

## The Literary and Social Virtues of “Junk” Books for Girls

By Cassie Buckley

When I was younger, all I wanted to do was read. This vexed my mother for two reasons. First of all, instead of doing my chores, she would find me curled up somewhere with a good book. She attempted to thwart this by grounding me from reading; I retaliated by hiding from her, reading in the tree behind our barn, it was a long battled issue. The second reason was that all I was interested in reading was what she referred to as “junk.” Instead of stimulating my fifth grade mind on Jane Eyre, The Scarlet Letter, The Sun Also Rises, or any other book she deemed “acceptable” for my age and reading level assigned by standardized tests, I was holed up reading The Babysitter’s Club, Sweet Valley High, and the ever-loved Harlequin Teen Romance novels. And I loved them, though for the life of her my mother couldn’t understand why. Shelves upon shelves of books were in my house, being that my mother and grandmother were both teachers with a focus in English, and I, for some inexplicable reason, continued to waste my birthday money and my time with these less acceptable, dime store, “junk” books. Why? Why is it that these books served as my entertainment, when there were such “better” books out there? There has been much research done to discuss not only why adolescents turn to these books, but also why they are good for them, too.

The most important thing about these books is that they encourage the pre-adolescent or adolescent to want to read. In Readers, Teachers, Learners: Expanding Literacy in Secondary Schools by William G. Brozo and Michele L. Simpson, “young adults enjoy reading books about characters who are grappling with the transition from childhood to adulthood” (241). And why wouldn’t they? These characters are experiencing the same thoughts and emotions as the reader. Brozo and Simpson also state that when students learn to love reading at a relatively young age, this attitude can be generalized towards other subjects, “which leads to a deeper love of reading as a primary source of information and enjoyment” (242). If interesting books aren’t found when young adults are first forming their reading habits, it can lead to minimal reading later in life.

I will confess that I still read these “junk” books on certain occasions. I refer to them as my “chocolate donut” books, not filling, and too many leaves you with a sick feeling, but in the right amount is tasty and comforting. When I’m having a bad day, I head straight to the beautiful Normal public library, curl up on one of those hard blue couches, and lose myself in the crazy antics of the Wakefield twins. These books have become a talisman for me, where all problems can be solved in a two hundred page soft cover chapter book. It seems the same feeling holds true for many girls in the adolescent stage of life.

According to Readers, Teachers, Learners: Expanding Literacy in Secondary Schools, pre-teen literature, what I referred to as “chocolate donut books” are defined in many ways. They are primarily written and marketed for teenagers with main characters similar in age to the readers to which the readers can relate. These books have relatively uncomplicated plot lines and match the

interests and concerns of teenagers (241). I have chosen the works of Ann M. Martin to discuss in this paper: the series The Babysitter's Club and California Diaries.

The Babysitter's Club would be categorized as coming-of-age novels. Coming-of-age novels are when the characters are in the transition from childhood to adulthood. It has been said that these books can help to move young adults toward maturity (241). The characters in these books serve as positive role models for their real-life adolescent counterparts. They help the readers with personal problems they may be facing in real life concerning friends, family problems such as divorce, and the everyday angst adolescents encounter. Every member in this particular series constitutes a strong personality with which various readers can identify. There is Kristy, the athletic leader coming from a single parent family; Claudia, the artist; Mary Anne, the quiet girl raised by her father only; Stacy, who loves math and is currently dealing with a move and a new disease; Dawn, also dealing with a move and newly divorced parents. Each character has a quality the female reader can emulate, they show how girls can be smart, resourceful, anything they want to be. The best coming-of-age books are able to develop honest, credible characters and don't use condescending or preachy tones. The reader is almost tricked into learning something. It's a beautiful thing.

According to Dr. Mary Pipher in her book Reviving Ophelia: Saving the Selves of Adolescent Girls, during adolescence most girls tend to lose their confidence, grow sad and angry. She believes that "girls today are much more oppressed. They are coming of age in a more dangerous, sexualized and media-saturated culture. They face incredible pressures to be beautiful and sophisticated, which in junior high means using chemicals and being sexual. As they navigate a more dangerous world, girls are less protected" (12). They feel they must meet impossible standards, and when they fail, they can become depressed, develop eating disorders, or become sexually active at a far too young age. They have low esteem and become insecure. However, Dr. Pipher also has hope that "We can work together to build a culture that is less complicated and more nurturing, less violent and sexualized and more growth-producing" (13). I believe that some of the high amount of pressure set by the media can help be alleviated by the positive influence of books like the Baby-Sitter's Club. In these books, girls have problems, but are still succeeding in life, relying on other females for guidance, for moral support. The message in these books is a positive message, that girls can be strong, successful, and have anything they want, no matter who they are or what problems they may be facing.

The babysitter's club all started with the idea of a girl named Kristy Thomas. This character is the product of a single-parent family, the father having left when she was younger. However, despite this, she is a good student, and a born leader. Girls can look up to Kristy for many reasons. For one, she is described as "bossy"—and it's a good thing. When most girls are shrinking into the woodwork, letting boys be in charge as the "dominant gender" she is making things happen. Starting clubs, telling people what to do, being in charge. She

also loves sports, especially softball, and coaches her own team. Later on in the series, her mother remarries and she must adjust to that. Girls facing parental remarriage can also relate to her at this time: new family, new house, new neighbors. A book that particularly discusses this topic is Kristy and the Snobs.

Kristy and the Snobs opens with the line “If there’s one thing in life I can’t stand, it’s a snob” (1). She moves into the “rich” neighborhood, and must make friends with people whom she considers “snobs.” Right off the bat, Kristy does not get along with these girls. They argue, exchange insults, and play pranks on each other. But when Kristy’s dog dies, one “snob” named Shannon takes it as an opportunity to make amends, offering one of the puppies from her purebred mountain dog. She confesses that she had been rude to Kristy only because she had been jealous of the idea of the Babysitter’s Club and of Kristy taking away some of her sitting jobs. Kristy in turn apologizes for harshly judging Shannon and, when realizing how little she actually knew about her, says, “I decided this was my punishment for thinking that all my neighbors were snobs, and not bothering to get to know them” (134). They become friends, and Shannon is even invited to join the BSB. However, since she has such a busy schedule (another positive attribute adolescent girls can emulate: a full life), she decides to just be an associate member. The lesson here is not to judge people, whether they are rich, poor, whatever. Kristy feels that the rich people in the neighborhood are snobs, when she is actually showing some rather snobbish qualities herself by judging others by the size of their mansions. All girls should be able to get along with each other, and not to fight with other women. We should be uniting with them instead. Kristy is the President of the club.

The Vice President is Claudia Kishi. She is a Japanese-American girl living with her parents, older sister, and grandmother. She doesn’t like school, but loves all forms of art. She also loves junk food, boys, and Nancy Drew books, which her parents think aren’t quality reading. Girls who also have a hard time in school can relate to Claudia. She has to work hard to get average grades, and has an older sister who she thinks her parents think is “perfect.” Girls who have older siblings they feel inadequate compared to can relate to Claudia. A book that particularly discusses this topic of sibling rivalry is Claudia and Mean Janine. Janine is so different Claudia doesn’t even understand how they can be sisters. She says, “I can hardly even talk to Janine” (3), because they are completely different people. Not only this, sometimes Claudia feels she doesn’t quite measure up when compared to Janine: “I wouldn’t admit this to just anybody, but I have a feeling I’m a big disappointment to my parents” (4). While she knows that her parents love her, she still sometimes wishes she could be as smart as her big sister. Throughout the book, Janine and Claudia argue continuously. Then, at the end, Claudia realizes that Janine has been jealous of Claudia this whole time just like she has been jealous of Janine. Mimi, Claudia’s grandmother, lives with the Kishis, and Claudia spends a lot of time with her. Janine tells Claudia “sometimes I wish I were as close to Mimi as you are” (40). Claudia thinks that all Janine cares about is being smart, but there is much more to her than that. Sometimes she wishes she could be as fun and artistic as Claudia. Gradually Claudia comes to realize that although they are different,

neither is more or less special than the other, and she is glad that she has her as a sister: “I supposed we loved each other, although we’d never actually said so” (130). She realizes that although they might not get along all the time, they are still family, and that is a very important, sacred thing.

The Secretary is Mary Anne Spier. She is a very shy girl raised by her strict father. Her mother died when she was just a baby, and throughout the series she is learning to come to adulthood basically on her own, with no mother figure. She has grown up with Kristy and Claudia by her side, but when there is a fight in the Baby-Sitter’s Club, she is left alone until the club makes up. She must learn to branch out and make new friends despite her quiet nature. During adolescence when girls are losing touch with friends and making new ones, they can relate to Mary Anne. In Mary Anne Saves the Day the baby-sitters have a huge fight, where they all start throwing catty insults around (and we all know that’s a common pastime among junior high girls). Mary Anne tells the girls “Maybe I am shy...and maybe I am quiet, but you guys *cannot* step all over me” (14). While it was brave of her to stick for herself, the problem is that now she doesn’t have any friends she can turn to. The next day at school, it’s that nightmare we’ve all faced: she doesn’t know where to sit at lunchtime. She says “Suddenly I felt like a new kid at school. I didn’t know who else to sit with” (30). However, the positive thing is that she makes some new friends. At first she is scared: “I wasn’t sure if I had ever made a new friend all on my own” (34). But she is able to make a new best friend named Dawn Schafer, who is asked at the end of the book to become a member of the Baby-Sitter’s Club. Another positive thing that happens from her growth as an individual is she learns to take charge and solve her own problems. She is used to depending on others to make decisions for her, but when her friends and her are in a fight, she must depend on herself, an important life lesson that must be learned. When she is babysitting, the little girl gets sick and the only person Mary Anne can rely on is herself. Once she has solved this problem, she realizes that making amends with her friends is another problem she can fix.

Later on in the series, Mary Anne’s father remarries and she must deal with a stepmother, a stepsister, and a stepbrother when she used to be an only child. Mary Anne is also the first girl in the series to get a boyfriend. The books give the girls a more realistic view of “love” in the adolescent stage. Mary Anne and her boyfriend Logan (who is an associate member of the Baby-Sitters Club) are the perfect example of a G-rated couple that 13-year-old girls should be seeing, instead of the inappropriate scenes from the media.

The Treasurer is Stacey McGill. She just moved to the small town of Stoneybrook, Connecticut from New York City, New York. She had just been diagnosed with the illness diabetes and at first was afraid to tell anyone. During adolescence when many girls can be horribly mean and change friendships like changing shoes, Stacey is proof that girls may be betrayed by who they believe to be friends but are able to then find even better ones. In The Truth About Stacey Stacey says, “they’re my friends, and I belong with them. Which is more than I can say about certain traitors I left behind in New York” (3). In New York when she found out she had diabetes all her friends avoided her and abandoned

her when she needed them the most. As a result, when she first moved to Stoneybrook she didn't want to tell anyone about her diabetes because she didn't want her new friends to think she was strange or a freak. But then she realized that it was no big deal, that true friends didn't care about a little thing like that. In this book the BSB starts having some problems but Stacey knows she will stick with them through thick and thin. She says, "the club was more than just a project or a business to me. It was my friends. It was the only good thing that had happened to me in the last horrible year" (16). However, later in the book the McGills make a trip back to New York, Stacey and her former best friend and her make amends. So not only can girls who have had to move and make new friends relate to her, so can girls who have been distanced from a friend they have once been close to—and this happens a lot during the adolescent stage. Stacey is someone girls can look up to as a girl who can forgive those who have wronged her and move on with her life. She is also the image of a girl who has some very serious health problems in her life but doesn't let them get her down.

Stacey is also the "fashionable" one and lives for shopping, sales, and boys. The other girls like to tease her and Claudia as being "boy-crazy." Later on in the series, Stacey moves back to New York, and then later, back to Stoneybrook again. Girls having to adjust and readjust to new schools can relate to this. Also, Stacey's parents end up getting divorced later, and her father moves back to New York. This can be a hard time, and Stacey relies on her friends for support, just like girls should be able to do in real life. Another way in which Stacey is a good role model for adolescent girls is that she loves math. At a time when girls are struggling with math, as Dr. Pipher in her book says "In early adolescence, studies show that girls' IQ scores drop and their math and science scores plummet" (19), Stacey is rockin' the logarithms hard-core. She is number one in her math class, and loves it. She doesn't pretend she doesn't understand material, doesn't "dumb it down" in any way. She is an excellent example of an intelligent female who isn't afraid of overshadowing boys in the mathematical world. She is a fashionable, pretty girl who can still solve for x like no one's business.

The alternate officer is Dawn Schafer. Her parents had gotten divorced, so she moved from California to her mother's hometown of Stoneybrook with her mom and younger brother, Jeff. Girls who are going through a divorce where one parent lives extremely far away can relate to Dawn. Also, girls who are moving to a new town that is completely different from the one they are used to can relate to her as well. Dawn is a vegetarian surfer girl with double-pierced ears. She believes in things like "Save the Whales!" and the environment. She shows girls you can care about the world around you and make a difference, however small it may be. The book Dawn Saves the Planet opens with her science teacher asking, "Do you think kids can save the planet?" (1). "Most of the class just sat there like lumps staring at her. But not me. I raised my hand and practically shouted, "Yes, of course!" (1). However, in Dawn's quest to spread her knowledge of recycling and conservation, she becomes very pushy and bossy. She thinks she knows more than everybody and acts like everyone else doesn't care as much as she does. But in the end, she realizes that "in

order to make big changes in the world we have to begin at home—within ourselves” (146). She also discovers that you can’t do things alone; you must depend on other people for help sometimes. She says, “when you work together, you can do almost anything. Even save a planet” (146). This book not only shows girls you can save the planet, it also spreads the message that you need to work together to do it.

There are also many running themes throughout the series. These themes regularly make in an appearance in the books. One such theme that is discussed throughout all the books is divorce. The girls view divorce in many different stages throughout the series. First of all, Kristy’s dad is already gone when the books start. Then, Dawn moves to Stoneybrook as a result of her parents’ divorce. Lastly, Stacey’s parents get a divorce in the middle of the series. They have many things to say about it which a reader going through a divorce can relate to and be comforted by. In Dawn Saves the Planet Dawn says Stacey makes trips to visit her father so much that “she feels like a commuter daughter” (9). I think Dawn sums up divorce perfectly when, in Dawn’s Big Move she says, “My parents live on opposite sides of the country, like bookends. Sometimes I tell people I have a “bicoastal family” because it sounds pretty cool. But let me tell you, it *feels* pretty awful” (2). Dawn expresses the feelings kids have when they’re parents split up and they don’t know who they are supposed to love more. It especially gets difficult when both parents remarry. Of which family are you a part? About this she says, “How can you love two separate families and not feel like an outcast, or a traitor?” (104). Reading about Dawn and her struggles to readjust to a lifestyle completely different than the one to which she is accustomed can help the adolescent reader who is confused about her changing family. Also, not only is reading about another girl going through a divorce comforting, it also shows a girl who is getting through major changes in a responsible, mature way. Many times adolescent girls react in a way that is harming to them physically and psychologically. Dawn is able to rationally and reasonably discuss her problems with her friends and her parents.

Kristy’s parental situation is different from Dawn’s. In hers, her dad took off when her younger brother was a baby, and he hasn’t written or been back since. This can be a very traumatic experience, the thought of your own parent not wanting you. In Kristy and the Copycat she says, “My parents’ divorce hasn’t exactly been friendly, and my dad never writes or calls my brothers and me. I don’t think he cares about us at all” (75). Another factor of divorce Martin reflects on is how to talk to a friend about divorce. When Dawn was upset about divorce, Mary Anne let her know it was all right to feel bad, and that she didn’t think it was her fault in any way. In Mary Anne Saves the Day, when Mary Anne has first met Dawn, she says to her “I guess it’s awful when your parents split up, but there’s nothing *wrong* with it...I mean, I don’t care that you’re parents are divorced” (45). When there is a divorce happens, girls whose parents are still married may not know quite what to say to their friends. Mary Anne lets the reader know that you don’t have to say something wise or meaningful. The important thing is to let them know that you are their friend, and you are there for them. Which is

another theme the series runs on, what is all basically about: the concept of true friendship.

The whole reason the BSB was started was for a group of girls to hangout, baby-sit, and goof off. In fact, throughout the series, the club keeps getting bigger and bigger, more and more girls are becoming characters, and the friendships keep getting stronger. This sends an anti-clique message, as well as gives the reader friendship role models. Not to say that the relationships between the girls are always perfect, not by a long shot. In fact, part of the beauty of the friendships are that fights happen, jealousy happens, yet they are able to solve the problems and become stronger friends in spite of it.

An example of when jealousy became an issue in the BSB was when Mary Anne became good friends with Dawn. Up until then, Kristy had been her best friend. But Mary Anne realized that it is possible to have more than one friend—in fact, it's a really good thing! In Kristy and the Copycat Kristy says “I was, I admit, a little jealous when Mary Anne became best friends with Dawn. I didn't want Mary Anne to have two best friends. But when I got to know Dawn, it wasn't so hard and I didn't feel like I had to compete with her for Mary Anne's friendship after all” (19). Kristy basically feels the way we all do when a person we love has someone new in his or her life, like we have competition now. But Kristy shows that new friends are always a good thing, and if we just open our minds to new people, we can meet a great new friend, too. Along the lines of opening the mind to new people, Kristy and the Snobs is a great story of friendship, when Kristy thinks Shannon is a huge snob, but then realizes she is really an amazing person and they become close friends. Looking back on the past, Kristy says, “Now we laugh about the misunderstandings and tricks we pulled on each other, and I can't believe all that ever happened” (24). Another aspect of friendship is the issue of feeling jealous of your friends—after all, they must be awesome people or why would you be friends with them? When Mary Anne is talking about Claudia and Stacey in Logan Likes Mary Anne!, she says “The two of them really stand out in a crowd, and I've always been envious of them” (4). But instead of dwelling on this and feeling inadequate, Mary Anne is proud of their accomplishments. In the same book, Mary Anne talks about Kristy saying, “Kristy is so smart. She's such a good businesswoman. That's why she's the president of our club” (23). Too many times girls put each other down in the haste of competing. These girls are friends in the truest sense of the word; they support and encourage each other.

Another issue would be something all adolescent girls (and, let's face it, this doesn't change the older we get) think about: the opposite sex. Throughout the series, they talk about boys a lot, but the book that really is the turning point would be number eleven, Logan Likes Mary Anne! The girls have just started eighth grade, and many things are changing—including Mary Anne. She is just beginning to notice boys—and is noticing her as well. Ann M. Martin does a really nice job of describing love in an innocent, unassuming way, describing Mary Anne's reaction to her first real crush in a way that is appropriate for the pre-adolescent girl she is. When Mary Anne first meets Logan, she says, “I froze. I froze into an ice statue of Mary Anne. I couldn't even blink my eyes”

(35). She goes on to say, “If anything should have made me melt, it was Logan, but I was frozen solid. I couldn’t even turn my head to look into his dark eyes. I was dying” (36). Reading about Mary Anne’s reaction to boys helps the young reader by letting them know it’s normal to be nervous around boys as you go through puberty. Many girls think they have to be something they’re not, that they have to be “cool.” Mary Anne lets them know that really, all girls are as nervous as they are. In fact, when Logan attends a Baby-Sitter’s Club meeting, Mary Anne was too nervous to even talk. She says “my tongue felt as if someone had poured Elmer’s glue on it and then covered it with sawdust” (42). She explores all the thoughts young girls have around their first real “boyfriend”, wondering if she could possibly be in love. Once when she and Logan are talking she thinks to herself “It was as if Logan and I were in our own world, and nobody and nothing else existed. A scary thought occurred to me. Was this part of being in love? Nah. I was only twelve-going-thirteen. I couldn’t really be in love...could I?” (117). Another positive attribute of this book is that though Mary Anne thinks she may be in love, she still recognizes that she is only thirteen. For instance, when she is going to the school dance with Logan she is glad that she won’t have to be alone with him: “My friends were all going to the dance, too. Kristy and Dawn were going stag, Stacey was going with Howie Johnson, and Claudia was going with Austin Bentley, whom she had gone out with a few times before. I was glad they would all be there” (88). But not just girls with their first crushes can relate to this book.

Girls who are not yet ready to begin this phase of their life can relate to how Kristy feels in this book. She is not yet ready to let go of her childhood, and feels a little strange watching Mary Anne embark on a new adventure she can’t be a part of. She expresses her feelings to Dawn, saying “And suddenly she’s...I don’t know...ahead of me, and I’ve been left behind” (101). Mary Anne is her best friend but Kristy is beginning to feel like they are separating. Kristy has always been the bold one in the friendship; Mary Anne has always been the quiet one following Kristy’s lead. Lots of pre-adolescents can relate to the confusion Kristy is feeling about this new turn of events.

In 1998 Charlie Reed said that one of the best ways to reach young adults was through books. He said that books could help students work through a personal or interpersonal crisis, as well as excite their imaginations (Brozo 1995). Is pre-teen literature just the written version of the after-school special? It can help inform of hard stuff parents don’t really like to talk about—sex, drugs, abuse while also entertaining the adolescent reader with tales of other adventurous, cheeky adolescents.

While The Babysitter’s Club contains characters adolescent girls can look up to as well as relate to, another series by Ann M. Martin, California Diaries, is a horse of a different color. These books talk about some of the harder issues in life—alcohol, dying friendships, disease. They are a close follow to The Babysitters Club. In this series, one of the babysitters has moved back to California to live with her father. California Diaries deals with her friends here—they are not the innocent, G-rated girls like the characters in Martin’s previous series. They have problems more complex than seen in the BSB series—they

seem to grow with the reader. The adolescent female reader can transition from simple friendship issues to a dirtier world, a world of eating disorders and dying parents and substance abuse while staying in touch with a character they already know, Dawn Schafer.

These books also differ from The Babysitter's Club in the format in which they are written. They are written using non-traditional font, so it seems you are more reading an average girl's diary instead of a story written by an adult not familiar with the problems the younger generation is facing. Like I said earlier about being tricked into learning something, the adolescent reader is almost tricked into being comforted by the thought of other teenagers going through the same troubles they are. These books are much less "preachy" than that of The Babysitter's Club; they are more to help the reader who is facing these problems rather than to contain characters the reader can try to emulate. Instead of a platform, everyone, reader and character, is on the same playing field.

Another cool thing about California Diaries is the style it is written in. They are all written in the form of a journal, complete with handwritten pages. It makes the reader feel more like they are actually reading a girl their own age's diary instead of the preachings of an adult. Another thing that is less preachy about this series than The Baby-Sitters Club is the problems in them. Instead of the character facing a problem that is discovered, solved, and moved on from in one 200-page book, these characters have problems that stretch from book to book. For example, one character's eating disorder. You are able to witness the beginning stages, watch it develop into something worse, then you read on about her struggle to get help. This helps the adolescent reader not only if they themselves may be facing a problem of this sort, but also readers who may witness a stage of this behavior in their friends. The reader is not only able to read about how the character is feeling and what they are thinking, but also how the character's friends are reacting to this. Everyone can find a person they can readily relate to. There is even a boy main character, which is also different from The Baby-Sitters Club, who is 16. The journals rotate from character to character: Dawn, Sunny, Maggie, Amalia, Ducky, repeat.

There are five characters in the California Diaries series. We have heard about a couple of them from the BSB books written about Dawn when she was in California. The most familiar character is Dawn Schafer from The Baby-Sitter's Club. She has moved back to California where many new situations are awaiting her. Not only must she readjust to her move back, her stepmother is pregnant, her overcrowded junior high is moving its eighth grade class (which she is in) to the high school building, and she is falling apart from someone that used to be one of her best friends. This first book of the series, written from Dawn's point of view, is the transition from The Baby-Sitter's Club to California Diaries, the transition from a safer world to a world with bigger problems. This book possesses some of the qualities of The Baby-Sitter's Club—a problem that is solved in a seemingly simple process, for example, along with some discussion of harder issues: alcohol, a dying parent, a friendship lost. When I first read it, it was completely different from what I had expected after The Baby-Sitter's Club. It was a little bit like watching Roseanne after a marathon of 7<sup>th</sup> Heaven's:

intense in comparison to what you're used to. The adolescent reader who is tired of the preachy tones in the previous series can find relief in this series while still being vaguely sheltered.

The second character whose journal we encounter is Dawn's best friend Sunny Winslow. Sunny's mother is dying of lung cancer, and she is not taking it well. Her response to this is to simply pretend it isn't happening. She runs away from home, she skips school, she starts drinking, she hangs out with an older, wild crowd—she is basically acting like a typical rebellious teenager. Adolescents can relate to Sunny because she is acting in a way they themselves would act—not in a mature, “respectable” way to teach them a lesson.

The third journal we read is written by Maggie Blume. In the BSB series, we know her as a quiet girl who loves animals, wants to be a veterinarian, and whose father happens to be a Hollywood producer. But in this series, we discover an entirely new Maggie. She is a girl growing up in a home full of money and privilege but short on family. Her father is a workaholic that is hardly ever home. Her mother has a severe drinking problem. She herself is having problems with boys and issues about self-image. In the first book we read about her contemplating going on a diet, in the others books we read about her getting thinner, and in her next journal she is on a severe crash diet. With each book the problem gets worse, eventually moving on to discussing her trying to get help.

The next character is Amalia Vargas. When we read about her in the previous three books, she is seemingly the “normal” one. She has just moved here, but she has both parents, a sister she occasionally has spats with, but gets along with for the most part, and her boyfriend is the singer for a local band. But gradually throughout her first book we realize that her boyfriend is abusive, getting jealous when she talks to other guys and coming on much too strong in the relationship in relation to how young she is. Eventually she gets the courage to dump him. Girls can relate to this situation when they are too young to be in an intense relationship. Instead of thinking this is what they are supposed to be doing and therefore growing up too fast, they can use Amalia as an example and break things off with their abusive boyfriend.

The final character we encounter firsthand is a boy named Christopher McCrae—but known as Ducky. His is a different story from the girls'. He lives with his 20-year-old brother because his parents are professors and often go for extended trips to other countries. The other girls view him as their confidante, the guy who always has it together and they can always go to him for help. But really, he is an insecure guy trying desperately to just fit in. He has two best friends that he feels he is falling apart from: one who has gotten “too cool” for him, and another who is suffering from a severe case of depression. Although he is not the same gender or age as the girls reading his “journal”, he has many relatable qualities. He feels slightly unloved by his parents, he is confused about the newfound popularity ensconcing one best friend that he is not a part of, and he doesn't know what to do about his other best friend who seems to have no will to live. Added to that are the group of girls who think he is perfect and he feels he can't let them down. Many pre-adolescents can relate to his sense of not

wanting to let anyone down, as adolescence is a time of new responsibility as well.

From the simple issues of The Baby-Sitter's Club to the stickier situations of California Diaries, Ann. M. Martin covers a range of topics, personalities, and characters the adolescent or pre-adolescent reader can use as a bouncing board for their own lives. These books overall help form positive role models, help young females realize they are not alone in the problems and feelings they encounter as they grow up in the world.

Although many of these situations seem shallow and unimportant when compared to more "classic" literature, these are the types of things pre-adolescent girls are curious about, information they may not receive from their parents. These books address real issues for real girls in a positive manner—educational, yet also entertaining.

These are the chocolate donut books. In excess, they are probably not altogether a strong source of well-written literature, but in the right amount they provide positive role models, relatable situations, and boundless entertainment. So when people like my mother wonder why girls with a thirst for books reach for the books of authors such as Ann M. Martin, maybe the answer is obvious. Sometimes, they just taste better.

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