

The Virgins

Pamela Erens

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With a lyrical voice, Pamela Erens has written a novel about first love and sexual awakening that is multilayered and perceptive.

This novel of academia is set in a fictional boarding prep school, Auburn Academy, in late 1970s New England. Wispy Aviva Rossner is from the Midwest and is Jewish, while Seung Jung is Korean-American. Aviva is quiet and studious, while Seung tends to live more on the edge, particularly as he dabbles in drugs. Aviva's family is distant, while Seung's family is stern and foists high expectations upon their second son. An unlikely couple, the two are inexplicably drawn to each other and form a relationship that is both envied and ridiculed by classmates.

Aviva and Seung's teenage exploration of intimacy, which arguably may not have been seen as shocking in present day, turns into scandal and shame in the setting of a 1970s boarding school. When Seung is caught sneaking out of Aviva's room one night, it unleashes a downward spiral in their relationship and leads to tragic consequences.

Within minutes of arriving on campus, Aviva has an unpleasant encounter with Bruce Bennett-Jones, who is so overcome with passion for Aviva that he comes dangerously close to raping her. Though Aviva doesn't speak to Bruce for years, his obsession does not recede but only ripens. What makes the story unique, and oftentimes unsettling, is that it is told in Bruce's voice, though he sits on the sidelines. Bruce is essentially a voyeuristic observer in the relationship between Aviva and Seung, and the reader is left wondering how he could have known about their intimate conversations and sexual encounters, particularly as he speaks in the present tense. At times he admits that this is how he imagines what happened, which makes him an unreliable narrator, an unwanted third party in their relationship.

Bruce explains his interest in this way: "When I began to piece together this account, I did so simply to make sense of things, to create a plausible whole out of the fragments left behind ... Later, as I amplified and embroidered (yet every little detail, every flourish I added seemed to bring me closer to the truth), I began to see my tale as a kind of restitution, the only type of penance I could then see to pay Aviva."

Ultimately, though, Bruce's importance to the storyline, and his role in the outcome, is revealed at book's end.

What could loosely be described as a coming-of-age novel, the book touches upon themes of ethnic prejudices and the folly of youth. The slim book is thickly layered with prose that intrigues the mind and captivates the senses.

HILARY DANINHIRSCH (Fall 2013)

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