

**Harzewski, Stephanie. *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011. 264 pages. Cloth 978-0-8139-3071-8; \$55.00 Paper 978-0-8139-3072-5, \$19.50**

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From almost the moment the terms *chick lit* entered the English vocabulary in the mid-1990s, the popular novels grouped into the category have faced derision, if not outright hostility in the popular press, as well as from so-called “literary authors” and “serious” academics. The authors branded—often unwillingly—with the label have been dismissed as *chickerati*, accused of selling themselves and their books as part of a commercial plot designed by publishers to peddle formula fiction to gullible female audiences.

Sound familiar? Naturally. Romance writers have been dogged by the same charges. But, as Stephanie Harzewski points out in the introduction to *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, such vituperative criticism resembles that launched against another group of successful women writers: the novelists of the eighteenth century, such as Eliza Haywood, who took advantage of advances in publishing and an expanding middle-class readership to achieve recognition and success. Their successors in the nineteenth century, including Jane Austen, solidified women writers’ achievements while perfecting the novel itself, yet they still had to fend off criticism of the form as inferior literature. As Harzewski argues, “The critical reception of chick lit can be seen as another cycle of gendered antinovel discourse directed at the composer of romance and amatory fiction, a discourse that has punctuated the novel’s three-hundred-year history” (40-41).

But while few would now question a scholar’s decision to study the novel, critics of chick lit have encountered resistance, even though serious studies of popular culture are now accepted as routine—if not essential—contributions to critical discourse. Harzewski’s book, and a handful of others, are finally addressing the gap. In *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Harzewski makes the case for considering chick lit an “underanalyzed body of postmodern fiction” which provides “an accessible portal into contemporary gender politics and

questions of cultural value” (5). Her book devotes sustained literary and feminist analysis to its origins, development and significance.

The astounding numbers alone, attesting to the cultural influence of chick lit novels (and associated forms of what Mallory Young and I have termed “chick culture”), suggest that sustained critical attention to the form is necessary. Consider that Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, routinely identified as the novel launching the chick-lit genre, had, within 10 years of publication, been translated into 30 languages, sold more than 2 million copies worldwide, and, in 2001, became a popular film grossing over \$245 million. As writer Jenny Colgan quipped, not all copies of Fielding’s novel have been “bought by lovelorn single women in London” (qtd. in Gibbons).

Harzewski notes that chick lit’s commercial success (along with its invocations of consumer culture) has been perhaps the greatest barrier to serious analysis of the genre. She argues that “Chick lit’s accessibility, humor, playfulness, and barrage of brand names at times overshadow innovative generic fusions and reflexivity” (53).

Her book excels in its analysis of chick lit in relation to established, traditional literary genres, from the *Bildungsroman* to the novel of manners. Scholars of romance fiction will be most interested in Chapter One, “Postmodernism’s Last Romance,” which considers chick lit in relation to the original romances of the medieval era and outlines its parallels and divergences from contemporary romance fiction. The chapter originated in an essay published in *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (Routledge, 2006), but has been revised and expanded here to include a history of Harlequin publishers and a more thorough overview of the distinctions between the classic contemporary romances commonly identified by that name and chick lit.

For instance, Harzewski notes that while popular romance fiction adheres to a “one woman-one man” ratio, chick lit presents one woman involved with many men. If in romance fiction, the quest for romance is central, in chick lit, the heroine’s quest for self-definition and the need to balance work with personal relationships is given equal, if not greater, attention. The idealized protagonist of romance fiction, typically an active, intelligent beauty, is nowhere to be seen in chick lit, which features protagonists who are highly conscious and critical of their physical appearance and who are more often pictured as flawed than feisty.

More significant differences center on the characterization of men and depictions of love and sex. Harzewski argues that romance fiction presents men as objects of erotic desire who are valued for their sexual prowess. By contrast, in chick lit, she argues, men are “not really valued as individuals as much as a means to a lifestyle, wedding, or in some cases beauty boost” (33). The moments of genuine eroticism that punctuate and, for some readers, characterize romance fiction are missing in chick lit.

Above all, the two genres differ in their endings. There are no HEA (“Happily Ever After”) endings in chick lit, which offers “a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring in varying degrees, the dissolution of romantic ideals, or showing those ideals as unmet, sometimes unrealistic, expectations” (40).

Subsequent chapters consider chick lit in relation to its most prominent, and oft-cited, precursors: the novels of Jane Austen and Edith Wharton. Chick lit is commonly seen as having a dual Anglo-American origin in 1996, the year that saw the publication of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in the UK and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* in the USA. As Harzewski observes, each now “has the status of a master plot” (91). Chick lit’s British

roots extend to Austen and other nineteenth-century authors such as the Brontës and George Eliot (see Wells and Hale). With their Manhattan settings, the works of American writers, such as Bushnell, Plum Sykes and Lauren Weisberger, have invited comparison to Wharton's novels set in Old New York (see Wells).

Chapter Two of *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* considers *Bridget Jones's Diary* in relation to Austen's novels, particularly *Pride and Prejudice*. There is little new in Harzewski's analysis, which emphasizes general generic connections over detailed textual links. She notes, for instance, that chick-lit novels "lack the subtlety and ironic precision of observation that goes into the creation of Austen's heroines" or "Austen's dexterous use of silence" (67). Nonetheless, the chapter does provide a thorough comparison that will be useful to those new to the study of chick lit. In addition, Harzewski considers chick lit's role in the current wave of Austenmania, the repackaging of both the author and her works for a popular audience, a phenomenon that has drawn much attention from Austen scholars in books such as *Jane's Fame* and *Janeites*.

A companion chapter, on *Sex and the City* and other chick-lit novels set in New York, will be of greater interest to chick-lit scholars. It provides a thorough history of Bushnell's career, supplemented by information from personal interviews Harzewski conducted with the author. She also argues persuasively that Bushnell cannot be dubbed "a quintessential 'chick lit' author" (94). Instead, she "can be credited more with inspiring commercial chick lit than directly authoring it" (108). Harzewski convincingly demonstrates that the close female friends featured in the television series and film versions of *Sex and the City* bear little resemblance to the characters in Bushnell's novel, who are often antagonistic, if not openly hostile, to each other as they compete in a tight singles market. Instead, it is the novel's "urban setting, its scenes of nightlife, its characters' preoccupations with money and status" that have become part of the chick-lit formula (94). Bushnell's novels do, in Harzewski's view, share a thematic with Wharton's fiction: they similarly feature women on the market navigating New York's cut-throat social milieu and highlight the expenditures necessary to circulate in the set (110). However, she notes that Bushnell does not share "Wharton's elegant, mannered narration" (113), an understatement indeed.

Certainly, chick-lit authors can claim more than two literary influences and Harzewski considers some possible twentieth-century precursors. She acknowledges that Imelda Whelehan has covered similar territory in her excellent study of popular women's novels from the late 1960s and '70s. In *The Feminist Bestseller*, Whelehan contended that chick lit shared common themes and literary devices with bestselling novels of the second-wave feminist era, including confessional narrative techniques that invite reader identification and a realistic treatment of women's concerns with family, work, friendship and sex. Harzewski's selections, some dating earlier (1920s-60s), extend the range of popular novels bearing kinship to chick lit. Her process of selection, however, is rather narrow and often seems more haphazard than meaningful. For example, she isolates two pre-WWII "career-girl novels": Dawn Powell's *Wither* (1925) and Faith Baldwin's *Skyscraper* (1931). Certainly, these novels do share contemporary chick lit's focus on urban, career life, but other popular novels of the same era could easily have been included, as well. For instance, Anita Loos's *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, the bestseller of 1925, which prompted a fan letter from Edith Wharton, may bear greater resemblance to contemporary chick lit in its use of first-person narration, its flawed, materialistic protagonist and allusions to sexual license. Harzewski's selections of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* (1963) and

Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman* (1970) are more problematic. Her contention that these "mental illness" stories anticipate the appearance of a "neurotic" protagonist in chick lit strains credulity on two levels: can characters who struggle with confidence and self-esteem issues accurately be called neurotic? And more importantly, can the serious portraits of mental illness in Plath's and Atwood's novels be compared to the lighthearted, humorous travails of chick lit heroines obsessed with their appearance and/or weight? Only Gail Parent's *Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York* (1972) fits comfortably here, for, as Harzewski notes, not only does it exhibit the self-deprecating humor we associate with chick lit and share the genre's critique of modern dating pressures on women, it has been cited by "Jennifer Weiner and Melissa Senate as a founding text of the chick lit genre" (133).

While Harzewski has extended the range of texts that might form part of the genre's modern history, then, the unevenness of her analysis suggests that more work needs to be done by chick-lit scholars to develop meaningful connections among "feminist bestsellers" of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As the author herself notes, "we need to exercise discernment in claiming titles as chick lit because they are female-oriented, employ first-person narration, or are set in a city. Chick lit should be viewed primarily as a comedic genre deliberately written for women, whose light-heartedness and optimism upstage social criticisms" (147).

This observation makes me question Harzewski's choice of title, which may lead readers to expect a sustained analysis of chick lit in relation to postfeminist politics, in place of the thorough study of the genre that the book actually provides. In the book's final chapter, Harzewski does provide a brief overview of the contested definitions of the term *postfeminism*, concluding that they range from negative (e.g., Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra) to positive (e.g., the various champions of the third-wave feminist movement) to neutral. To be fair, attention to postfeminism has been a recurrent trend of chick-lit criticism, for the two terms were fused in one of *chick lit's* first appearances: in a title originally used by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell for a collection of alternative feminist fiction (and Mazza herself has recounted the story of what she contends is its misappropriation). Whelehan has also claimed in *The Feminist Bestseller* that "both feminist bestsellers of the 1970s and the bestselling genre loosely known as chick lit are in dialogue with feminism" (5). Perhaps given that the overwhelming majority of chick-lit novels are written by women about women and for women, attention to feminist politics is both inevitable and necessary. Certainly, one can argue, as Harzewski, Whelehan and others have, that chick-lit novels dramatize, with great verisimilitude, the social realities facing contemporary young women as they negotiate a shifting set of expectations for career and relationships—at least those women who are educated, urban and white.<sup>[1]</sup> However, to the chagrin of some critics, such as Tasker and Negra, they do not engage directly with feminist politics. So it may be misleading to define chick lit, as Harzewski does, as "the most culturally visible form of postfeminist fiction" (8) without a clear definition of *postfeminist*. At various times in her book, the term is used to describe "a confusion of girlhood and womanhood" (9), "a manifestation of the spirit of capitalism being displaced onto the intimate life" (100), a negotiation of "the tensions between feminism and femininity" (150), and an "insistence on the right to female sexual pleasure" (152).

Harzewski appears to come closest to agreeing with Rosalind Gill that a postfeminist "sensibility" characterizes chick lit. She claims that "chick lit as a temper of postfeminism

seems to express the fact that feminism's gains in the professional arena have not abated the desire for romance" (180). As such it is not "antifeminist" (181), but does not offer an identifiable political position at all. And it might be worth asking whether it is right to expect works of literature—even or especially those written by women—to do so. As Harzewski claims, "it is not fully fair to judge chick lit as a template for some twenty-first-century transnational feminist how-to guide" (192).

The strength of this book lies, not in considering chick lit as a manifestation of postfeminism, however it's defined, but as a group of contemporary literary texts with ties to classic and popular literature of the past. Its great benefit to chick-lit scholarship is in taking the texts seriously as works of literature, as texts which are often cleverly and creatively engaged in reappropriating and rewriting generic conventions while providing enormous pleasure to readers—and not just women. Just as not all romance fiction should be dismissed as formulaic, nor should all chick lit be written off as disposable, commercial trash. Instead, selected works deserve scholarly attention and reward serious literary study. Harzewski has outlined some possible directions such an analysis might take, by considering chick lit's generic conventions and situating the texts in the history of popular romantic fiction. Her work paves the way for scholars of both romance and chick lit to take up the threads of her investigation or to pursue other directions of literary analysis.

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[1] Harzewski questions "the social accuracy of postfeminism as a descriptive term" and asks "whether this term can still be used responsibly outside the context of white Anglo-American metropolitan feminism" (23). This may explain her book's paucity of allusions to varieties of chick lit that feature protagonists who are not exclusively white Britons or Americans. While limited, there are examples of chick lit that feature African-American, Eastern European, Indonesian, Indian, and Hispanic protagonists (see, for example, Butler and Desai, Donadio, Guerrero, and Séllei).

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Product Identifiers. Publisher. University of Virginia Press. ISBN-10. 0813930723. Stephanie Harzewski. Place of Publication. Charlottesville. Genre. Cultural Studies. Stephanie Harzewski is Lecturer in the Department of English at the University of New Hampshire. Country of Publication. United States. Subject. Social Sciences. Imprint. University of Virginia Press. Language(s). English. Date of Publication. 09/02/2011. Show more. Show less. "Chick Lit and Postfeminism is certain to advance the study of chick lit and add depth and sophistication to our understanding of its origins and development." --Suzanne Ferris, Professor of English at Nova Southeastern University, and Mallory Young, Professor of English at Tarleton State University, Editors of Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction, Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies. Publisher: University of Virginia Press (February 9, 2011). Language: English. ISBN-10: 0813930723. Harzewski not only references the unfortunate homophony between Chick Lit (the literary genre) and "Chiclet", the gum, but also carefully examines the history of a genre that merits in depth discussion.