

# I Once Was Miss America

In 1984, Vanessa Williams became Miss America. She would later have to step down because of a nude photo scandal, but when she was first crowned it was an amazing moment for black girls everywhere. Williams was the first black woman to wear the Miss America crown in the pageant's sixty-three-year history. I was not the kind of girl who cared much about pageants or being a beauty queen, but watching Williams and her perfect cheekbones and glittering teeth as she accepted the crown gave girls like me ideas. That moment made us believe we too could be beautiful.

While Vanessa Williams offered black girls a new image of who the All-American Girl could be, the more traditional image of the All-American Girl could be found in Sweet Valley, an idyllic town in sunny Southern California where the lawns are perfectly manicured. Everyone is fit and beautiful and successful. As is the case in most perfect places, life in Sweet Valley is episodic. There is a narrative arc to each day or week or month, always a valuable lesson to be learned from life's experiences. The endings, in Sweet Valley, are mostly happy. The meek inherit. All

good things come to those who wait. There is nowhere in the world like Sweet Valley.

Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield are the sweethearts of Sweet Valley. They are blond and thin and perfect even with all their human flaws. The Wakefield sisters are twins—twice the perfection. Elizabeth is the good twin, and Jessica is the more rebellious twin. Jessica is a bad, bad girl, even though in Sweet Valley, a bad girl is never quite that bad. The sisters wear matching lavalier necklaces, and they drive a red Fiat. Elizabeth and Jessica love each other and are best friends, but they are also rivals. Sisters are complicated even when they are perfect.

Elizabeth is responsible and universally adored for her sweetness and patience. She wants to be a journalist. She loves Todd Wilkins, a tall, handsome, and popular basketball player. She works on the school paper and is a cheerleader—smart and athletic, the perfect combination.

Jessica likes boys and partying. She is charming and enjoys gossip, flirting, and shopping. She loves to borrow Elizabeth's clothes, and Elizabeth puts up with it because you cannot say no to Jessica Wakefield. She's a cheerleader too, and although she comes off as a bit of an airhead, Jessica has depth and intelligence. She sometimes says unkind things, but that's because she is impulsive and has a bit of a temper. She's all emotion. Jessica is the kind of girl who gives in to her impulses, while Elizabeth controls her urges, at least most of the time.

The Wakefield twins aren't real; they are the main characters of the Sweet Valley High series. I started reading the Sweet Valley High books when I was eight or nine years old. I was cross-eyed and wore thick bifocals. Other than my younger brother, I was the only black kid in school, so I was going to be noticed even though I wanted very much to go unnoticed. I was shy and awkward and didn't know how to fix myself. My hair was wild, stood on end, earning me the inexplicable nicknames Hair, Beard, and Mustache

even though I had neither a beard nor a mustache. My classmates also called me Don King. I looked nothing like Don King. He's a man, for one. I was told my parents "talked funny," which I later realized was a reference to their thick Haitian accents, which I did not hear until they were pointed out to me, and then suddenly those accents were all I heard. I read books while I walked to school. I had the strangest laugh—somewhat halted and tentative—and a bit of a bucktooth situation. I regularly wore overalls by choice and didn't *really* know any curse words, so that should give you a sense of where I was on the social ladder—reaching for the bottom rung.

When I first started reading Sweet Valley High books, I wanted girls like the Wakefield twins to love me. I wanted the handsome boys who chased girls like those Wakefield twins to love me. I wanted the popular kids to pull me into the shelter of their golden embrace and make me popular too. Popularity is contagious. Many movies from the 1980s bear this theory out. I had hope, is what I'm saying, though certainly that hope was fragile.

There was one particular group of golden, popular kids at my school. They're in every school, an interchangeable infestation of good genes and big smiles and perfect hair and Guess or Girbaud jeans. I don't remember much about grade school, but I remember the first and last names of the popular kids. If I returned to my childhood neighborhood, I could point out their houses and other geographical points of interest. I watched the popular kids all the time, trying to figure out how to breathe the air in their atmosphere. They were so *American* and, therefore, exotic because they had freedoms I did not. I was a different kind of American. I had conservative Haitian parents who wanted the best for their kids but were also very wary of American permissiveness. I was American at school and Haitian at home. This required negotiating a fine balance, and I am a clumsy person.

There is nothing more desperate and unrequited than the love an unpopular girl nurtures for the cool kids. One day, the kids

in the popular clique were teasing me, about what, I do not remember. I got angrier and angrier as they taunted me, not only because they were teasing me but also because I was so painfully aware of the gaping distance between where we were and where I wanted us to be—walking through the mall, arm in arm, or sharing secrets at a slumber party, or gossiping about cute boys. I liked the mall. I had secrets. I liked cute boys.

That day, though, I needed to come up with a snappy retort to show them they couldn't push me around, to show them I was cool too, to stand my ground. I pointed my fingers at them like Miss Celie laying a curse on Mister in *The Color Purple*, and I shouted, "One day, just you wait and see. I'm going to become Miss America." That was my mother's nickname for me, Miss America. I'm her beloved firstborn, her first child born in these United States. I loved my nickname. Those popular kids laughed and laughed. For the rest of that year and into the next, they teased me mercilessly about being Miss America, asking how my campaign was going, making comments about sashes and crowns, prancing around in front of me doing the Miss America wave. They incorporated props. Those kids made it clear I didn't have a shot in hell at the crown, but I'm stubborn and Vanessa Williams had won Miss America so I began to sincerely believe I was going to become Miss America. I reminded my classmates of my belief regularly, which only fueled their petty torments. I have no idea where I was going with that strategy.

The Sweet Valley High books were extremely popular when I was young, and most girls immediately identified as an Elizabeth or a Jessica. Most of the people who knew me would assume I was an Elizabeth, minus her popularity, but I wasn't. In my head and in my heart, I was a bad girl: misunderstood and interesting. I was a Jessica—a girl who was confident and sexy and smart, a girl everyone wanted to be around. I was the future Miss America, ordained by my mother and Vanessa Williams.

I always knew there was something unnatural about Sweet Valley. I did not care. I still don't. I was well aware not everyone lives in a perfect suburb with perfect parents leading perfect lives. I had been to Haiti, seen incomprehensible poverty with my own eyes, so I knew my relatively good fortune was an accident of birth. I knew there is rarely such a thing as a happy ending. I understood that the Sweet Valley High books espouse an unrealistic, narrow ideal of beauty (blond, white, thin) and that any town where everyone looks and acts the same is not to be trusted. The one time a citizen of Sweet Valley (Steven Wakefield, the twins' older brother) dated interracially, that relationship lasted for only one book (#94) because the couple decided, in the end, that they were too different. I also knew that verdict was suspect.

Like many writers, I lived inside of books as a child. Inside books I could get away from the impossible things I had to deal with. When I read I was never lonely or tormented or scared. I read everything I could get my hands on, and my parents indulged and encouraged me. They were strict about things like television and grades, but they never censored my reading material or questioned my love of Sweet Valley. We moved around a lot for my father's job, but Sweet Valley never moved and the people never changed. The kids in Sweet Valley were a constant, and in a small, poignant way, they were my friends.

I waited for new Sweet Valley High books the way other kids waited for new comics or movie releases. Each time my mother took me to the mall, I went straight to Waldenbooks and quickly scanned the shelves in the Young Adult section, wondering what the twins and their friends and enemies would get into next. When the series began churning out thick super editions, I could have died and gone to Sweet Valley heaven. As my collection of Sweet Valley High books grew, I maintained the set meticulously, keeping the books in perfect order and pristine condition. Sometimes my brothers would sneak into my room and reorder

the books. Minor skirmishes would erupt between us that often ended with me doing something like burying their favorite toys in the backyard. I was quite serious about my Sweet Valley High books.

Nostalgia is powerful. It is natural, human, to long for the past, particularly when we can remember our histories as better than they were. Life happens faster than I can comprehend. I am nearly forty, but my love of Sweet Valley remains strong and immediate. When I read the books now, I know I'm reading garbage, but I remember what it was like to spend my afternoons in Sweet Valley, hanging out with the Wakefield twins and Enid Rollins and Lila Fowler and Bruce Patman and Todd Wilkins and Winston Egbert. The nostalgia I feel for these books and these people makes my chest ache.

When I learned Francine Pascal was releasing *Sweet Valley Confidential*, an update to the Sweet Valley High series, set ten years into the future, I basically lost my shit and began obsessing about what was going down in Sweet Valley. I began marking the days until the book's release.

At 2:30 in the morning, on the day of its release, *Sweet Valley Confidential* downloaded to my Kindle. I spent the next three hours reading. There wasn't a page I turned, electronically speaking, where I didn't think *Girrrrrrrrrrl*, laugh aloud, or mutter "Mmmm." Reading this book was a vocal and emotional experience. I went to work, and when I got home, I read *Sweet Valley Confidential* again. The book was, as you might imagine, terrible, an insult to the memory of the original Sweet Valley High series. As I read, I kept thinking, *They could have called me. I work cheap.* "They," of course, have no idea who I am, but still, it hurt to know how many fans of Sweet Valley are out there, fans who could have written this book in the manner it deserved.

*Sweet Valley Confidential* makes you understand why so many people are lamenting the death of publishing. The book is bewil-

dering. On a fundamental level, the writing is extremely bad. The word "appalling" comes to mind. The narrative structure is so deeply flawed it physically pained me. The story jumps from the present told in third person past tense to the past told in first person present tense. Sometimes the narrator changes from one twin to the next, and then other times the narrator is another, lesser character. I have spent more time than I care to admit trying to make sense of these authorial choices. Every so often, some sort of Web 2.0, social media reference is dropped into the narrative as if Pascal is saying, "Look, I'm still relevant! Twitter! Facebook! Oh my!"

The twins and their friends are all a decade older, but there is little evidence of any emotional maturity. You would expect that the twins, as women in their late twenties, would have sex lives, but most of the sex in the book is strangely antiseptic, eroticism from another room, as if the audience is still tween and teen girls. When you do see a bit of Elizabeth's or Jessica's sexual personas, it's written so you can only cringe. Many of the petty grievances from high school linger, and most of the characters come off as the very worst people in the world. The whole enterprise has the feel of caricature. The twins have been written in such a way that makes you think Pascal (who created the series but didn't write any of the original books) has no idea who the Wakefield twins are. Elizabeth and Jessica display behaviors so uncharacteristic that the simplest explanation is that Elizabeth and Jessica have both been lobotomized. I don't want to give too much away, but throughout the novel, we're supposed to feel sorry for Elizabeth. However, she is portrayed as such a self-indulgent, self-pitying sop of a woman you start to feel like she deserves her misery. Jessica, on the other hand, we're supposed to hate, but she's professionally successful and in a loving relationship and has a personality. She seems rational and interesting and as vibrant as ever. She makes mistakes but in a really human, endearing way. When you find yourself rooting for the person you're supposed to hate

because of the overall plot of the novel, the narrative has taken a drastically wrong turn. (For the record, TEAM JESSICA 4 EVA!)

One thing remains gloriously the same, though: the gratuitous descriptions of Elizabeth and Jessica's beauty.

In *Sweet Valley High 1: Double Love*, the twins are described thusly:

*With their shoulder-length blond hair, blue-green eyes, and perfect California tans, Elizabeth and Jessica were exact duplicates of one another, down to the tiny dimples in their left cheeks when they smiled. Each wore a gold lavalier around her neck—matching presents from their parents on their sixteenth birthday last June.*

Twenty-eight years later, in *Sweet Valley Confidential*, the twins look much the same, though their description has aged finely, like wine:

*Like the twins of that poem, Elizabeth and Jessica Wakefield appeared interchangeable, if you considered only their faces.*

*And what faces they were.*

*Gorgeous. Absolutely amazing. The kind you couldn't stop looking at. Their eyes were shades of aqua that danced in the light like shards of precious stones, oval and fringed with thick, light brown lashes long enough to cast a shadow on their cheeks. Their silky blond hair, the cascading kind, fell just below their shoulders. And to complete the perfection, their rosy lips looked as if they were penciled on. There wasn't a thing wrong with their figures, either. It was as if billions of*

*Twice.*

When I first read the passage from *Sweet Valley Confidential*, I woke someone up with my laughter. I literally applauded because I was so thrilled by the exquisite badness.



To be fair, *Sweet Valley Confidential* could never have satisfied the expectations of those of us who fell in love with the original Sweet Valley High series. Like I said, nostalgia is powerful and that power builds with time; it often reshapes our memories. It's not that the original Sweet Valley High books were the mark of great literature, but that to some preteen and teenage girls, the books were the most familiar and resonant expressions of our angst and our fondest wishes for ourselves, the girls we wanted to become. There is a young girl-heart still throbbing in many of us. Those of us who read *Sweet Valley Confidential* were looking to recapture some of the Sweet Valley magic from our youth.

Despite the book's flaws, the magic was very much there for me. I easily embraced the drama, the absurdity, the wild implausibilities. You would not believe what's going down in Sweet Valley and who has ended up with whom, but let me tell you, it's all a delicious scandal. Someone's gay! Someone betrayed her sister. Someone's living in New York City. Someone got married to a wealthy but controlling man and lived in Europe until she escaped. Someone is engaged to be married and everyone's talking. A guy we all thought was a prince of a man is really just a man. Someone has turned into a real bitch. Someone uses baking to sublimate her sorrow. Someone had cancer. Someone became a real asshole. Someone hasn't changed one little bit. Someone got filthy rich. Someone got filthier rich. Someone died. Someone loves someone else in a tragic, unrequited way. Amidst all the drama, some things in Sweet Valley don't change. There are many happy endings. As mindless, escapist entertainment, *Sweet Valley Confidential* delivers.

I was never going to become Miss America. I know that now. Vanessa Williams and her glittering teeth could only do so much. Nonetheless, I continue to have a very active fantasy life. In one of my more elaborate, embarrassing flights of fancy, I win an Oscar for

writing the Best Adapted Screenplay based on my bestselling novel, which has graced the *New York Times* bestseller list for at least fifty-seven weeks. At the Oscar ceremony I am wearing something flawless by a designer with a long, exotic name. My hair and face are beat. I don't trip when I walk up the stairs in my Louboutins to accept my honor. My date is my husband, who is the most handsome, famous movie star in the world. He is madly, uxoriously in love with me, and he beams as I stare into the audience. He will win Best Actor later in the evening because he starred in my movie. That's how we met. In my acceptance speech, I thank my parents and my agents and my famous movie-star husband and my friends. I thank Francine Pascal for creating the land of Sweet Valley and Vanessa Williams for teaching me I could be beautiful. Then I call out the names of the golden, popular kids who never loved me. I raise my Oscar over my head with one hand, and I point my fingers at a camera with the other, once again like Miss Celie laying a curse on Mister. I say, "I once told you I was going to become Miss America. This isn't the Miss America crown, but it's pretty damn close."

As a black girl, as a Haitian girl, I was not supposed to see myself in the Sweet Valley High books, but I did. Perhaps it was because I too lived in the suburbs, perhaps it was because I was looking for the way toward a perfect life and becoming Miss America, but I felt the Sweet Valley stories deeply. I read and reread the books countless times. The drama, recycled plots, and ludicrous circumstances spoke to me profoundly. This may also explain why in high school I become utterly devoted to *Beverly Hills 90210*, which took the Sweet Valley High formula and elevated it to high art. *Sweet Valley Confidential* reminded me of my most awkward years and the silly promise I made to a silly group of kids. The book reminded me of the solace, escape, and quiet joy I found in Sweet Valley. Some experiences are universal. A girl is a girl whether she lives in West Omaha or Sweet Valley. Books are often far more than just books.