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 **Re-Reading the Romance of *Seventeenth Summer***

Virginia Schaefer Carroll

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Re-Reading the Romance of *Seventeenth Summer*

Virginia Schaefer Carroll (bio)

Begun when the author was seventeen, Maureen Daly's *Seventeenth*

Summer was published in 1942 as an adult title. As Daly herself notes, "the book was in print for 20 years before someone noticed that teenagers were reading it and designated it YA" (qtd. in Fakhri 36). *Seventeenth Summer* is still in print, one might suspect, precisely because of its distinct position as a cultural and literary artifact: I regularly include this novel on the syllabus of my adolescent literature course because, as one critic notes, "the modern period of young adult literature is often said to have begun with *Seventeenth Summer*" (Vogel 41). Recently, however, my students' responses to *Seventeenth Summer* have prompted me to brush the dust from my usual reading and to discover, within the sweet and arguably sometimes dated narrative of Angie Morrow's first summer romance, a strong, unlikely heroine in a complex novel of female development.

When I first heard students complain about the novel—they groaned that "nothing happens" and felt incredulity at Angie's naiveté—I asked them to re-examine the work by focusing on Angie as a female hero.¹ Jeanette Mines's assertions about the kinds of heroines needed in young adult books became the basis of this guided reading:

Librarians, teachers, parents, and anyone concerned with young adult readers need to know the literature that speaks to young girls about real people, particularly females, in real situations with real feelings. Teenagers deserve encouragement to read stories with female heroes who transcend their worlds in positive, healthy, female-oriented ways. They deserve introduction to books with strong female characters who have stories worth telling and hearing.

(12)

More than half of the twenty-seven essays my students wrote in response expressed at least partial disagreement with the view that *Seventeenth Summer* fulfills Mines's criteria. Criticism of Angie herself was frequent: she "leaves too much unsaid," "doesn't really know what's going on in the world around her," and is "too wishy-washy," "dim-witted,"

and "subservient." One reader remarked that the story "isn't worth hearing" because it is *too* realistic: "Falling in love and all of the fear, happiness, and confusion Angie feels are real situations with real feelings, but so is walking a dog." Another confessed that Angie seems so passive and naive that "it's hard to keep from wanting to yell at her when reading!" In addition to this dissatisfaction with the plot of *Seventeenth Summer*, a number of students expressed a range of negative reactions to the way the relationship between Angie and Jack is developed. Students commented especially on the ineptitude of Angie's communication: "she never freely expressed her feeling for Jack. Indeed, she communicated most often with the indifference of silence." When considering Angie's response to Jack's marriage proposal (she cries and says nothing), two male students placed themselves in Jack's position: "If I were Jack, I would want more response than a blank expression"; "she should have been much more open and vocal with her feelings about Jack and her family."

Some of these criticisms may be simply related to the era or to the quality of the writing, but the most negative responses seem to indicate that readers in the 1990s have clear requirements in mind for the romance genre—and *Seventeenth Summer* fails to satisfy their expectations. One female student, for example, suggested that the slow pace of the action is unrealistic and uninspiring: "readers like to read about the kissing, hugging, and even sex. . . . If these things don't happen within the first couple of pages in the book, we tend to want to put the book down." A male reader also remarked that "it took them forever, or so it seemed, just to hold hands and then kiss." Others pointed out that the novel "had no real excitement and surprise" and that its "long, boring parts . . . [left them] irritated, expecting more." Such disappointment is not surprising, given the marketing strategies evident in the Archway Pocket Books edition the students used. On the cover, a muted photograph shows a star-quality couple...

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by Virginia Schaeffer Carroll

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Although one might expect university students in the mid-1990s to support Angie's decision, at age seventeen, to choose college over marriage, a number of students expressed regret about this ending. For example, one wrote, "I thought that she loved Jack and no one would separate them, but her family and college did." Another student confessed, "I [would have chosen] a fairy tale ending for them." Several students expressed shock that Angie "loved Jack and just let him slip away." The undercurrent of dismay about Angie's rejection of Jack suggests some differences between ideas of dating in 1942 and 1995. More importantly, however, the essay responses

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