

'Cherish is the Word ...'

'70s heartthrob David Cassidy is centre of novel about the 'raw hunger' of fandom

BY ANDREA BAILLIE

When British writer Allison Pearson was working on her latest novel, *I Think I Love You*, she plastered the tiny writing room at the top of her house with posters of '70s teen idol David Cassidy. She trolled eBay for memorabilia featuring the Partridge Family star and pored over old fanzines adorned with the singer's smiling visage, his hair perfectly feathered and his teeth impossibly white.

Her husband, New Yorker film critic Anthony Lane, was a little alarmed by the setup in their Cambridge home.

"He said: 'My God, it looks like the lair of a serial killer,'" Pearson, 50, recalls with a chuckle during a recent interview at the office of her Toronto publisher. "And it did look like some terrible lunatic stalker.... We think of it as being a kind of childish infatuation, but my God, the raw hunger in it."

"It's a powerful force. It's huge, really."

Pearson expertly channels the obsessive ardour of teen fandom in *I Think I Love You*, which follows Welsh teen Petra as she and her girlfriends hatch a plan to travel to London for a David Cassidy concert. The second half of the novel flashes forward to revisit Petra in 1998, after she's suffered a few of life's bumps.

The novel, Pearson's first since her 2002 harried-mommy manifesto *I Don't Know How She Does It*, eerily evokes the mindset of teenage girls caught in the thrall of a musical idol.

Petra wears brown (Cassidy's favourite colour); she's annoyed by his Partridge Family costar Susan Dey, who gets to see him at work every day; she imagines her name as Petra Cassidy; and she is certain the singer is speaking to her in code through his song *I Am A Clown*.

Like any proper teen-idol worshipper, Petra is also fiercely loyal — she's left completely puzzled by girls who prefer Donny Osmond over Cassidy and is astonished when one of her friends casually mentions a penchant for Bay City Roller lead singer Les McKeown.

Such detail is sure to invoke cringe-inducing teen-crush memories in many female readers, but Pearson doesn't shy away from emotional truths.

"I think as a writer you should go toward things you find embarrassing or difficult or secretive," she says. The author accomplished that feat in spades with *I Don't Know How She Does It*, which struck a pitch-perfect note with exhausted mothers and spawned scores of



Author Allison Pearson

subsequent "mommy lit" books. "I guess the first novel was really addressing that secret parallel world that working mothers inhabit where you keep your guilt to yourself and your concerns about work and so on, so I think I was very attracted by that," she says.

"This (book), as well, feels like it's a kind of buried emotion... I like things like that because I think if you own up (to something) with all your heart then you make a connection."

Indeed, Pearson has already received all kinds of letters from readers relating their own tales of teen fandom. It's a phenomenon, she notes, that is stronger than ever, with current heartthrobs such as Zac Efron, the Twilight stars and omnipresent Canadian star Justin Bieber.

And Pearson, who has two children (she has tickets for an upcoming Bieber concert!), is not done with the topic yet.

She has plans to write a jukebox musical based on *I Think I Love You*, and giddily scrolls through an MP3 player during an interview to list off potential tunes for such a show.

Cassidy himself (Pearson interviewed the singer in 2003 for a magazine piece that is included at the end of *I Think I Love You*), is said to be pleased with the book.

Pearson "desperately hopes" that's true. "The last thing I would want is to be another person he would feel maybe had exploited him," she says. "I see the book as a sort of love letter to him."

After all, while there is certainly plenty of humour and teenaged silliness in *I Think I Love You*, Pearson takes the sheer force of such early feelings very seriously. "You look back and think it was just this silly infatuation but actually I think it's extraordinarily powerful," she says. "I think it marks the beginning of the stories that women tell each other about love."

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The Partridge Family: David Cassidy (top left) was the idol of millions of '70s teenage girls.

For former teenage girls, a book to love

BY CATHERINE MALLETTE

Last year, I was in the lobby of a Dallas theatre when a friend said, "Oh, there's David Cassidy." It was probably a good thing that my husband was standing next to me, so my response fell within the bounds of human dignity.

Of course, what I wanted to do was run up to Cassidy and make some sort of clever allusion to one of his hits from the '70s to prove what a loyal fan I had been. I knew all the lyrics, having sung them a bajillion times in a mock Partridge Family band with my best girlfriend and the boy next door. Who says there are no time machines? Suddenly I was also in a living room in Massachusetts asking someone to please point me in the direction of Albuquerque.

David freakin' Cassidy. David freakin' Cassidy! My middle-aged heart was pounding.

"I can feel your heartbeat, and you didn't even say a word..." Apparently, Allison Pearson, growing up in South Wales, had a similar Cassidy crush.

"Oh I could say I need you/But then you'd realize that I want you/Just like a thousand other (girls)"

Pearson has written a novel that takes the Cassidy crush as its central theme and turns it into an exploration of teen heartthrobs, celebrity, and the agony and the ecstasy of teenage girlhood.

Pearson's protagonist is Petra, who in 1974, when the story opens, is 13-years-old and is obsessed with Cassidy. She and her girlfriend Sharon hungrily

consume every word of The Essential David Cassidy Magazine. They kiss his image on the shrine of posters on Sharon's bedroom door. They are in love.

"This morning I woke up with this feeling, I didn't know how to deal with... I think I love you."

The girls and their entourage, led by mean girl Gillian, make plans to travel from Wales to London to attend Cassidy's farewell concert. What will they wear? How will Petra keep this from her mother, who disapproves of pop music? What will it feel like to see David?

Part I of this book rings so true with young teen angst that I almost wondered if my face might break out reading it. There I was in that time machine again. I was Petra. We were all Petra.

Pearson introduces another point of view in Part I, that of a guy named Bill, who is starting his career as a music journalist and has, quite luckily and unfortunately, landed the job as the voice of Cassidy for The Essential David Cassidy Magazine. It's a humiliating job, and yet it pays the bills and, he's good at it.

He writes, and Petra and her gang believe.

And just when the reader is getting quite comfortable in 1974, Pearson takes us to Part II, 1998. A grown-up Petra is at her mother's funeral with her husband, whom she is divorcing because he's shackled up with a younger woman. Petra's got a daughter, a 13-year-old who is madly in love with Leonardo DiCaprio. Same song, new verse, but then something happens and Petra — having lived her entire adult life in London as a cellist



I Think I Love You, by Allison Pearson (Alfred A. Knopf, \$27.95)

and music therapist — is suddenly confronted with a surprising situation that compels her to travel back down the Cassidy roads of her past.

"I'm on my way back home, gonna fly..."

Pearson's Petra is so real that I almost felt like I should call her up and tell her how much I related to her story. This is a well-told tale with equal parts of teenage and grown-up drama, all of it almost too real, too. As the years fly by, the pages fly by.

Not too long ago, I met Nick Jonas briefly after a concert he gave at Dallas' House of Blues. He seemed like a nice kid — earnest, soft-spoken. On the way back to the car, I saw hundreds of girls camped out in tents in the January cold waiting for him. What made them so desperately eager to catch just a glimpse of him?

If you've ever been a teenage girl, you know exactly how the desperation feels and maybe understand why it was so hard for me at the age of 48 to restrain myself when Cassidy walked by.

If you don't understand the phenomenon, read Pearson's book for some entertaining insight.

The crazy longing is really not that complicated. But it is essential.

As David once sang, "Love is all that I ever needed."

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