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## **The Commercialization and Imposed Voices of Femininity in The Summer I Turned Pretty**

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### Abstract

This essay seeks to explore and analyze the novel *The Summer I Turned Pretty* by Jenny Han. The novel's ability to maintain relevance as a piece of popular YA literature despite its release over ten years ago makes it an interesting title to study because it demonstrates the concept of a "formulaic text," which is defined as having, "...simple syntax, frequent repetition, and explicit authorial interpretations" (Smith 31). Additionally, Han's novel displays the commercialization of femininity and enforces the common heteronormative relationship narrative displayed in this strain of romantic fiction. This essay aims to explore these social phenomena and how they are displayed in Han's novel and television show adaptation that was released this past summer. The questions that this essay aims to answer pertain to how the television adaptation differs from the show and how the novel adheres to the concept of a formulaic text. This essay will also mention the traditional stereotypes concerning gender and romance that appear in the novel, while also diving into Han's fictional parental figures such as mothers Susannah and Laurel. The objective of this essay is to understand how this novel has stood the test of time amongst other popular romantic fiction titles and how the genre can be further improved, challenged, and understood for future young adult readers.

*Keywords:* Jenny Han, *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, romantic fiction, young adult literature, motherhood, feminism, femininity, codes of romance, heterosexuality, television adaptations

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

The Commercialization and Imposed Voices of Femininity in *The Summer I Turned Pretty*

by

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## 1. Introduction

“Winning was always important, and doubly so because I was a girl and was never expected to win anything. Victory is a thousand times sweeter when you’re the underdog.”

-Jenny Han, *The Summer I Turned Pretty*

Jenny Han’s novel *The Summer I Turned Pretty* (2009) explores a fictional beach-town where cares are limited, and anything is possible. At Cousins Beach, Isabel Conklin experiences a summer unlike ever before. Motivated by her adoration for close friend and romantic interest Conrad Fisher, Isabel lives her life exclusively in summers. The commercial success of Han’s novel propelled a television series which was released in summer 2022, where the written characters are brought to life. The novel centers around Isabel Conklin, a fifteen-year-old Asian-American from North Carolina who has visited her friends Conrad, Jeremiah and her mother’s best friend Susannah Fisher at their beach house every summer since she was a child. With her mother Laurel and her brother Steven along for the ride, Isabel undergoes changes in this specific summer, the summer she realizes she is pretty to the Fisher brothers. The novel demonstrates longevity and relevance despite its release over a decade ago, further demonstrating the prevalence and longevity of negative societal ideals around young girls and women. Han’s novel builds on one of the many conversations about young adult literature, specifically romance novels aimed at teenage girls, and the concept of a formulaic text that continues to hold relevancy and immense popularity throughout time. The following essay aims to deconstruct the novel and its expression of female friendship and motherhood, popularized heteronormative romantic narratives, codes of romance, and the imposition of commercialized femininity on young girls.

## 2. The Concept of a Formulaic Text in Romantic Fiction: Why Girls Are the Audience

Romantic fiction is girlish. Or at least that is what we are taught to believe. Teenage girls have been identified as an “untapped market” from as early as the 1940s through the commercial success of *Seventeen Magazine* (Johnson 56). Romantic fiction is a genre that has been marketed to young girls and often viewed as having a prominent influence on the construction of their identities. The study “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: A Qualitative Study of How Young Adult Fiction Affects Identity Construction,” discusses this unique market further when stating, “From romance to paranormal fiction, the tales that populate these shelves deal with issues important to adolescents, such as underage drinking, eating disorders, parental abandonment, peer popularity, and, of course, the age-old question, ‘Just who am I?’” (Kokesh & Sternadori 140). Although not surprising, these subthemes in romantic fiction stem from young girls’ ideas of what it means to be an ideal or exemplary teen.

This has been on brand for young consumers since the bloom of *Seventeen* in the 1940s as Kelley Massoni notes when reflecting on the magazine’s first commercial conception of the “perfect teen” named Teena, who was described as being, “16 years old, 5 feet 4 inches tall, 118 pounds, attends public high school, expects to go to college – and then marry and stay at home” (33). Although some of these aspects of the perfect teen have changed, such as the rigid gender concepts and lack of career aspirations, the concept of Teena still applies to many young girls. For example, Teena’s physical proportions are stereotypical of the popular Eurocentric beauty standard, which is limiting for girls simply because not everyone can fulfill that. This is reflected in *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, where protagonist Isabel often experiences insecurity about how she looks and how she is viewed by her best friend Taylor and her male peers.

Massoni’s article sheds light on the Eurocentric beauty standards that have held a tight grip on society for decades. By labeling Teena as the “ideal teen” where her readers are

consisting of millions of girls with varying ethnicities, these standards will be absorbed with negative consequences. Teena is described as “a young white girl with long, straight, brunette hair. Slender – but not skinny – she has perky round breasts and a small waist” (35). Massoni further describes Teena as always being bubbly while constantly warding off the attention of boys and being the ultimate shopper or consumer (35). Teena is not the only example of a conceptual girl that is everything a girl might *want* to be. American media further enforces this standard with dolls such as Bratz, with plump lips and slender waists, and even Disney movies such as *Pixel Perfect* (2004) where the male protagonist creates a hologram that surpasses the talents of the human girl in the film. This specific form of media curates the image of an almost supernatural or unreal girl that cannot be replicated in real life. For girls, perfection is the standard, and it is quite a high standard to be set for a young and influential audience.

These rigid standards continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century through the continuation of product placement and a focus on physicality in romantic fiction. These repetitive ideas and tropes can be defined under the umbrella of a formulaic text. The term “formulaic text” can be used to describe a text that does not engage the reader to think critically, with predictable plots and characters that result in expected storylines and conclusions. In “Talking about “Real Stuff”: Explorations of Agency and Romance in an All-Girls’ Book Club,” Sally Smith describes a formulaic text as having “...simple syntax, frequent repetition, and explicit authorial interpretations. These devices relieve readers of the need to supply their own interpretive frames, and they conceal the reader’s active role in the reading transaction” (31). And sometimes this can be preferred for girls, because some might often try to escape their realities by engaging in unrealistic romantic tropes to avoid the reality of a patriarchal society. Smith goes on to say that another element of a formulaic text is its ability to create a focus on the appearance of the leading girl, further



conceptualizing a limited idea of femininity (31). This is reflected in Han's novel simply through the title, where the word "pretty" is a primary indicator of what themes are to come within the text. Romance fiction often adheres to the guidelines of a formulaic text in this regard because there tends to be an emphasis on physical appearance and fashion, which creates a standard that girls/women can absorb and unconsciously want to fulfill in their own lives. The girls in the book club that Smith describes in her article address this topic by saying that girls in romantic fiction are often viewed as "superficial," "shallow," and "talking about boys" when that does not accurately reflect the lives of adolescent girls (33). At times, Han's novel adheres to these negative qualities, where Isabel and her best friend Taylor often engage in superficial conversation about how to impress the boys at the beach house.

So, what draws girls to these types of texts, and why is a formulaic text so common despite the passage of time and societal changes? A formulaic text is capable of sustaining relevance because of its ability to entice women by meeting their expectations of what a male protagonist should look or act like, further fulfilling an unobtainable fantasy for the reader. Girls and women stereotypically desire a romantic male lead that displays emotional intelligence which is often deemed as a feminine trait. This may seem peculiar or ironic given the number of male protagonists who appear emotionally distant, including Han's character Conrad Fisher (Crane 257). But the perceived beauty of the romantic fiction is the common plot of a male character becoming more open and emotional for the *right* woman, and this lies the plight of Isabel Conklin: her unfledged adoration and pining to be enough for Conrad. This narrative is not only layered in fantasy and unrealism for a woman, but quite popular among the formulaic text of what a male character should be in television and literature. For girls, romance becomes a quest or something to work hard at until there is a chance of victory, which can lead to obsessive

behavior and extremes. This can be demonstrated through real life accounts of women and popular literary heroines, through diet-obsession (Daly 50), glamorizing femininity molded through the patriarchy, and pitting against female friends (Johnson 57).

### **3. Commercialization of Femininity**

Another element that is important to analyze when understanding why females are the primary audience of romantic fiction and the title of Han's novel focusing on the word "pretty" is the commercialization of femininity. The commercialization of romantic fiction is only one example amongst many that influences how females view themselves both physically and mentally. The concept of the commercialization of girlhood is discussed by Naomi Johnson in "Consuming Desires: Consumption, Romance, and Sexuality in Best-Selling Teen Romance Novels," where she analyzes the marketing tactics that are used in romantic fiction that hinder a reader's ability to have an accurate perception of their unique femininity (54). From the advertisement of relevant brands to endless descriptions of a girl getting ready or "becoming beautiful," the process or transformation of the self to someone more sexually appealing promotes a heteronormative narrative, simply because it adheres to what society believes a male would find desirable or attractive. This then becomes something that is glamorized or romanticized in society for girls to attain (55).

Linda Smith's chapter in *Text of Desire: Essays on Fiction, Femininity and Schooling* dives into the idea of the commercialization of a heteronormative romance narrative to young girls by stating that, "It means being the object of desire of the corporate sector which spends several billions of dollars yearly to woo women to consume. Young women are not exempt from these campaigns. Whenever they pick up teen romance novels, they enter the world of a 500 million dollar a year industry" (48). When girls read or watch this content, they feel an

unconscious need to fulfill this image, or rather view this as part of the process to achieve romance. This is done purposefully, given women and young girls heavily participate in consumer culture, making them the target that will support the marketers and businesses while simultaneously limiting their views of self (54).

This limited view of girlhood can impact the self-esteem and long-term psychology of a young girl. The constant mention of beautification and the action of “getting beautiful” can also have negative consequences, simply because it becomes something that girls believe *should* be a part of romance or how to obtain it. This is further elaborated by Smith when she states, “The frequent repetition of such descriptions tacitly legitimizes this interest as a seemingly natural part of the female universe by drawing on cultural conventions and stereotypes” (31). It is also a subtle marketing ploy, because specific products commonly seen through film or television but also literature, can promote an endless consumer culture for girls and women that adheres to a profitable vision of girlhood, rather than a specific individual’s needs. Young girls often use romantic fiction to navigate their own experiences and shape their identity (Johnson 55).

An example of this in YA literature is the popular book series *The Clique* (2004) by Lisi Harrison, one of the novels mentioned in Johnson’s study. *The Clique* references hundreds of brands in the series (55), further enforcing its subliminal message that a girl needs specific brands and products to not only look beautiful but be seen as beautiful to boys. An example of commercialization in Han’s novel *The Summer I Turned Pretty* is with products such as “Sun-In,” a hair lightener that Isabel taunts her friend Taylor for using. Han uses this product in the novel to drive Isabel’s underlying envy towards Taylor and her ability to be conventionally attractive to her male peers. This further demonstrates that product use connects to a character’s ability to be beautiful and desired, and that specific product placement is intentional in the

confines of a narrative (55). When Taylor is first introduced to the boys Isabel describes the scene, stating that, “The boys came to attention right away. Right away they looked at her, checked out her smallish B-cups and her blond hair. It’s a Miracle Bra, I wanted to tell them. That’s half a bottle of Sun-In. Her hair wasn’t usually that yellow” (68). This scene creates a comparison between Isabel and Taylor, with Isabel inferring that Taylor receives male attention instead of her because of the lightness of her hair and chest size.

Taylor’s character is the prime example of commercialized femininity, from her use of hair lightener to her makeup (68), to the constant scenes of her getting ready to go out. Her character is constantly getting ready, from receiving phone calls while putting on mascara (displayed in tv adaptation), to talking to Isabel while putting on a new outfit (87). She even bonds with Isabel over this, constantly letting her borrow her more adult clothing such as tiny bathing suits to impress the boys (71). Isabel’s silent rivalry with her female best friend is further driven by her idea that Taylor is the standard of beauty to the boys their age. An example of this in the text is when Isabel has a fight with Conrad on the beach while he is with another girl, and she describes the girl as “...pretty, in the same kind of way Taylor was pretty, which somehow made things worse” (117). Isabel is the quintessential example of a protagonist who is constantly trying to correctly perform western ideals of femininity. Her response is not irrational of her given the constant push for a character that must reach a preconceived notion of what femininity is. Isabel’s lack of agency and belief in her own beauty is apparent in the novel through her passivity and mindset of trying to please everyone else, especially the male figures in the narrative. She constantly wants to win and keep the approval of the Fisher brothers, as shown when she states, “As soon as Conrad left, I closed my door and ran over to my mirror. I took my hair out of its braids and brushed it...I smeared some strawberry frosting lip gloss on my lips and

tucked the tube into my pocket, for later. In case I needed to reapply” (11). This further demonstrates the concept of “getting beautiful,” being shown in this specific form of romantic fiction.

The physical descriptions of Taylor as a blonde-haired, skinny, white character who always wins the approval of the boys in Isabel’s life presents a common character archetype that is relevant in YA literature: the girls who look like Taylor versus the girls who do *not* look like Taylor. Johnson notes this phenomenon as the “WASP” model which she describes as “a White standard of attractiveness” (58). This could be another reason why Taylor is scarce in the novel once Isabel is surrounded by the boys, because when she is around, Isabel and her experience constant rivalry. Isabel further describes her differences to her best friend when expressing “I was the funny one, the one who made the boys laugh. I thought that by bringing her I’d be proving that I was a pretty one too. See? See, I’m like her; we are the same” (67). This further demonstrates the idea that girls must be one dimensional, and that a girl cannot be funny and pretty, only one or the other. Isabel never felt herself to be one of the pretty girls, since she is often picked on by her male peers in the novel to the point where it feels normal. This is demonstrated when she states, “A long time ago Conrad and Jeremiah and Steven convinced me that there was a child killer on the loose, the kind who liked chubby little girls with brown hair and grayish-blue eyes” (39). One of the only characters in the novel that helps to convince Isabel of her beauty is Susannah Fisher.

Isabel’s relationship with Susannah Fisher is one that is full of admiration and respect. Susannah is the mother of Conrad and Jeremiah but is also best friends with Isabel’s mother Laurel Conklin. Susannah is girlish and seemingly put together, constantly wanting Isabel to partake in activities that she did as a girl such as cotillion. Susannah’s character struggles with

cancer in the novel, but since she is a woman, she can hide her illness with the illusion that she is simply losing weight. This is noted when Isabel states, “‘You look thin,’ I told her, partly because it was true and partly because I knew she loved to hear it. She was always on a diet, always watching what she ate. To me, she was perfect” (20). This demonstration of body surveillance and self-consciousness regarding weight demonstrates that some strains of romantic fiction aimed at young adults can be negative with views of body image. In Beth Younger’s essay “Pleasure, Pain, and the Power of Being Thin: Female Sexuality in Young Adult Literature,” explores this idea further by proclaiming “Young Adult fiction reflects girls’ lives back to them, and this literature contains many representations of young women that reinforce negative body-image stereotypes” (46). The characterization of Susannah being a middle-aged woman that is the image of femininity and womanhood, while simultaneously engaging in toxic diet culture and being extremely thin further demonstrates that to Isabel, her power comes from her appearance and being “ultra-thin” (Younger 46). It also demonstrates the idea that a woman’s appearance when sick is the same as her fulfilling a popular body standard, which is frightening.

Is it that Susannah is perfect to Isabel because of her relation to Conrad, who is Isabel’s romantic interest, or because she fulfills a stereotypical image of femininity? The title of the novel is even inspired by Susannah, with her stating, “‘You’re so pretty. So pretty. You’re going to have an amazing, amazing summer. It’ll be a summer you’ll never forget’” (21). When Susannah told Isabel she was pretty, she truly believed it, because to her Susannah is the epitome of beauty. Isabel also describes Susannah’s physical appearance with admiration and tries to relate a younger version of Susannah to herself. Susannah had to wear a wig once she had cancer and completed treatments of chemotherapy. Isabel describes Susannah’s natural hair as “...the prettiest hair. Long, caramel-colored, soft as cotton candy. Her wig didn’t even compare, it was

real human hair and everything, the best money could buy. After the chemo, after her hair grew back, she kept it short, cut right below her chin. It was pretty, but it wasn't the same. Looking at her now, you'd never know who she used to be, with her hair long like a teenager, like mine" (37). The connection between hair length and youth is a striking one and is important to recognize when analyzing popular ideas of what femininity looks like in literature. It is also interesting to note that although Isabel's mother is present in the narrative, she is never referred to with as much admiration for her physical beauty as Susannah. This further demonstrates Isabel's admiration for conventional ideals of beauty that she believes she can never truly obtain for herself.

Isabel's fixation on western ideals of beauty is further referenced in relation to Conrad's romantic prospects. She often focuses on physical attributes of the girls and her idea of what Conrad typically likes, further demonstrating that in some romantic fiction novels, "...the authors rarely describe male bodies, but female bodies are continually looked at in what becomes a powerful enactment of the male gaze" (Younger 47). When Conrad is discussing his recent breakup, Isabel says "Who was this girl? I pictured someone with pale white, blond hair and turquoise eyes, someone with perfect cuticles and oval-shaped nails" (34). Whenever she references one of the girls, she often compares herself to them, going on to mention that she kept her nails short and is more of a tomboy. This then turns her character into someone who has a limited idea of themselves and is only viewed in relation to the many boys in the novel, forcing her into a static character role. This is also done through her brief relationship with Cam, where she constantly experiences a negative internal dialogue of wanting to impress him at the cost of her less feminine attributes (114). This is unfortunately common for teenage girls to experience

given the influx of media that tells girls how they *should* act and look, and the persistent presence of romance codes in this strain of novel.

#### **4. The Heteronormative Romantic Narrative: Analysis of Conrad, Jeremiah, and Codes of Romance**

YA romantic fiction often focuses on a heteronormative narrative that focuses on a rigid code of dating scripts and romance. Christian-Smith discusses codes of romance in “Gender, Popular Culture, and Curriculum: Adolescent Romance Novels as Gender Text,” mentioning that these codes are reliant on “romance, beautification and sexuality” (366). Relationships are defined as a “market relationship” where both genders possess specific traits that are brought to the surface in the relationship, with women in YA romantic fiction using men as a status symbol or title of “boyfriend” to establish credibility in their respective social circle (372). This can be seen in *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, where Isabel’s primary struggle is feeling like she is unworthy of male attention and trying to obtain it from the *right* boy. This is shown in the very beginning of the novel when Isabel states, “Conrad was the older one, by a year and a half. He was dark, dark, dark. Completely unattainable, unavailable” (5). This also inherently makes Han’s novel and most of the YA literature market dependent on heterosexuality to maintain these ascribed codes.

The heteronormative romantic narrative is predominant in this genre of literature because this narrative of romance is profitable realm that takes advantage of girls and women’s insecurities. It also takes advantage of the societally constructed power balance between men and women, with men often being viewed as “dominant” in romance, while women are submissive (372). This is further noted by Johnson who states that, “Patriarchal society is structured in such a way that women and girls seek male approval, focus on their beauty, and act passively.



Unfortunately, these are primary vehicles that serve an indirect means of accessing social, political, and economic power for women” (58). An example of social power for women in their practices that is reliant on heteronormative narratives is Isabel needing a date for her cotillion in the television adaptation. This turns romance into a power balance among girl peers and further feeds into the concept of romance being a “quest” for young girls and women. Romance codes keep women in a place of subordination, often making them the receivers of romantic gestures rather than being the initiators. This is further defended by Christian Smith when stating, “Girls in the novels are not usually placed in positions where they can directly initiate romance or sexual encounters. Indeed, they wait. They wait to be asked for dates and, most importantly, they wait to be kissed” (377). This code of romance can create feelings of insecurity for girls, especially girls that notice their friends are getting male attention and they are not. This idea of boys coming up to girls is noted in romantic fiction, especially through Han’s novel, right down to the title. Isabel connotes her worth and beauty upon being like “other girls” such as her friend Taylor that boy’s approach, and she relates her level of being approached to her physical assets. This is shown when she states, “Taylor was always the pretty one, the one the boys looked at for that extra beat. I was the funny one, the one who made boys laugh. I thought by bringing her I’d be proving that I was a pretty one too” (67).

The adherence to this romance code is prevalent in Han’s novel with Isabel’s overly critical internal monologue, where she strictly adheres to dating scripts such as this, where the boy must initiate the first kiss or date. And if a boy has stereotypical qualities that relate to femininity, such as nervousness or taking their time, a girl will often become insecure and believe that he does not care at all. This happens to Isabel with Cam when she realizes that they are not progressing as quickly in their intimate relations as her peers. She states, “The truth was,

Cam and I hadn't done much else besides kiss. He didn't seem to be in any big hurry. He was careful with me, sweet – nervous even. It was completely different from the way I'd seen other guys behave with girls" (170). Isabel interprets Cam's innate cautiousness to his lack of interest in her, simply because a boy's level of initiation relates to their desires, at least according to the script. Isabel tries to attempt to flip the script when she flirtatiously approaches Cam only to be rejected and left feeling embarrassed when she states, "Part of me was mad and part of me was relieved...I wanted to run after his car and yell at him. He was supposed to come back" (202-204). This further demonstrates that the boy in the novel controls the romantic narrative, with the girl waiting for his advances and left feeling distraught with any other storyline.

Conrad and Jeremiah Fisher, the brothers in Han's novel that Isabel pines after with varying degrees of persistence, represent two popular tropes of male characters in romantic fiction. Similarly, to Susannah and Laurel, Conrad and Jeremiah are on opposite sides of the spectrum in terms of their temperaments and character profiles. With Jeremiah being defined as the angel of the narrative even in his appearance, with Isabel stating "I missed his curls. Susannah called him her little angel, and he used to look like one, with his rosy cheeks and yellow curls. He still had the rosy cheeks" (7). Conrad is described as the more mysterious brother, with him playing the guitar and being described as, "...quiet, moody Conrad, not a football god. And I liked that. I liked that Conrad preferred to be alone, playing his guitar. Like he was above all the stupid high school stuff" (6). Isabel often viewed Conrad as being higher than all his peers, even herself. Naturally she developed intense, romantic feelings for the brooding male character.

Conrad and Jeremiah's differences are exacerbated by stereotypes of gender, an example being Conrad's yearning to be alone all the time while Jeremiah is more of a socialite. Isabel

creates this contrast when stating, “I bet Jeremiah was more popular than Conrad at school. I bet the girls liked him better. I bet that if it weren’t for football, Conrad wouldn’t be some big deal. He would just be quiet, moody Conrad, not a football god” (6). While Conrad and Jeremiah both do sports; it is Conrad who struggles with the idea of continuing with it because it does not make him happy. He often goes against the stereotype of boys who prefer to socialize in teams and would rather play guitar (6). This idea of stereotypes in communication and socialization is explained by Youniss & Haynie, with girl activities being defined as “unstructured” while boys prefer to socialize in the confinement of rules and games (61). Conrad struggles with himself because he is different from these stereotypes, but also has a need to be like his father who fulfills stereotypes of masculinity, hence the reason he continues playing sports despite disliking it. Conrad’s lack of initiative and stereotypically feminine qualities is what draws Isabel to him, creating the ultimate quest for her worth and his love.

Isabel’s narrative with the Fisher brothers is changed drastically in the summer when she experiences changes in her body and other elements of her physical appearance, making her seemingly more desirable to the boys in her life. It can be inferred that this is the main reason why the novel is titled *The Summer I Turned Pretty*, with Isabel’s romantic pursuits and male attention being the focal point of the plot. Christian-Smith’s “Dominant Code of Beautification” demonstrates this by describing attractiveness as “the precondition to romance” and the teenage body as “gradually sexualized” (379). Isabel’s physical changes related to puberty are stated early in the novel when she first sees the boys after a year. Isabel describes this moment when stating, “Conrad gave me a quick glance-over the way boys do at the mall. He had never looked at me like that before in my whole life. Not once. I could feel my flush from the car return. Jeremiah, on the other hand, did a double take” (8). This is when Isabel starts to notice that this

summer will be different than the rest, and the reason she would then be classified as “pretty,” further demonstrating that feeling beautiful can sometimes be a direct result of getting attention from a boy (Christian Smith 381).

Isabel struggles with her newfound attention and sense of maturity, which is shown in the narrative. She starts to realize that she is different than the boys as they get older, and that there are differences in their priorities from when they were kids. Even her nickname “Belly” throughout the novel is representative of her youth and makes her feel less attractive to the boys. This is demonstrated when she states, “Belly was the kind of name that conjured up images of plump children or men in undershirts...I do wish people called me Belle. It’s prettier” (112). Isabel struggles to connect with the boys and feel a part of the group because of her older brother Steven, who simply views her as a pesty little sister, while the Fisher brothers start to see her in a more romantic light. She often feels envy for her brother because he can fit in with them because he is a boy, even though they all grew up together. Her differences start to become apparent solely because of her sex. This is made clear when she states, “...it was the feeling different, like an outsider, that I hated. I hated it being pointed out. I just wanted to be like them” (26).

Isabel’s relationship with Cam is filled with her own apprehension and dumbing herself down to make him feel smarter. This is expressed through her internal dialogue, when she describes Cam as being “a real guy who had noticed me even before I was pretty” (122). When Isabel reunites with Cam at a beach party, she realizes that he knew her from a science convention they both attended as younger children, which causes her embarrassment because she did not like how she looked at that time. Isabel’s initial intelligence that she possessed when first meeting Cam takes a backseat as she overthinks every interaction with him. She thinks to herself,

“For some reason I wanted to impress this boy. I wanted him to like me. I could feel him judging me, judging the dumb things that I said” (114).

Isabel’s role in the novel becomes about her constantly seeking validation and the superficial. This limited role of a leading girl in young adult literature is one of the popular strains of romance fiction, where the character becomes obsessed with finding love and seeking male validation. This is stated by Linda Smith when she notes, “Romance fiction has been criticized for its ‘limited roles for females’ and their depiction of ‘a narrow, little world’ in which virtue is rewarded with the right boy’s love...the books teach young women to put boys’ interests above their own, encourage young women to compete against each other for boys” (48). Isabel’s narrow world that Smith speaks of is Cousin’s beach, which she greatly romanticizes and makes the main setting for the novel. Isabel’s romanticization of the beach and her summers there represents her eagerness to see Conrad and be around the Fisher family.

Isabel’s crush on Conrad is often one that provides purpose to her narrative, with her proclaiming “I’d nursed a crush on Conrad for whole school years. I could survive for months, years, on a crush. It was like food. It could sustain me” (105). Isabel relied on her relationship with Conrad for purpose and self-worth, with his actions or lack of dialogue changing her mood for periods of time. This is shown when Isabel has her first fight with Conrad, where she argues with a girl that he is with, stating that “I’d never gotten into a fight with a girl before, or with anyone for that matter” (117). Isabel found herself trying to change and became angry throughout the novel at everyone else because of her frustration with Conrad. This is shown through her friendship with Taylor and other girls in the novel such as his random romantic prospects.

Alternatively, Isabel's friendship with Jeremiah is one that provides her with comfort, seeming to be the antithesis of her relationship with Conrad. While Jeremiah offers her comfort, he does not excite her like Conrad does. It is interesting to note that difference, and the correlation between comfort and romance. It automatically engrains in young girls that romance is related to feelings of nervousness or anxiety. This friendship is so complicated because Jeremiah grapples with his romantic feelings for Isabel, demonstrating the stereotype that males and females cannot be "just friends" and that girls relate to boys solely for the sake of romance (Christian Smith 375). And contrary to Conrad, Jeremiah often initiates romance with Isabel and even offers to be her cotillion date in the television adaptation. He is outgoing and funny, and often is the buffer between moments of tension in the novel. But Isabel's feelings for Jeremiah differ from Conrad's mostly because he is less "complicated" and makes her comfortable. Isabel often feels confusion with Conrad because of his lack of communication and initiative, stating, "The problem was, I didn't entirely know. I guessed it was mostly the way he was making me feel all mixed-up inside. Being nice to me one minute and cold the next" (199). This narrative creates feelings of excitement as opposed to the comfort that Jeremiah brings that is associated with feelings of friendship. But the notable main friendship in the novel is that of the older women, Laurel and Susannah.

##### **5. Conceptions of Motherhood and Adult Romance: The Parents in a YA Novel**

Isabel's mother Laurel and her friendship with Susannah is an important element of the novel that explores adult relationships in YA literature. The friendships and romantic interests of parental figures in this genre of literature can be skimmed over often, perhaps because the younger audience does not relate to their tribulations. But Isabel's perception of her mother and her relationships is crucial to analyze. In comparison to Susannah, Laurel is viewed by her

daughter as emotionless and cold. She unfortunately takes the brunt of a lot of Isabel's anger and frustration, which can be common among teenage daughters and mothers. Laurel's character is different from Susannah's in that she is the opposite of what femininity is stereotypically labeled as. She divorced her husband and is viewed as the "mean parent," she does not value material items, and she is not someone who is well-versed in traditionally feminine practices like Susannah. When describing her mother Isabel proclaims, "To me, my mother wasn't that mysterious. She was my mother. Always reasonable, always sure of herself. To me, she was about as mysterious as a glass of water...I wasn't sure if it was that she fell out of love or if it was that she just never was" (51).

In "Good Mother/Bad Mother: The Representations of Mothers in Printz-Award-Winning Literature," Heidi Hadley analyzes what is viewed as a "good mother" figure in YA literature. Views of motherhood in YA literature is just as important as views of adolescence because both provide scripts of how these roles should be performed and can be internalized by their readers (23). When referencing parental archetypes created by psychologist Carl Jung in the scope of YA literature, Hadley defines "good mothers" to have traits such as "patience empathy and selflessness," while defining a "bad mother" as being "destructive, selfish, and detached" (24). These traits can be limiting and harmful in nature, but nonetheless are often applied to mother figures in literature. Based on Isabel's view of her parent's divorce and relationship with her mother, Laurel possesses more of the stereotypical "bad mother" traits, which make her unfavorable in the novel, causing Isabel to favor Susannah. The reasoning for Laurel appealing to the stereotypically negative traits of motherhood could be because she does not follow the typical gendered schemas that are expected of mothers. For one, she keeps her maiden name when she gets married unlike Susannah, which Isabel views as haughty when she states, "My

mother liked to feel superior to Susannah for not changing her name” to which Laurel replies ““After all, why should a woman have to change her name for a man? She shouldn’t”” (44).

Isabel viewing her mother as thinking she is superior for wanting to keep her maiden name is an example of adhering to stereotypes of femininity. Isabel’s mother tends to go against classic codes of romance, one of them being that males are typically the stronger force in the relationship while women remain subservient (Christian-Smith 372). Additionally, Isabel favored Susannah because she could talk to her about “girly” things, proclaiming that, “Susannah loved to talk about anything girly; she said I was the only person who she could talk to about those kinds of things. My mother certainly wouldn’t, and neither would Conrad or Jeremiah. Only me, her pretend daughter” (260). Even in the 2022 television adaptation, Laurel is focused on writing her next novel while Susannah helps Isabel prepare for the cotillion she signed her up for. Laurel appears more career motivated in the television show than the narrative, offering a less static version of these characters on television. By consequentially viewing Laurel as the “bad mother,” it is easier for Isabel to sympathize with her father during her parent’s divorce who is mostly absent in the narrative.

The use of a family event that causes disagreement between child and parent is done in YA literature to centralize on the mother daughter relationship (Nadeau). The family event in Han’s novel would be Isabel’s parents’ divorce, where Isabel starts to see her mom differently now that she is not in relations with her father. Parental absence or divorce is prevalent in this genre of literature, with Hadley stating, “One of the common plot devices in YA literature has been absent parents, a situation that allows youthful protagonists to engage with independent problem solving” (24). In the lens of the novel, the absentee parents are the father figures in the novel, with them not being wanted at the beach during the summer. Isabel proclaims that,



“...dads didn’t belong in the summer house. Not my father and not Mr. Fisher. Sure, they’d come to visit, but it wasn’t their place. They didn’t belong to it. Not the way we all did, the mothers and us kids” (42).

Isabel’s brief interactions with her father are retrospective, with her describing his apartment as sad, and that it was her mother’s fault they were divorced, stating that “It was she who had precipitated the divorce, had pushed the whole thing...My father would have been perfectly content carrying on” (50). The narrative that her mother was to blame for craving more than being content is an interesting one, further enforcing the idea that women are solely meant to chase a relationship and be content thereafter. In Isabel’s mind, she cannot understand why her mother would make this choice, which causes strain in their relationship. In terms of her values, she might identify more with Susannah’s traditional way of appearing or performing femininity. Susannah’s interactions with her husband are far and few, with her trying to keep him at arm’s length to avoid confrontation about her sickness and him being busy with work. Conrad and Jeremiah notice the absence of their father in the novel, with Susannah being the parent that holds the glue together for everyone, even Laurel. Isabel describes Mr. Fisher as attractive and extravagant, giving off the appearance of a “fun dad”. Susannah’s differences in her marital dynamics compared to Laurel are evident when Isabel states, “He’d arrive at dinnertime on Friday night, and we’d wait for him. Susannah would fix his favorite drink and have it ready, ginger and Maker’s Mark. My mother teased her for waiting on him, but Susannah didn’t mind” (47). Susannah’s accommodating personality resonated with Isabel more than her mother’s headstrong mentality, with Isabel looking to her for advice on most matters. But despite Isabel’s viewpoint of her, Susannah often admired Laurel and went to her for guidance.

Susannah and Laurel's friendship is one that creates harmony and laughter within the house, with both maternal figures having different personalities that form a strong bond. It is a close and emotionally intimate relationship in the novel that is not based on romance. Susannah's sickness becomes a huge part of the novel towards the end, causing the perfect image of the beach house to fall apart. Her sickness becomes a metaphor for the passage of time and the old traditions slowly fading as everyone ages. As the summer progresses, Susannah tries to lie about the severity of her sickness and pretends she is fine, which causes tension in the house. Her sons want to protect her, but her best friend also wants to respect her boundaries. And Isabel is stuck on the fact that they are all changing, and nothing will ever be the same. This is shown when Isabel states, "How could it be that I had spent this whole summer worrying about boys, swimming, and getting tan, while Susannah was sick? How could that be? The thought of life without Susannah felt impossible" (257). Laurel is her companion through the hard times, and their relationship is often depicted in ways that show the importance of womanly friendship. There are times where Isabel shows envy for her mother's friendship with Susannah, stating that "I stood outside their door for a minute, listening to them laugh. I felt left out. I envied their relationship. They were exactly like copilots, in perfect balance. I didn't have that kind of friendship" (84). Laurel and Susannah's friendship represents the fulfillment that a platonic friendship can provide, and by removing the male figures from the novel, demonstrates that romance is not the main catalyst for happiness and healing. In fact, there are times when Susannah and Laurel appear more childlike than the children themselves, with images of them smoking marijuana and eating all the food in the house or going to the bars to dance with men.

The demonstrations of heteronormative dating scripts, interpretations of motherhood, and commercialized femininity that are applied to Han's novel are indicative of behaviors that are

still relevant to teenagers now, despite the book's release in 2009. Han's series was put on the big screen in the summer of 2022, when *The Summer I Turned Pretty* and its characters were brought to life. It is important to analyze how the television series employs the descriptions in the novel to real actors and places, and how the actors represent stereotypes of romance, masculinity, and femininity. Surprisingly, the show does change some of the mid-2000s scripts and offers nuance to some of the characters, especially Jeremiah and Isabel. By doing this, modern teenagers who are the predominant viewers, but also adults who read the novel as teenagers, can analyze the unique soundtrack, actors, and interpretation of the novel in a myriad of ways.

#### **6. Why YA Books are Now on The Big Screen: Comparing the Show to the Novel**

In addition to YA literature, adolescents often aim to replicate their lives from those shown in television. The media plays a major role in how teenagers shape their experiences and approach to romance (Eggermont 245). It is becoming increasingly more common for mid-2000s YA romantic fiction novels to be put on the big screen. And there are many elements of a television show that enhance the quality of the novel's written narrative and bring something different to the table. They can allow the characters to be more nuanced and challenge or reaffirm a reader's idea of what their favorite characters should look like. Subsequently, the show can further fulfill ideas of what a character's personality will be like based on their descriptions in the novel.

Han's show specifically brings life to the voices of other characters besides Isabel, who is the sole narrator of the story. Viewers can form opinions about the other characters that are not completely based on Isabel's descriptions, from the Fisher brothers to Laurel. Author Jenny Han was an integral part of the adaptation, with her being a co-showrunner for the new series.

*Seventeen Magazine* released an article titled, “Author Jenny Han on *The Summer I Turned Pretty* and Her Favorite Moments from Set,” shortly after the show premiered where Han talks about how the show is similar but different to the novel. She mentions, “I think the relationship between Belly and her mom was very important to me because I think mothers and daughters are a fertile place to be for a writer, to think about the nature of that relationship. Also, I would say the relationship between the two women, Laurel and Susannah, was foundational to the whole story” (Campano). Han also goes on to state that she wanted the story to feel modern but, “maintain what people were going to expect” (Campano).

In the television adaptation, the Conklin family is represented beyond Isabel, with her brother Steven and mother Laurel experiencing financial burdens and being stereotyped because of their race and respective sex. Laurel experiences stereotypes in her industry as an author, where her novel is not received with as much praise as her male competition Cleveland Castillo, who is a big part of the television adaptation but nonexistent in the novel. Laurel’s debut novel is about her experience with divorce, where Cleveland describes her as an “unreliable narrator” prior to realizing it was based on her personal experience. This further displays that Laurel’s experience with her divorce was something that everyone around her did not understand, which eventually became isolating for her character. But despite these struggles, the on-screen revival of Laurel’s character added a fresh and fun aspect to the series, which is noted by Delia Cai in her article, “*The Summer I Turned Pretty* Is Wistful Fantasy for the Whole Family” published by *Vanity Fair*. Cai states, “...there’s a slightly more grown-up but nonetheless delightful escapism in Laurel’s set-up as a single mom who, apparently, gets to spend the whole summer smoking weed and lightly co-parenting with her rich best friend”.

Laurel's other child, Steven displays the class struggles that the Conklin family experiences while spending their summers at Cousins. There an emphasis on the financial and class differences between the Conklin and Fisher family, with Steven struggling to afford expensive outfits and luxury dinners for his girlfriend Shayla. There is also a scene in the television series where Steven is working to pay for college, and he experiences racism from the older men at the country club, where they label him as overly intelligent simply because of his race. At first Steven feels confident because he thought the men were impressed by his gambling skills, only to realize the socialized differences between him and the gentleman that make him seem subordinate and reduce his successes to stereotypes regarding his race. He is also referred to as the "waiter" by Isabel's debutante friends, further establishing the differences between him and his girlfriend who comes from money.

Two characters that differ in their literary versus television representation are Jeremiah and Taylor. Compared to his representation in 2009, Jeremiah's character becomes multifaceted, with his character being bisexual while simultaneously being masculine, which makes him go against societal standards of a leading man who is hyper-masculine and heterosexual. Similarly, to Taylor, he is labeled as the promiscuous character in the friend group. He provides comic relief in the show and is friends with everyone, with Isabel describing him as a "golden retriever". But Jeremiah often feels stuck behind the shadow of his big brother, in terms of his relationship with his father and his relationship with Isabel. When their father visits on the Fourth of July, Jeremiah finds himself overcompensating and trying to prove to his father that he is more athletic than Conrad. In addition to Jeremiah's, Taylor's character becomes multifaceted in the television series versus the novel. She is shown to struggle with insecurities of her own despite Isabel's views of her. When entering Isabel's world in Cousins, Taylor feels insecure

because she does not fit in with Isabel's debutante friends. And when hooking up with her brother Steven, she feels disposable because she is considered the other girl, while Steven wants to keep it a secret because he does not want to ruin his chances with Shayla. Taylor appears as the friend that Isabel and Steven would rather keep in their other world and not in their summer world where they try to be different people. She is often othered by Isabel because of the stereotypes surrounding her, making her the second option in not only her best friend's life, but her romantic interests. This further demonstrates that despite the stereotypes that drive young girls against each other, both sides of the coin can experience struggles. This double-bind that is posed for women and young girls is further displayed by Isabel when she frustratingly states "So this was my power over her, my supposed innocence over her supposed sluttiness. It was all such BS. I would've traded my spot for hers in a second" (186).

The one major difference between the novel and show is that the television series focuses on a debutante ball as opposed to the novel that does not mention this social event. Apart from Susannah and Isabel, the ball is met with sneering remarks from everyone, with Laurel describing it as an "archaic dream" and Cam saying it is "steeped in the patriarchy" in the first episode. This is interesting when noting the earlier references and analysis of Susannah and Isabel's yearning to conform to western beauty ideals and stereotypical ideas of femininity. But despite these stereotypes, the ball seems to be more inclusive in its ability to include LGBTQ representation and characters that do not come from wealth such as Isabel. The ball causes tension between Laurel and Isabel because she does not view her daughter as the type to participate in those kinds of traditions. Isabel's desired view of herself and femininity often conflicts with how others view her, causing anger and frustration within herself both in the show and novel.

## 7. The Importance of the Soundtrack

A rather important difference between a book and television show is the soundtrack, with it being a unique quality that a book cannot provide. Han's television adaptation provides a modern soundtrack, with artists such as Olivia Rodrigo and Taylor Swift. These musical choices are intentional and enhance the narrative, which helps when shaping the reality of a literary work and enhancing the marketability and popularity of the show. Costabile & Terman explore the concept of narrative enhancement and persuasion in "Effects of Film Music on Psychological Transportation and Narrative Persuasion," demonstrating that music in film helps to persuade viewers to agree with the ideas presented in the film, but only if the music aligns with the mood of the film or show (316). It comes as no surprise that music such as Swift and Rodrigo that aligns to the perils of young adulthood, with women being the predominant listeners for these artists, would be the soundtrack for this YA book turned television series. In fact, the soundtrack further helps to demonstrate the perpetuation of the tropes and stereotypes that are commercialized in YA romance novels.

It is also demonstrated that narratives in general are a strong force of nature, with narratives being more convincing than information in any other mode (316). The idea of narrative persuasion is an important phenomenon when it comes to YA literature that is adapted onto the big screen because the power of the narrative is already influential on teenagers, but to combine it with a relevant musical score creates an undeniable pull for its audience. It is also demonstrated that films purposely choose a soundtrack that aligns with the visuals and characters on screen, but regardless of the visuals, music remains the ultimate tactic of persuasion (Lipscomb & Kendall). This further demonstrates that elements in a television show that are not found in a novel can influence the viewer in a different way, creating different reactions to the

same plot. So, while some people can prefer the novel, viewers of the show can take away a completely different experience because of audio or visual elements that a show can provide.

### **8. Why This Research is Valuable**

The research demonstrated in this essay is valuable because it builds on research about gender stereotypes and perceived notions of femininity in YA literature. There is not much research on comparisons between television adaptations of novels and the initial literary interpretation, which is important to explore when adaptations are created much after the written works are published. The television adaptations can reshape characters to meet modern standards or renewed values of society and dating scripts. This is shown through Han's adaptation, which she played a part in. It is also important to note how television and literature impacts young adults and their perceptions of relationships with a relevant piece of literature that is sweeping pop culture.

Research has already been established that discusses the importance of television in how thoughts related to romance are molded. Viewing television shows in the romance and drama genre has a positive correlation to how young adults view relationships, romance, and overall relationship satisfaction. This was further supported by the specific tropes in romance shows that enforce the belief that "love conquers all" and the concept of a soulmate (Kretz 208). It is a common consensus that movies and television shows demonstrate different perceptions of love, with some such as "happily ever after" being more negative than others. When researching "maladaptive beliefs" it is demonstrated that the most common ones are, "disagreement is destructive, mind reading is expected, partners cannot change, one must be a perfect sexual partner, and the sexes are different" (Kretz 209). These beliefs have been explained in this essay in varying lights, all being valuable criticisms for why the genre can be improved. Han's



narrative presents a story that is simultaneously progressive and dated in its presentation of relationships and gender. When comparing the television show to the novel, it is found that the show is more progressive in its presentation of male characters such as Jeremiah, while characters such as Isabel still struggle with images of femininity that are heavily rooted in western culture. This essay was a topic of interest because the show replicates a novel from 2009, showing that novels from over a decade ago adhere to a formula of romantic fiction that is still relevant to modern adolescents. Regardless of time, Han's novel provides an open discussion about romantic fiction and the pitfalls that the genre still faces in 2022.

## **9. Conclusion**

Simply put, romantic fiction will always be relevant in literary discussion. Whether it is through the storylines of a Taylor Swift album, or the pages of the primary novel being analyzed, young adults long for a commercially curated love story. It is something that most people want to relate to and are open to critiquing. And there is always room to expand on the conversation of romantic fiction, whether it is critiquing the narrative or praising its ability to foster a community. And while these topics are popular, their place in academic literature is scarce (Hefner & Wilson). This essay aimed to uncover the value of a formulaic text and how it holds longevity for its younger audience, specifically through Han's novel. This novel is important because it delves into topics that are relevant since its release in 2009, such as stereotypes of femininity, body image in young adult literature, the power of an adaptation, and views of motherhood in this genre of literature. Regardless of time, the formula of Han's novel will continue to have relevancy and keep its loyal readership. Laura Struve notes the stereotypes that a reader will face when reading a romance novel, stating, "The stereotype of the reader as "unintelligent, uneducated, unsophisticated, or neurotic" is usually based on the content of the

novels themselves. If romance novels are perceived as poorly written, formulaic, and pornographic, then it is easy to characterize their readers” (1289). This begs the question; if we know these novels are fraught with olden ideals and gender stereotypes, then why read them? Simply put, romance novels are a way for girls to bond with other girls over the tiresome ideals presented by the patriarchy, all the while engaging in a form of escapism for themselves. Whether that form of escapism be like the shimmering waters outside the fictional beach house of Cousins beach is up to the individual.

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