

Smooth Talk

by Eleanor Malin

Fifteen-year-old Connie is a young man's dream. She has blonde hair, long legs, and mush for brains. Rampant hormone levels have caused her to become boy crazy. She doesn't have a steady boyfriend, so she spends every moment she can at the shopping mall with girlfriends, cruising. The girls contrive silly excuses and get one of their moms to drive them there, almost every day. Once there, they glamorize their make-up, re-accessorize their ensembles, then press forward, ogling the young males, who also patrol the mall in groups, looking for the other half of what the girls are seeking.

As you can well imagine, this primitive form of courtship is not very effective. It may seem easier to approach a one-on-one relationship in a group, since there's less pressure, but that's not how it works.

On the other hand, if the girls really understood what it was they were seeking, and one of them said to the others, "Let's put on our sexiest outfits and go to the mall and pick up some guys and get laid," ... well you catch my drift. You can shop for sex at a suburban mall, but you can't buy love as easily as you can shop for sexy underwear.

Titillated but unfulfilled by their forays into the anonymous subculture of the mall, Connie and one of her friends take to going to the theater at the mall in the evening, pretending to see the same movie three nights running. They walk from the theater to a nearby hamburger stand, the teen version of the pick-up bar. Connie gets snapped up by the first guy who asks her, and gets to do a little necking. She is frightened by her excessive passions, and backs down.

On her first venture to the hamburger stand, she catches the eye of Arnold Friend, played by Treat Williams. Friend is the consummate predator. He describes a target in front of her, says, "I'll be watching you," as he gestures a shot into the target.

Connie has a falling out with her family and refuses to go to a family barbecue. She is home alone on a sunny Sunday afternoon, outside of Petaluma California, when Friend shows up in his funky convertible with a strange guy whose ear seems to have grown to his ghetto blaster.

Friend has been watching Connie, and apparently, taking copious notes. He knows her name. He knows she's home alone. He knows where her family is. He knows she is horny; knows she is a virgin. He offers her assistance. He's a gentleman (he says); he's polite. He, rather calmly, lists his good points. His friend, Ellie (pretty weird, huh?) lends ominous overtones to an already disconcerting situation.

As Connie, Laura Dern is languid as the Petaluma summer. She is incapable of serious concentration, apparently due to adolescent smouldering, and she can't do any work, or even remember to run errands. She's too lazy even to eat. She dances a little around the house, but otherwise is only energized by the presence of boys. Dern creates a characterization that is painfully accurate, one you would expect from an older, more experienced artist. It's one of the best performances

of the year, one I'd recommend everyone see.

Connie sings and dances to old James Brown sexy rock songs. She makes vulgar jokes to the other girls. The combination of her blonde good looks and her innocent hedonism threatens the other women around her. She makes her girl friends, her sister and her mother uncomfortable, and doesn't even realize it, she's so into herself.

As Arnold Friend, Treat Williams does a superb job. He looks the part. There is no intelligence gleaming back from his eyes — only animal cunning. The "smooth talk" he proffers is anything but. A woman with any experience at all would reject him, unless she were really desperate.

This film is based on a short story by a woman, was directed by a woman, and treats a subject not often dealt with in a mature manner, that is, the sexuality of young persons. Today's teenagers are sexually mature and fully fecund years before they are allowed (at least officially), sexual freedom. It really is a problem for girls who mature early, and this film treats the subject with piercing honesty.

Sugarbaby

A woman whose main physical characteristic is 250 lbs. avoirdupois, works as a mortuary attendant. Her life is a steady routine of going to work on the subway, preparing corpses for burial, coming home on the subway, eating in front of the TV. She doesn't even sit up (doesn't even have a chair). She lies on her bed, aimed at the TV set, a little nest of open junk food sacks arranged around her. She is so efficient a feeder, she can chew in her sleep. When she dons her bathing suit and gets in the pool, she is too passive to swim, and merely floats.

One morning the chubby heroine, Marianne Sagebrecht, awakens, turns on the

radio and hears an old rock song, "Sugarbaby." She has a flashback to when she was fifteen. That day, on the way to work, she sees a slender blond subway conductor, and it is lust at first sight. She pines for him, cannot do her work, or even get to work on time. When dressed down by her supervisor, she negotiates a five-week vacation, and sets about tracking down the conductor and feathering her nest. Single-mindedly, she traces the Sugarbaby of her choice, using ingenious detective work and strong binoculars for surveillance.

She special orders sexy lingerie, buys 4-inch plastic heels, and redecorates her apartment, so it looks like a real love nest. The scene of her toting her new double mattress up the stairs on her back was one of many hilarious visual one-liners.

Needless to say, she gets her man, enticing him first with candy, talking him into a cup of coffee, then ordering him to dinner at her place the next evening. Although he is married, his beautiful blonde wife is out of town, and Marianne seduces the young conductor easily. One might not expect so. But this is a German movie, and the filmmaker chooses to make Marianne as feminine, bold, sexy, and successful as any woman can be. She vanquishes the young man and brings out his sensuous side, which has been consistently repressed by his wife. He not only succumbs to Marianne's advances, but gets into it, and the two of them even get to the point of having serious conversations. (Remember, the German Northland is the one that gave us Erda, the earth goddess.)

Marianne turns out to be a fully-realized woman, with intelligent thoughts and deep passions. She has a history, although it had been put on hold (since she was about 15). And her philosophy of life is to live to the fullest, much the same as her recipe for good meat broth, "Lots of meat and not much water."

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