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Dylan Berman
Seattle University

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Totally Booked: The Pepsi Cola Addict

Dylan Berman, News Editor

Contains mentions of sexual assault, suicide

Twin sisters June and Jennifer Gibbons lived very strange lives. Known as “The Silent Twins,” they began to speak only to each other in early childhood, and their own language became more unique, eventually fully unintelligible to anyone on the outside. No therapist could successfully convince the twins to communicate with anybody besides each other. When forcibly separated they each shut down completely until reunited. During their teenage years they engaged in vandalism, petty theft, and arson, and this along with their refusal to communicate landed them in a mental hospital for eleven years. The twins were inseparable, but also tried to kill each other multiple times.

For a time, both sisters were deeply creative and wrote a number of plays and books, but the only one available today is *The Pepsi Cola Addict*. Long thought a lost novel, it was again made widely available by the publishing house Strange Attractor in May of 2023.

The Pepsi Cola Addict follows 14-year-old Preston Wildey-King, who is literally addicted to Pepsi-Cola. He drinks the stuff constantly, and turns to it like a drug when faced with something difficult or painful, which is quite often. He dreams of Pepsi-Cola, drinking hundreds of cans a day.

The novel opens as follows: “He walked into the turbulent supermarket. There were people everywhere. His eyes swept over the shelves and stabilized on a large stack of Pepsi-Colas. He could almost experience the cool fizzy liquid descending his parched throat.”

Preston lives alone with his mother and mean older sister, his father long dead, near the beach in Malibu. He’s still in love with his cheerleader ex-girlfriend Peggy, who left him because of his soda addiction, but she won’t take him back. Preston says that he is “attractive to everybody he [comes] into contact with,” which would seem narcissistic if it wasn’t true. Peggy’s younger sister wants him, his male best friend Ryan won’t back off, eventually assaulting him, and after asked to come over for private tutoring, he is raped by his math teacher, who claims to be in love with him, and he faces unwanted advances from a guard during his time in juvenile hall.

Preston never fully processes the extent of the abuse he faces throughout the novel, and Gibbons writes his repressed pain and shame well, as he navigates sexuality as a young adult. While struggling in his friendship with Ryan and his relationship with Peggy, he gets caught up in a convenience store robbery plot, caught because he stays behind with the store’s boxes of Pepsi-Cola, and spends time in juvie, where he witnesses a friend murdered.

His math teacher also visits him during his time incarcerated to tell him she is moving to Europe with her husband. When he gets out, and finally seems to have a chance again with Peggy, she tells him she’s moving with her family to San Francisco.

The long list of painful experiences befalling Preston throughout the novel push him to the edge, and he downs a pill bottle and dies.

The novel has a powerful sense of atmosphere, partially because of its strange and unpolished writing. You can tell it's the mostly unedited work of a very talented 16-year-old, and this lends it a powerful sense of earnesty. The writing makes the novel unsettling. Everything just feels a bit off, like we're in the "Twilight Zone," or a David Lynch film. Gibbons' descriptions are mildly clunky and straightforward, but create an overall compelling and unique feel to the novel's setting.

The work is effective as a unique coming-of-age story. Preston is compelling and sympathetic, and Gibbons captures the unique sense of social confusion and alienation, experienced in young adulthood as he navigates the events of the novel.

The book is obviously far from perfect, but it stuck with me. There is clear talent and creative control at work, and its feel of being rough around the edges makes it feel authentic. The author is someone who felt isolated like Preston, who later fell into crime and was institutionalized, like Preston.

It's a coming-of-age novel chronicling a very troubled child, written not by an adult looking back, but by someone coming of age as a troubled child herself.