In the sensitive novel *Sweet, Lovely, Attentive*, two college students learn that considerable work goes into loving relationships, whether with partners, friends, or family members.

In K. W. Jeppesen’s multicultural romance novel *Sweet, Lovely, Attentive*, roommates navigate their sexual identities, buried family histories, and the trials of being college freshmen together.

The fortuitous assignment of Arm and Logan, better known as Legs, to share a dorm room at the University of Minnesota ignites passion in both young men. Arm is an international student from Thailand, eager to learn about the US and the taboo subject of his unknown American soldier grandfather. Legs is grateful for the independence and progressiveness of university life compared to life in his rural Minnesota hometown; he is drawn to exploring his nascent homosexuality and artistic ambitions. The men form an instantaneous bond, and their relationship deepens over the course of the novel—a love story that details the pressure of clashing cultures and sordid family histories as well as the enormous value of a supportive community.

The vast majority of *Sweet, Lovely, Attentive* is told from the perspectives of Arm and Legs. However, the novel is also framed by a narrator from the future, Tim—a writer devastated by the loss of his husband Geoff to COVID-19. Years earlier, in search of someone to translate his novel into Thai, Tim and his husband forged a friendship with the roommates and became their informal confidants and guides. An unexpected wedding invitation led Tim to reminisce about that time and retell the story of Arm and Legs.

In this complex narrative structure, the roommates’ blossoming love is broken into serial-style vignettes that coalesce into an expansive depiction of two gay men maturing into themselves. Arm strives to challenge himself, taking on Tim’s translation project and stumbling through the foreign territory of Legs’s forthright affection. Legs struggles to find an adequate balance between ignoring Arm, caring for him, and obsessing over him. Beginning with a fight over Arm’s early-morning classes and deafening alarm, the two men tiptoe around the issues of compassion, trust, and communication. Is Legs’s protective insistence on accompanying Arm when he goes out to meet new people caring? When Arm sees Legs out with a girl after missing their regular Sunday brunch, is his anger justified? After a winter break in which Legs invites Arm home for the holidays, it becomes clear that these are the simplest questions that their love will generate.

While the novel’s strength lies in its big-picture structuring and comprehensive approach to narrating the course of a relationship, awkward literary and linguistic elements disrupt its plot. People’s conversations sound unnatural, more often conveying context and miscellaneous information than helping to develop a sense of their relationships in an organic manner. And the characters’ stilted voices also result in abrupt transitions between scenes that undercut their emotional and meaningful events. When Arm first discusses the possibility of translating Tim’s book, for example, the subject of sexual assault comes up and touches him, yet the potency of this revelation is diminished by a strange, unrelated exchange that concludes the meeting.

Source: https://www.forewordreviews.com/reviews/sweet-lovely-attentive/
*Sweet, Lovely, Attentive* is a sensitive romance novel focused on young men on a circuitous path toward understanding themselves—and love.

WILLEM MARX (November 9, 2023)

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