

distractions

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Younger, faster, sexier — soaps have a new following

Poor Jenny Gardner! Blackmailed by Liza the slut and haunted by the return of her rapist father, she has just returned to Pine Valley after a successful modeling job in New York City to be with her boyfriend, Greg. But her return is marred by Liza's latest jealous plot to end her relationship with Greg. That's a lot for a high school girl of 17 to go through.

People will eagerly watch Jenny stumble from one crisis to another, year after year. They are deeply concerned about what happens in Pine Valley, the home of ABC's soap opera "All My Children."

A large number of University students follow afternoon soap operas with a religious passion. They are part of a growing number of young adults who memorize the characters and intricate plots with an accountant's precision for detail.

Look out Luke! It was easy for him to save Port Charles from being turned into a giant ice cube, and just as easy to leave Laura, the girl he raped and later married. But can he get back the money that locals invested with him and lost because he was fooled by an oil-drilling scam?

Campus soap fans are a new generation, different from the stereotypical housewives of the 60's who cried in front of their television sets from morning to mid-afternoon. Campus soap aficionados are mostly female, but more men are watching afternoon drama.

"Yeah, there are a lot of football players watching soap operas," says Keith, an "All My Children" fan. One football player at University Inn says he prefers "The Young and the Restless" over others. "I think it's more realistic," he says. "The others are just too bizarre."

Ray Gardner would be a nasty guy, even if he wasn't a convicted rapist. Once married to Opal Gardner, Jenny's mother and Pine Valley's sewer dweller

on the social ladder, he was believed to be dead for many years while actually in jail serving a sentence for the rape of Ruth Gordon, long-time Pine Valley busybody. Now back in town, Ray is being used by Liza in her latest plot to get revenge against Greg, her former sweetheart. Ruth, paranoid as usual, has bought a gun in case Ray comes back again.

Most campus soap fans can only watch the shows two or three times a week because of conflicts with classes. Last year some die-hard fans from Carson Hall dormitory got around that problem by using a videotape recorder to see the shows they missed during the day, according to Brenda, a sophomore.

Many students watch the soaps in the television room of the Fishbowl in the EMU. Usually there're a few empty seats, but sophomore Jenny Lusk says "When Luke and Laura got married (last year on "General Hospital"), you couldn't even get in there."

Brenda says that her roommate last year was so hooked she would leave her half-eaten lunch in the cafeteria to go watch "All My Children."

"I'll skip class sometimes if the action's really good," says Greta, a freshman. She and three friends in Hamilton complex have been "All My Children" fans since eighth grade.

Sophomore Michelle Olford says she didn't watch soap operas very much in high school. Since she scheduled her classes around the soaps this year, she's become an expert on "All My Children" and "The Young and the Restless."

"You develop an obsession once you start following the shows," says Jenny Lusk. Her "General Hospital" souvenir glass is a relic from the days when she used to watch the show religiously. "I feel guilty whenever I watch one. I know there's something else I should be doing."

Sammy Davis Jr. is being killed by

television. Portraying a washed-up, dying entertainer, Davis has a heart attack in the middle of a benefit concert for the Port Charles sports center for disadvantaged youths, who are curiously never seen. Will any of the dozen or so General Hospital doctors in the audience save his life?

Many students begin watching soaps out of sheer boredom. "I just have a free hour, that's all," says Dave Bass. He started watching "General Hospital" at the Fishbowl in late October.

It was the summer before sixth grade when Brenda got hooked on the soaps. The shows appealed to her, she says, because "here was the first image I saw of the real adult world and I was able to find out what grown-ups were like to each other. I guess, looking back now, that it's really not the best impression for a kid to get."

Many girls started watching the soaps during junior high school. Robin, a freshman, says "My friends were always talking about "All My Children" at school. I wanted to know what they were talking about and be part of the conversation." She's been following the Pine Valley gossip since the eighth grade.

A whole industry has grown up around soap operas, including no less than a dozen soap opera magazines, with features like the baseball game between soap opera all-stars and Rochester, N.Y., media all-stars, the "startling predictions about your soap opera fave's for next year" and the latest women Tony Geary (Luke of "General Hospital") has been seen with. Advertisements urge you to buy "the exclusive wedding album from Luke and Laura's wedding."

"Life is a soap opera," Jenny Lusk explains. "They exaggerate human reactions and emotions, but they are really a reflection of society."

Most soap opera plots run between three and six months at a time, according

to an interview with "The Edge of Night" headwriter Henry Slesar in "Afternoon TV," a soap opera magazine.

"It would be boring to watch the shows if the characters weren't so emotional. That's part of the fun," explains Hannah Walker. She and her boyfriend watched "All My Children" last summer.

Slesar explains in the interview that "ABC picked it up first — more action, less introspection, fewer older people's marital problems and more externalism, faster moving, more violence, definitely more sex, but that came with the permissiveness of the era."

Brenda echoes some of Slesar's comments. "My women's studies class took a look at how the soaps handle some topics," she says. "On "All My Children," Erica and Mark were already in bed before they found out they were actually half-brother and half-sister. There's also some violence, as when Ann was blown up by a car-bomb meant for someone else."

"Rape and abortion on 'General Hospital' are handled pretty well, but the way Laura had to fall in love with her rapist was really unbelievable," Brenda says. "We examined one study about why there are so many lawyers and doctors on soap operas. The study concluded that those people had more interesting and dramatic events in life that lent themselves to TV drama. I don't see why a plumber or a carpenter can't have an interesting life on TV."

So the Pine Valley watchers will eagerly await the next week of drama in the sordid saga of "All My Children." Perhaps one day Jenny and Greg will find true happiness, Ray will finally reform himself and Opal will learn the meaning of the word "fashion."

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