

Fast Times at Riverdale High:
Adventure, Mystery, and Romance in a Post-Truth Me-Too Age

Like other teen shows before it, the CW series *Riverdale* (2017) mixes drama and romance narratives into a soap-opera blend. The show highlights love triangles, tensions with adult expectations, struggles with high school life, and anxieties about developing teen identities. But it is also very conscious about its nods to mystery conventions, staging entire seasons around single mysteries like the disappearance and death of Jason Blossom. *Riverdale* is *Twin-Peaks*-like in its approach. It isn't simply the high school or adolescence itself that is dark and foreboding, it is the whole sinister town of Riverdale, with its many, many secrets to hide. The brooding, fatalistic voice-over of resident journalist and skeptic Jughead Jones (Cole Sprouse) describes the town as "once wholesome and innocent, now forever changed" by the death introduced in the pilot. This is especially apt for a show that rewrites a seemingly wholesome comic for the current moment. The titles of episodes, such as "In a Lonely Place," evoke hard-boiled narratives to recast contemporary adolescence as a labyrinth of dangers and threats. This conference presentation argues that *Riverdale* doesn't simply draw on these moods and conventions in order to be clever or cutting edge, or even overly melodramatic, but to stage what it means to uncover secrets, to confront misogyny and class prejudice, to examine power, and to unpack mysteries and expose wrongdoing in a Post-Truth era, in an era where facts do little to strange structures of power. Many teen dramas before it have borrowed mystery frameworks, from *Pretty Little Liars* to *Veronica Mars* to *Scream*, but *Riverdale*'s tone, approach, and plots seem noticeably self-conscious and eerily thoughtful about life in the Trump era. If this year's theme is about Empathy, then *Riverdale* is a show about what it means to care about and protect others when even exposing the truth doesn't matter like it used to.