



ГОРОДСКОЙ ФОЛЬКЛОР / URBAN FOLKLORE

Folklore in the handwritten albums of Yerevan schoolgirls as a manifestation of urban youth subculture

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KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

In the last decades of the last century, the culture of keeping handwritten scrapbooks was widespread among urban schoolgirls. These scrapbooks are considered one of the small forms of urban and rural folklore of the recent Soviet past and have become an object of study by folklorists and anthropologists. This type of handwritten folklore has been widely studied in the works of foreigners, especially Russian theorists. It is usually referred to as post-folklore or subculture (Neklyudov). Various manifestations of adolescent behavior can be found in these manuscript albums: from rebelliousness to touching lyricism, from magical in-nature guessing games to sociological questionnaires. The predominant texts in these handwritten albums are lyrical texts consisting of couplets, quatrains, and rarely six verses, close to ditties. These small rhyming texts were recorded, memorized, and supplemented by friends and classmates. The tradition of girls' albums survives today but is perceived as a relic of the Soviet era. These days, young people prefer to use social networks to express themselves. What is the Odnoklassniki portal but an electronic handwritten album? If modern folklore is actively and purposefully studied abroad, in the Armenian reality there are practically no serious studies on the topic so far. The main material of this study is schoolgirls' notebooks created in Yerevan in the 80–90s of the 20th century, as well as materials recorded by the author from the former albums' owners. Schoolgirls of this generation are now mature women, some of whom still lovingly keep their school handwritten albums. The article deals with the peculiarities of the folklore of girls' school albums in Yerevan, the period and medium of their existence, and their genre-thematic manifestations, structure, and contents. The author pays most attention to the poetics of girls' scrapbooks folklore, which is peculiar to urban schoolchildren. Such issues as bilingualism, thematic layers of these lyrical texts, expression of love feelings in them, attitude to friendship, school, studies, advice about love and life, relations with the older generation, and others are studied. Folklore formulas, allegorical expressions, and fortune-telling games characteristic of school-age psychology are also examined.

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Фольклор в рукописных альбомах школьниц Еревана как проявление городской молодёжной субкультуры

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КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА

школа
девичьи альбомы
городская субкультура
постфольклор
лирические тексты
игры
анкеты

АННОТАЦИЯ

В последние десятилетия прошлого века культура ведения рукописных альбомов была широко распространена в городской среде среди школьниц. Эти альбомы считаются одной из малых форм урбанистического и сельского фольклора недавнего советского прошлого и стали объектом исследования фольклористов и антропологов. Этот тип рукописного фольклора широко изучался в работах зарубежных, особенно русских теоретиков. Обычно его называют постфольклором или субкультурой (Неклюдов). В этих рукописных альбомах можно встретить различные проявления подросткового поведения: от бунтарства до трогательной лирики, от магических по своей сути игр-гаданий до социологических анкет. Преобладающими в этих рукописных альбомах являются лирические тексты, состоящие из двестишней, четверостишней и редко шестишней, близких к частушкам. Эти небольшие рифмованные тексты записывались, заучивались, дополнялись друзьями и одноклассниками. Традиция девичьих альбомов сохраняется и сегодня, но воспринимается как некий реликт советской эпохи. В наши дни для самовыражения молодёжь предпочитает использовать соцсети. Что такое портал «Одноклассники», как не электронный рукописный альбом? Если за рубежом современный фольклор активно и целенаправленно изучается, в армянской действительности до настоящего времени практически нет серьёзных исследований по данной теме. Основным материалом данного исследования являются тетради школьниц, созданные в Ереване в 80–90-х годах XX века, а также материалы, записанные автором от бывших владелиц альбомов. Школьницы этого поколения сегодня уже зрелые женщины, некоторые из которых до сих пор с любовью хранят свои школьные рукописные альбомы. В статье рассматриваются особенности фольклора школьных девичьих альбомов Еревана, период и среда их существования, жанрово-тематические проявления, структура и содержание. Изучаются такие вопросы, как билингвизм, тематические слои этих лирических текстов, выражение в них любовных чувств, отношение к дружбе, школе, учёбе, советы про любовь и жизнь, про взаимоотношения со старшим поколением и прочее. Рассматриваются также фольклорные формулы, аллегорические выражения, гадательные игры, характерные для психологии школьного возраста.

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Notebook folklore and its main characteristics

Today's fast rhythm of humanity's development and the immediate reflections of these changes in traditional culture have made it imperative for the researchers of the last decades not to fall behind and to observe the manifestations of modern life through new lenses. Nowadays, technology has invaded almost all aspects of life, and even schoolgirl notebook folklore – one of the main and viable ways of entertainment in Armenian schools – has diminished and been replaced with social media. Despite this, notebook folklore like many other spheres of post-folklore culture remains completely unstudied.

For the past decades, the subject has drawn the attention of Russian researchers who have dedicated numerous articles to it (Bernshtam, 1988; Khanyutin, 1989; Borisov, 1997; Golovin & Lurie, 1998; Chekanova, 2004; Arkhipova, 2006; Rozhkov, 2017). The researchers document that the written notebook tradition has arrived in Russia from Europe – Germany and France – in the 18th century. It was formed in the context of salon culture and became a part of noble family culture. They used large albums with photos and literary or folk works, where the guests of the family left notes. Later, in the first decades of the 19th century, the tradition passed from noble families to students – boarding schools and gymnasiums, and in the 1920–30s, became a part of school culture. Large albums were replaced by notebooks, which could be kept in bags. In this period, the notebook culture acquired characteristics pertinent to urban folklore (Rozhkov, 2017, p. 122; Kalashinkova, 2003, pp. 599–619).

It is hard to determine the road that the notebook culture has taken in Armenia, or how and in which social group it was manifested as it remains a completely unstudied field to this day. Our initial observations show that notebooks were common in villages during the past century. More or less educated people of the village kept such notebooks for recording the oral culture of their village – songs, traditions, jokes, ceremonies, incidents, and memoirs pertaining to famous figures, often also their own works. Such notebooks were not distinguished by gender: both men and women could have them, in particular adults.



Fig. 1. Notebook 1.

Schoolgirls' notebooks, which will be discussed in this article, are clearly distinguished by age and gender. Such notebooks were popular among the girls of 7–8 grades – 13–15 years old. Although boys did not keep such notebooks, they were actively involved in girls' notebooks, filling in the questionnaires, sharing their opinions about their classmates, drawing, and leaving notes. In general, these notebooks were a part of the entertainment culture of schoolchildren (see the first page of one of such notebooks (Fig. 1)). They were prevalent both in cities and villages. However, similar to other manifestations of folklore, they most likely passed from cities to villages (Neklyudov, 1995, pp. 2–4). Such notebooks usually include school subculture, teenage romantic quatrains sprinkled with various comedic solutions, formulations characteristic to the oral speech of schoolchildren, jokes, games, questionnaires, etc. The recording of teenage oral culture in notebooks is a part of written folklore (studied during the last decades as post-folklore) succeeding classical folklore.

Research materials and sources

The materials for research are dated to the 1980–90s. As our observations show, these notebooks were so popular that every second schoolgirl had one. Despite the abundance of notebooks, we were not always successful in trying to obtain them. The reason is love confessions, personal notes, and frank opinions about the owner of the notebook that sometimes find their place in the notebooks, which is why they are kept away from others¹. One of our informants – a 42-year-old woman from Yerevan – admits that even though she had such a notebook as a schoolgirl, she tore it up before getting married, so it would not cause problems at her husband's house. Due to the abundance of personal secrets and romantic content, such notebooks were at times kept secret from parents and were not taken to a new house after marriage. Some of our informants mention that they don't know where their notebooks are now, as they left them in their parents' houses and have not reflected on them later. It is possible they were just put in the trash together with copybooks. It is evident that in these cases, notebooks are considered a part of girlhood, which is left behind after the woman marries. Some Facebook users also mention cases of burning or discarding their notebooks (Women's Corner, 2021).

Nonetheless, some people kept their girlhood notebooks and mention that they occasionally go through the memories of this sweet time in their lives (Truly from Lori, 2018). We were able to obtain six notebooks for research from different schools in Yerevan, which were created during 1990–2014. Considering the personal nature of notebooks, the names of their owners will not be published. We will mention only the school, the date, and the age of the owners of the notebooks (Notebook 1; Notebook 2; Notebook 3; Notebook 4; Notebook 5; Notebook 6).

The tradition of girls' notebooks still seems to continue today, but it is very different from similar manifestations of the last century. Modern schoolgirls' notebooks are dominated by personal diaries and illustrations. This is the reason why, out of the mentioned 6 notebooks, we mostly took the folklore materials from the first four notebooks, which were created in the 80–90s of the 20th century. Folkloric materials are less present in the last two notebooks (Notebook 5; Notebook 6).

¹ To keep personal notes away from others, some even wrote them in a foreign language or in a code language of their own creation with its own alphabet (Women's Corner, 2021).

Apart from the mentioned notebooks, interviews on their notebooks from different generations, as well as materials from Facebook regarding notebook culture and folklore were used in the research. Nowadays, posts with this subject can be encountered in various groups on Facebook. Usually, middle-aged women react to these with excitement, reminiscing on the notebooks that were a part of their school life. Such posts with their comments contain rich material on notebook culture of the '80s and '90s and include quotes directly from the notebooks, original folkloristic texts, and pictures².

Structure, content, and genres of notebooks

If we try to review the material gathered in schoolgirls' notebooks, we shall have the following picture: in the '80s and '90s, every second or third girl in 7th to 9th grade had a notebook. These were 96-page school copybooks, decorated with colorfully written titles, various pictures and paper memorabilia. In general, they contained notes in verse, games, questionnaires, diary entries, etc. The general content of the copybooks is similar as the games and questionnaires in particular were copied from one another, and the notes in verse were learned by heart. Nonetheless, every notebook bore the seal of the individuality of its owner.

The main place in notebooks belongs to lyrical *notes in verse* or simply *notes*. The notebooks usually start with these, and they can also be found in abundance on the other pages of the notebook (Fig. 2). These are direct recordings of school folklore, beautiful manifestations of the subculture of the age group, and usually have romantic content. Rarely, the notebooks also contain poems by Armenian poets, often without mentioning the name of the authors.

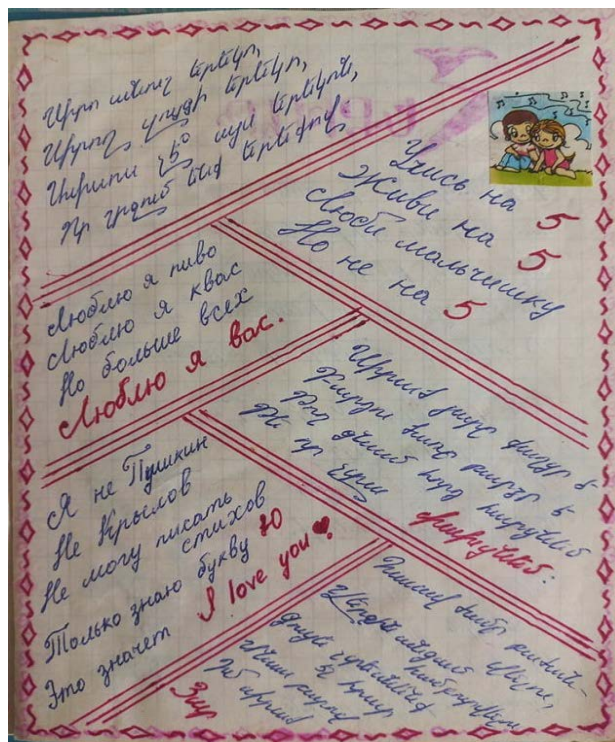


Fig. 2. Notebook 2.

² Three posts with their comments from Facebook groups were considered (Truly from Lori, 2018; Women's Corner, 2021; Half-Serious-Half-Joking, 2022).

In addition to notes in verse, notebooks have various funny *formulations and allegories*, usually with comedic, ironic content. Notebooks often have a section dedicated to *the rules of love*, which define the meaning of certain signs in relationships.

An obligatory part of notebooks were the *games*, which had a fortune-telling or self-recognizing nature. Usually, the owner of the notebook, directing questions to her friends or offering to choose a random number (randomly put a finger on a number, choose one of the papers) told the fortune of her friend, focusing on the main events of their future life – profession, wedding, etc., or the character of the future spouse (jealous, shy, etc.). Such games also included *horoscopes* (fortune-telling by birth month and date), *psychological tests*, etc.

Another important part was the *questionnaire*, which was answered by the classmates. The main requirements of the questionnaires were to fill in personal data, hobbies, names of friends and boyfriends, to make judgments about life, love, relationships, etc. Such questionnaires were usually filled in during breaks in class, or by friends from neighboring houses or summer camps. Included in the questionnaire or separately, there was a requirement for an *opinion* about the owner of the notebook. Some mention that they had a separate *questionnaire and opinion book* together with the notebook. The friends' opinions are surprisingly sincere, they mention the strengths and shortcomings of the owner and stress their attitude toward them. One of our informants, the 47-year-old woman from Yerevan (the owner of Notebook 1) mentions, that her friends' opinions were a means of self-recognition for her, helping her to make interesting discoveries about herself. The opinions were often accompanied by notes in verse and pictures.

Besides the genres discussed above, the notebooks include personal notes – diary entries, love secrets, and confessions, memoirs about favorite books and films, wrappings from favorite sweets, pictures of actors and singers – all decorated with patterned beautiful stickers, and colorful pictures cut out from magazines.

The poetry of notebook folklore

The research on notebook folklore brings to light a number of phenomena characteristic to traditional folk oral culture, such as traditional formulas, fixed speech patterns, variations, non-standard language, multilingualism or use of barbarisms and slang. We shall examine some of these phenomena.

Epigraph-beginnings. The notebooks are usually open with traditional fixed beginnings – a note-epigraph to the reader (Fig. 3).

Here, dear reader,
Be gentle with my book,
Don't leave even a mark
And give it back to me (Notebook 2).

The other, the most common epigraph is a curse/threat to those who may try to steal the copybook: “Whoever tries to steal the book / Let them weaken in the body / Get sick and die” (Notebook 3).

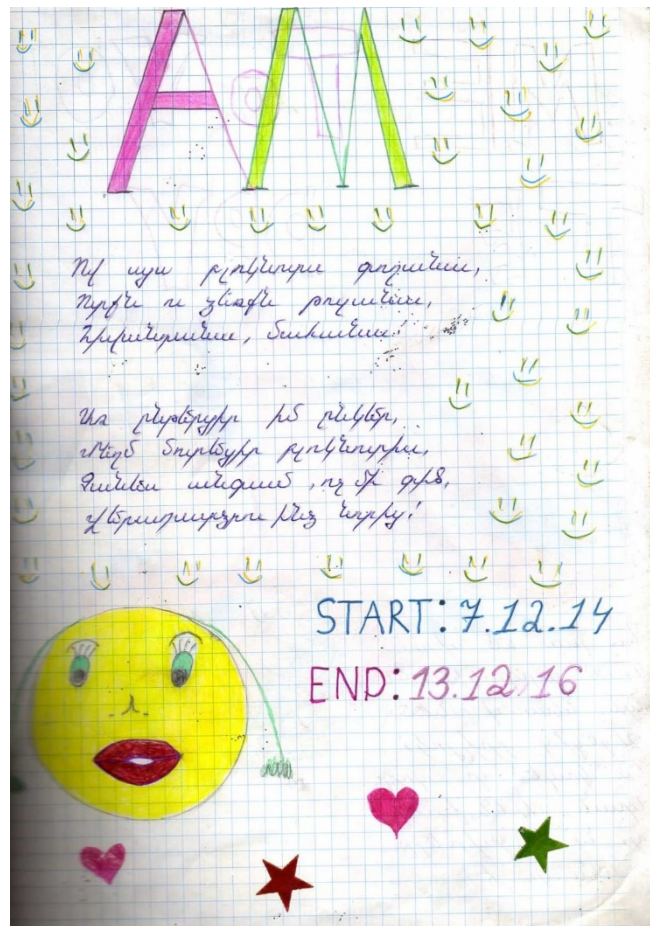


Fig. 3. Notebook 6.

This second version of the beginning brings to mind the oldest uses of a curse (Harutyunyan, 1975, pp. 25-114), according to which curses were written on historical and cultural monuments and documents to who would date to destroy them. Especially noteworthy is the use of curses in the records of ancient manuscripts (Harutyunyan, 1975, pp. 86-101), which can be considered the prototype of the curse-beginnings of modern notebooks which can be traced back to ancient times. When filling in questionnaires and sharing opinions, the notebook was passed from hand to hand, often taken home, so it was important not to lose it as it contained personal information. These curse prologues were a trusted means to ensure the safety of the notebook.

Notebook folklore is characterized by an abundance of traditional formulas and fixed speech patterns. These are present mostly at the end of the notes. For example, classmates often ended their opinions about owners of notebooks with the following formula: “Sake-sake, keepsake / Ever-ever, Forever, / From-from, from... / To-to to...” or the person leaving notes ended them with this formulation: “Ending it with this / Giving you a kiss” (Notebook 1; Notebook 2; Notebook 3).

As mentioned, the main part of the notebooks were the notes in verse, which are similar to traditional ditties (khaghiks). These are usually quatrains that rhyme. There are also couplets, tercets, less often sestets. The verses are usually short – 4-8 syllables. The rhyme schemes differ greatly: AABB rhymes, as well as AABA rhymes, characteristic to ditties and quatrains, have been encountered. “Though you left me alone / Without saying so long / But still I forgive you / Because I love you” (Notebook 2), “The sea of life

you'll enter / Many boys you'll encounter / But the first boy in your life / You'll remember forever" (Notebook 1).

The main language of notebook folklore is spoken, non-standard Armenian, the dialect of Yerevan, but notes also include Russian texts and more rarely English lines and expressions. Sometimes, the combination of three languages makes the verse slightly humorous.

I love you,
You know it
BECAUSE
(broken Russian)
You're pretty.
Soon you'll know (Russian)
Who I am,
Sincere love (Russian)
I love you.
(Women's Corner, 2021)

Study well,
Live well,
Love a boy,
But not too well.
(Russian)
(Notebook 2)

I'm not Pushkin, not Krylov,
I can't write poems,
I know only the letter Ю (U),
It means I love You.
(All in Russian except
I Love You)
(Notebook 2)

As with traditional folklore, notebooks belonging to schoolchildren from different schools also have repeated formulas and notes. The formulations regarding the school life and the "rules of love" are repeated almost word for word. Often, there are variants of the same notes with variations of a word or a couple of lines (Notebook 1; Notebook 2; Notebook 3).

The subjects of notes

The subjects of the notes in verse are not distinguished by diversity. It includes three main themes.

1) The first one is dedicated to memoirs itself. These lyrical sections often contain reflections on the necessity and importance to preserve memories. "A donkey doesn't know almonds / Who's not in a hurry, doesn't know what's late / If your past is empty, / You wouldn't know what's memory (Notebook 2; Women's Corner 2021).

Notes on this subject were most often written by friends filling in the notebook as an epilogue. They describe the circumstances of writing the note, sprinkling in carefree, light humor: "Under the wall of the diner / I'm writing you a note, / I have nothing more to say, / I'd better go and eat borsch" (Notebook 2), "Under a weak candlelight / I'm writing you this note, / This keepsake is small, / But the words are valuable" (Notebook 3).

Despite humor and jokes that are sometimes included, teenagers approach answering the questionnaires and leaving opinions and notes very seriously. They are very frank with their friends, which is evidenced also by their rhymes: "I cut my finger, / Made it bleed, / Wrote a note for you / With the red drop" (Women's Corner, 2021), "I took out my golden pen, / Wrote silver lines for you, / In my young age, / I made this keepsake for you" (Notebook 3), "It's the one who writes, / The one that loves you, / Notes take a moment, / Memory is forever" (Notebook 3), "I'm writing these lines for you / To give you as a keepsake, / Remember that in life, / Victory belongs to love" (Notebook 1).

The subject of memoirs is included also in the notes written by the owner of the notebook: "I was a bard at 13, / Made this notebook at night, / I've been in love since I was a child, / Always unfortunate in love" (Notebook 2).

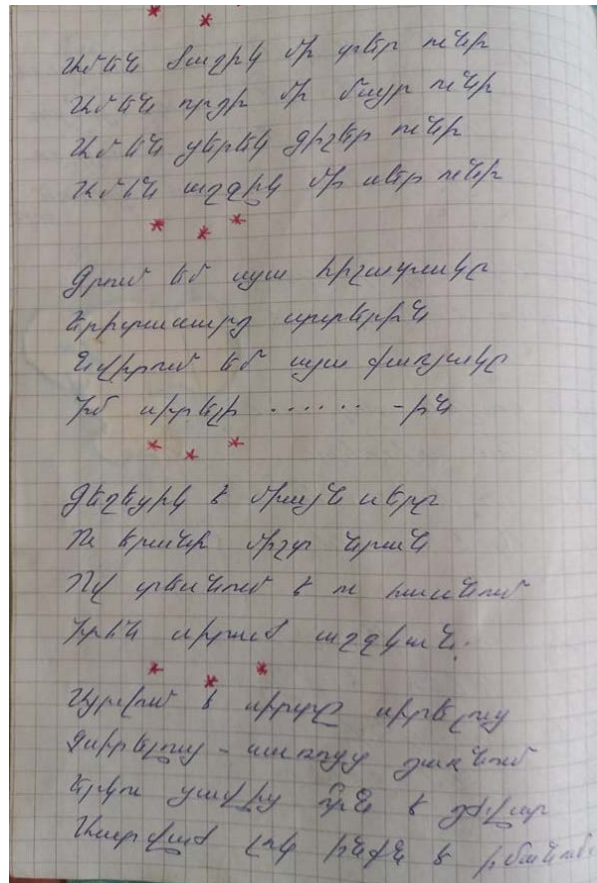


Fig. 4. Notebook 3.

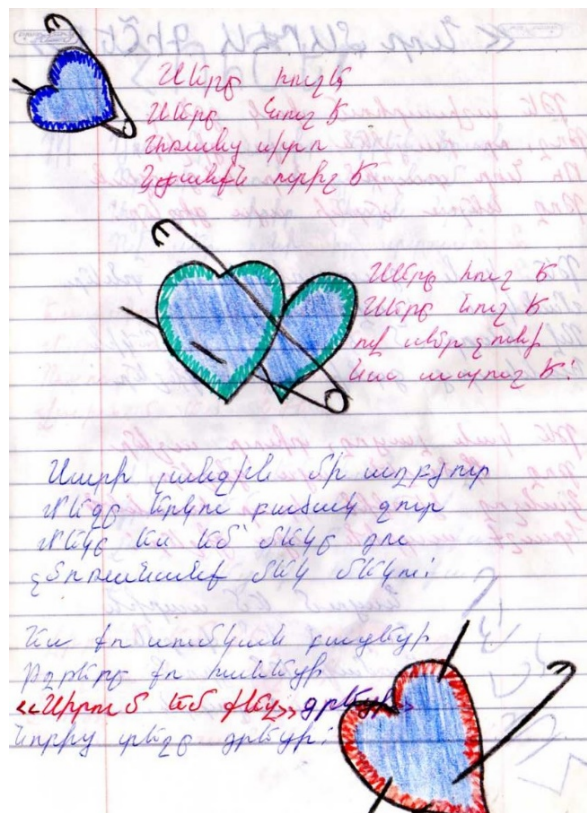


Fig. 5. Notebook 3.

2) The second main subject in notebook folklore is love. The first adolescent love, the attempts to recognize life, the motifs of appreciation of the place and role of love in life are often encountered in these copybooks (Fig. 4). It is no coincidence that the most common note with its two variants which are often seen together defines love as the sweetest memory: “Love is a memory, / Love is a berry, / The end of love / Is always merry”, “Love is a memory, / Love is a berry, / Who has no love / He’s losing badly” (Notebook 1; Notebook 2; Notebook 3; Half-Serious-Half-Joking, 2022) (Fig. 5).

What is love? It is the answer to this question that the note writers are trying to find. Adolescents who perhaps have not tasted real love or perhaps are under the influence of the torrent of emotions of the first romantic love, have written verses that laud love as the meaning of life, a superlative value without which man is nothing: “What’s the value of a ring / Without a precious stone? / What’s the value of a youngster / Without a loved one?” (Notebook 2), “Better live 2 years / As a young lover, / Than to live for centuries / Without loving” (Notebook 3).

In love notes, the motifs of being honest with the loved one, of loving and dedicating oneself to only one person and being loyal to them are prevalent: “If you love someone, / Don’t smile at another, / It won’t be love, / But pig feed” (Notebook 2), “If you love someone, / Love them forever, / Even if you are / Prettier and better” (Notebook 4).

At the same time, the notes contain advice not to be deceived by love, to get to know someone better, and only then get closer to them. Young, inexperienced girls write these to keep their friends from making mistakes. “When you enter the garden of love, / You will see many flowers, / Pluck only one of them, / But don’t be deceived by colors” (Notebook 3).

At this age, the highest manifestation of love is kissing, which is also hinted at in verse notes. “Love begins at heart / And ends with a kiss” (Notebook 1): this is the formulation of teenage love. The kiss motif is the only manifestation of the passion of love evident in the notes: “Love without a kiss / Equals zero” (Notebook 4).

The general mood in the notes is cheerful and slightly humorous, which shows that the teenagers lauding love have not yet tasted bitterness. For them, love is rather a game that they play imitating adults, but which doesn’t cause them serious pain yet. This is why love confessions are sometimes of humorous nature as, for example, in this very popular note, which to this day is common in schoolchildren’s speech: “I love you, my precious, / I’ll break your skull with a spoon, / I have cried so much for your love, / I’ve turned into Jimmy the Indian actor” (Half-Serious-Half-Joking, 2022).

There are also humorous notes making fun of those who have been caught in the trap of love: “Hey you, young, pretty boy, / Stay away from girls, / The nail polish of those girls / Will lead you to jail” (Women’s Corner, 2021).

3) The third subject apparent in notebook verses is school and classes. To be fair, there are few of them, and they are not a particularly big part of the general notes. It is rare to encounter notes stressing the importance of education such as this one: “The world is a sea, / Education – a boat, / Who doesn’t have it / Will go underwater” (Notebook 1).

The importance of education and the necessity of continuing to study at higher educational institutions is especially highlighted in the following note-course that starts the notebook: “Whoever steals this / Let them lose their sight, / Forget their knowledge / During the exams” (Notebook 3). As seen above, another version of this note threatened the culprit with disease and death.

Besides such rare examples, in other cases, the educational motif is joined with the love motif, either subordinating classes to love (“Why do I need physics / If I have love’s music”? (Women’s Corner, 2021), or interpreting the emotions of love through lessons. A particularly interesting example of the last version is a love confession using grammatical terms of the Armenian language: “My heart subject to your heart, / My soul predicated on your soul, / I love you not as an object, / Adverbs of manners will show” (Half-Serious-Half-Joking, 2022).

Formulations and allegories

One of the most common phenomena of notebook folklore is various humorous formulations and allegories. These contain the ideas of the schoolchildren about various aspects of their classes, teachers, and school through cheerful humor and witticisms. The following are characteristic examples: “First desk – first aid, Last desk – mysterious island, received bad mark – the day’s victim, Skipping class – the Elusive Avengers, Lunch lady – the Thief of Baghdad, Headmasters and vice headmasters – Three Musketeers, Chemistry teacher – illusionist, etc.” (Notebook 1; Notebook 2; Notebook 3) (Fig. 6).

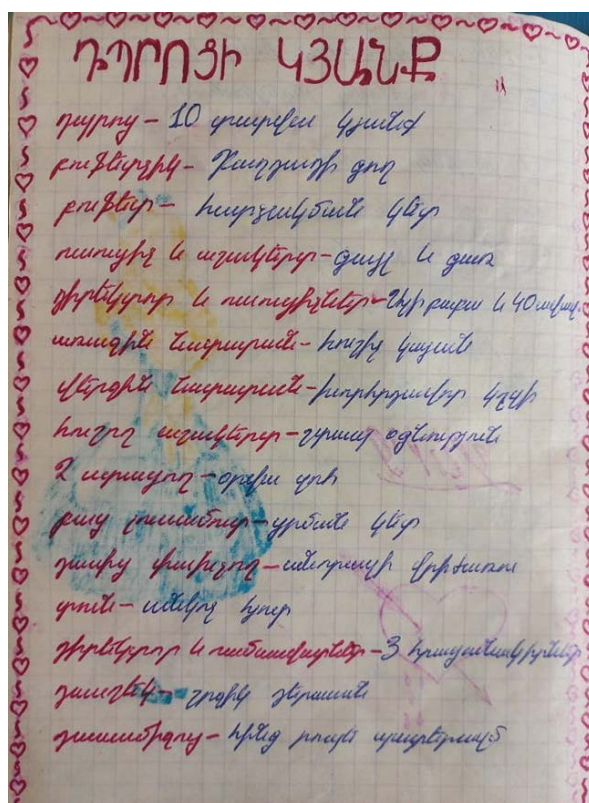


Fig. 6. Notebook 2.

This is a continuous series, repeated almost word for word in the notebooks of schoolchildren from different schools. Similar fixed formulations are present in the rules of love, which define the relationship between couples, the subtext, and the meaning of certain behaviors. In one of the notebooks we studied, these rules are eleven, in another one – thirteen. “1. If the boy takes the girl’s left hand, it means he wants to accompany her. 2 If the boy takes the girl’s right hand, it means he wants to get to know her or to tell her something. 3. If he takes her both hands, it means he wants to kiss her”

(Notebook 1; Notebook 3). These formulations also include moral lessons regarding relationships. “Love won’t last long if you kiss too early. If the boy invites the girl to a dark corner, then it’s fake love” (Notebook 3).

Conclusion

Summarizing the research, it can be documented that in the last two decades of the XX century, schoolgirls’ notebooks were popular in city schools and played a significant role in the life of schoolchildren. They were an important part of entertainment for them during the breaks and after classes, which is evidenced by the abundance of games in these notebooks. The notebooks had a function of self-recognition and self-expression for teenagers as evidenced by the sections dedicated to the opinions of friends and self-recognition games. They were a means of an expression of coming-of-age emotions, of romantic and platonic love, and often included love confessions by the owner of the notebook and classmates. The formulas and notes in verse present in the notebooks have folkloristic origin and their recording in schoolgirls’ notebooks brings to light new post-folkloristic qualities. They have a number of characteristics pertaining to traditional speech – fixed formulations, traditional fixed patterns of beginning and ending, variations, and colloquialisms. Adolescence is complicated when it comes to recognizing life, and judgments about love and relationships made in various formulations summarize the life experience, outlook, and psychological characteristics of this age group. Considering this, quatrain notes that sometimes seem too simple and artless are remarkable samples of adolescent folklore.

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Half-Serious-Half-Joking (2022, 18 February). Post with its Comments in a Facebook group *Half-Serious-Half-Joking* (Կես կաստակ-Կես լուրջ). <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=1220156302090892&set=gm.1475171582878654&idorvanity=612269325835555>. (In Armenian).

Notebook 1, 15–16 years old, number 50 school of Yerevan, 1990–1991.

Notebook 2, 14–15 years old, number 143 school of Yerevan, 1994–1995.

Notebook 3, 13 years old, number 181 school of Yerevan, 1997.

Notebook 4, 14–15 years old, number 82 school of Yerevan, 1998–1999.

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