hands. And I would whisper: “Yes, my girl. Yes, there fucking is.” ■

Johanna Gohmann has written for *The New Yorker*, *The Cut*, *Jezebel* and *McSweeney’s*. She makes her home with her husband and son beside a toxic canal in Brooklyn. You can read more of her work at www.JohannaGohmann.com.