

## Chapter One

# Introduction

Who needs a book of etiquette? Everyone does.

—*Amy Vanderbilt's Complete Book of Etiquette:  
A Guide to Gracious Living* (1952)

In British author Helen Fielding's 1996 popular novel *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the author describes the primping and prepping that her heroine undergoes before her first date with her boss Daniel Cleaver. Bridget reflects:

Ugh. Completely exhausted. Surely it is not normal to be revising for a date as if it were a job interview? . . . Since leaving work I have nearly slipped a disc, wheezing through a step aerobics class, scratched my naked body for seven minutes with a stiff brush; cleaned the flat; filled the fridge; plucked my eyebrows, skimmed the papers and the *Ultimate Sex Guide*, put the washing in and waxed my own legs, since it was too late to book an appointment. Ended up kneeling on a towel trying to pull off a wax strip firmly stuck to the back of my calf while watching *Newsnight* in an effort to drum up some interesting opinions about things. My back hurts, my head aches, and my legs are bright red and covered in lumps of wax. (59)<sup>1</sup>

Though in the paragraph that follows Bridget acknowledges “Daniel should like me just as I am,” she also notes, “I am a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture . . . traumatized by supermodels and too many quizzes and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices” (59). Bridget's observation, along with her pre-date actions, reveals the pervasive hold that women's magazines have upon her life. As a “child of *Cosmopolitan* culture,” Bridget subscribes to advice that encourages women to perfect their bodies through such beauty regimens as exercise, exfoliation, and waxing. Only

after perfecting her body according to *Cosmopolitan* magazine standards will she be acceptable for her date.

Bridget's remarks in this passage reveal just how heavily she relies on the advice of others. Not only does she consult *Cosmopolitan*, but she also reads *The Ultimate Sex Guide* as well as the papers and watches *Newsnight*, hoping to glean information that will perfect both her body and mind. Bridget cannot seem to believe that Daniel will like her just as she is because she consistently consults texts that tell her he cannot. Being "a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture," then, becomes metaphoric for the hold that consumer culture mediums from magazines to self-help books have upon Bridget's life. Bridget struggles to determine what advice she should follow and what advice she should disregard, and subsequently, a central theme of *Bridget Jones's Diary* becomes Bridget's (in)ability to navigate these controlling texts. In this passage and throughout her novel, Fielding creates a complicated and contested representation of the reader/text relationship and comments, ironically, on both women characters and readers as consumers.

*Bridget Jones's Diary* is just one of many texts from the recent literary phenomenon popularly known as chick lit which dialogues with consumer culture mediums, particularly women's advice manuals.<sup>2</sup> Loosely defined, chick lit, which arguably began with Fielding's text, consists of heroine-centered narratives that focus on the trials and tribulations of their individual protagonists.<sup>3</sup> At its onset, the genre was narrowly defined in that the protagonists depicted in these texts were young, single, white, heterosexual, British and American women in their late twenties and early thirties, living in metropolitan areas. Very often, these protagonists not only mirror the authors of these texts, but they also reflect the demographic of their reading audience, connecting the texts directly to their readers. Additionally, chick lit seeks to unite readers across genre lines, by both grounding themselves in nineteenth-century, heroine-centered literature and by dialoguing with various twenty-first century consumer culture mediums, particularly women's advice manuals. For these reasons, among others, the genre, as Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young note in the introduction to their collection of essays, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, has experienced "amazing commercial success. [It] has been called a 'commercial tsunami'" (2).<sup>4</sup> They continue, referencing Heather Cabot's 2003 article for abcnews.com entitled "Chick Lit: Genre Aimed at Women Is Fueling Publishing Industry" which indicated that "In 2002, for instance, chick-lit books earned publishers more than \$71 million" (2). Largely, because of this commercial viability, the demographic for chick lit has grown; it now chronicles the lives of women of varying ages, races, and nationalities.<sup>5</sup> And, not only has the demographic expanded, but also chick

lit texts have been adapted for television, the film industry, and the World Wide Web. For instance, Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* was adapted for television; running on HBO from 1998–2004, and in America, it is currently re-running on the CW network. Helen Fielding's novel was released as a feature film of the same title in 2001. And, Sherrie Krantz's *The Autobiography of Vivian Livingston* (2002) began as a website, Vivianlives.com.

Despite this immense popularity with readers, however, chick lit texts have been heavily criticized by reviewers of the individual novels and literary critics alike. In her review of *Bridget Jones's Diary* for the *New York Times* entitled "Dear Diary: Get Real," Alex Kuczynski declares, "Bridget is such a sorry spectacle, wallowing in her man-crazed helplessness, that her foolishness cannot be excused" (6) while Scarlett Thomas wrote in the *Independent*, "Chick lit is not just bad for the reader—it is bad for the author too." In the most highly publicized criticism of the genre, author Doris Lessing echoed Beryl Bainbridge's sentiments and pronounced chick lit "'instantly forgettable'" on the BBC Radio 4's *Today* program which aired on August 23, 2001 ("Bainbridge denounces chick-lit as froth"). Bainbridge, the six-time, Booker Prize shortlist recipient, declared that the genre represents "a froth sort of thing," and she asked, "What is the point in writing a whole novel about it? . . . As people spend so little time reading, it is a pity they perhaps can't read something a bit deeper, a bit more profound, something with a bit of bite to it" ("Bainbridge denounces chick-lit as 'froth'"). Three-time, Booker Prize shortlist recipient Doris Lessing concurred, "It's a pity that so many young women are writing like that. I wonder if they are just writing like this because they think they are going to get published . . . It would be better, perhaps, if they wrote books about their lives as they really saw them and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight and so on" ("Bainbridge denounces chick-lit as 'froth'").

Bainbridge and Lessing's conversation spurred subsequent, sensational media headlines that explored the state of contemporary women's popular fiction. The *Times* asked, "Be Honest With Me, Do My Literary Pretensions Look Big in This?" while the *Guardian* announced "Real Lives: We Know the Difference Between Foie Grass and Hula Hoops, Beryl, but Sometimes We Just Want Hula Hoops."<sup>6</sup> The *Sunday Telegraph* decried, "No Wonder Beryl's Cross. Bainbridge, et al. Wanted Boadiceas. Instead They've Got Posh Spice."<sup>7</sup> Media critics and chick lit authors, in turn, rushed to the genre's defense. Jenny Colgan, author of such chick lit novels as *Amanda's Wedding* (1999) and *West End Girls* (2006), responded, criticizing Bainbridge for her comments which imply "that . . . young women are too: ditzy/fizzy/stupid/drunken/man-crazed to a) write books and b) read them" ("Real Lives: We

Know the Difference Between Foie Gras and Hula Hoops, Beryl, but Sometimes We Just Want Hula Hoops”). Author Matt Thorne agreed, “People who are dismissive of chick lit are misogynistic and elitist . . . Chick lit is a perfectly acceptable genre, no different from ‘literary fiction.’ The best writers in the genre are producing some of the best writing around today” (qt. in Thomas).

Though this critical discussion helped to bring chick lit to the forefront of public consciousness, the debate was reductive in so far as it preoccupied itself with what Jean Radford, editor of *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, deems “the [critics’] same obsessive concern with the problem of value” (7). In the past, critics have been reluctant to take popular fiction seriously, and, as Radford and other feminist critics have concurred, all too often literary critics are quick to label women’s fiction as low art, a term which, by default, often denies any thoughtful consideration of that art. Deemed “feeble and tiresome” by Nathaniel Hawthorne in 1852 (Massie and Francassini), “silly” by George Eliot in 1856 (Eliot), “froth” by Beryl Bainbridge in 2001 (“Bainbridge denounces chick-lit as ‘froth’”), and “garbage” (Weinberg) by a random man that writer Anna Weinberg encounters on a train out of New York City in 2003, women’s novels have been disparaged throughout the centuries.<sup>8</sup> Chick lit, then, becomes an easy target for the critics’ derision, relegated to both subordinated spaces—the popular and the female.

As a result, chick lit, like the sentimental novels of the nineteenth century and the paperback romance novels of the 1980s, has not been a genre that literary critics have immediately embraced. While the mainstream media has been quick to take up the subject of these young, single, working women, the academic community has been slower to respond.<sup>9</sup> Of late, there has been increased scholarly interest, including articles such as Kelly A. Marsh’s “Contextualizing Bridget Jones” from *College Literature* and Jessica Lyn Van Slooten’s “A Truth Universally (Un)Acknowledged: *Ally McBeal*, *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, and the Conflict Between Romantic Love and Feminism” from Elwood Watson’s collection of critical essays, *Searching the Soul of Ally McBeal*. Additionally, Imelda Whelehan who wrote *Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary: A Reader’s Guide* has also produced an article entitled, “Sex and the Single Girl: Helen Fielding, Erica Jong and Helen Gurley Brown” and has written *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City*, which chronicles the history of women’s popular fiction, focusing specifically on, and making connections between, the fiction of the 1960s and 1970s and the chick lit boom of today. Chick lit has also been the topic of several graduate theses in England, America, and Hong Kong, and

it is finding a place in the undergraduate classroom as well.<sup>10</sup> In an article entitled “Chick Lit 101” for the Fall 2006 edition of *NWSAction*, Brenda Bethman notes that “both Harvard and Tania Modleski (at the University of Southern California) are offering courses that at least partially engage with chick lit, indication that the study of the genre is gaining more respectability” (12). Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the genre comes with the publication of Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young’s collection of essays, *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction*, which contains fourteen essays on chick lit texts such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Sophie Kinsella’s *Shopaholic* series, and Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* (1996). The collection covers such common chick lit themes as eating, shopping, and female sexuality, and several of its essays engage with more recent chick lit sub-genres such as mommy lit and chick lit for teenagers.

Still, there has not been a single, comprehensive study of the genre to date, and, more specifically, one which examines the nuanced way that chick lit engages with consumer culture mediums, particularly women’s advice manuals, such as women’s magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies, and/or domestic-advice manuals, despite the fact that the genre references and responds to these manuals in varied ways.<sup>11</sup> In the passage above from *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, we see how Bridget continually compares herself to the ideal offered by women’s magazines while Melissa Bank’s Jane Rosenthal (*The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, 1999) reads a dating, self-help book in the hopes of finding a man. Carol Wolper’s narrator from *The Cigarette Girl* (1999), a screenwriter of action films, puzzles over the fact that her life does not follow the simple plotline of a romantic comedy. And, Helen Bradshaw, of Anna Maxted’s *Getting Over It* (2000), consults home decorating magazines and catalogues in an attempt to construct the ideal home for herself. These consumer culture mediums, however, are more than just present in the text. Rather, these mediums heavily influence the protagonists of these texts, dictating to them expected feminine behaviors and ideals that they should attempt to achieve. In many of these novels, chick lit writers establish the behavioral guideline or standard for their protagonists to follow by including references to the explicit advice offered by women’s magazines, self-help books, and domestic-advice manuals and the more implicit advice for women conveyed through romantic comedies. In doing so, chick lit authors present complex representations of young, single women as both readers and consumers.

*Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* demonstrates how these texts question the “consume and achieve” promise offered by these women’s advice manuals and in doing so challenge the consumer industry

to which they are closely linked. Through their narrative structure and their depictions of discerning female readers and consumers, chick lit authors create fictionalized instructional guides that problematize the ideologies offered by the advice manuals their characters read. Chick lit authors, then, respond in varied ways to the manuals they reference, and in doing so, complicate the readers' expectations about female consumption, women readers, women's writing, and popular fiction. More specifically, *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* examines chick lit texts from the genre's early period, beginning with an analysis of Helen Fielding's novel (1996) and concluding with an examination of Sherrie Krantz's *The Autobiography of Vivian Livingston* (2002), pairing, in each chapter, these chick lit texts with the women's advice literature to which they respond.

Chick lit, like other literary movements, is a historically situated genre. In their introduction, Ferriss and Young cite Heather Cabot's 2003 article "Chick Lit: Genre Aimed at Young Women Is Fueling Publishing Industry" for abcnews.com. In the article, Cabot quotes Jennifer Weiner, author of chick lit texts such as *Good in Bed* (2001) and *In Her Shoes* (2002). Weiner comments that there is "an authenticity frequently missing from women's fiction of the past . . . I think that for a long time, what women were getting were sort of the Jackie Collins, Judith Krantz books—sex and shopping, glitz and glamour, heroines that were fun to read about, but just felt nothing like where you were in your life" (qt. in Ferriss and Young 4). Chick lit author Laura Zigman agrees that this need was historically situated as women writers and readers of the late 1990s were looking to write and read texts that validated women's experiences:

"In my heartbroken, urban, single, postfeminist mood I felt like there was a lot going on with women that no one was really talking about . . . We had a lot of freedom and a lot of choices, but there was a price. People were lonely . . . But you would pick up these books and go, Okay, I am not mad, I am not the only loser in the world who feels lonely."  
(Weinberg)

This feeling of disconnect prompted women writers like Weiner and Zigman to begin writing chick lit narratives, which they felt more directly connected to their own experiences. The author bios at the back of chick lit texts serve as evidence of this fact; they emphasize the similarities between the authors, their characters, and their readers. Bank highlights her single status in her author biography, noting that she "lives in New York City with her Labrador retriever, Maybelline," while Sherrie Krantz emphasizes her own

career achievements, a major focus of her protagonist's quest. Helen Fielding's author photograph for the hardcover, 1998 British edition of *Bridget Jones's Diary* even goes so far as to mimic the cover design.<sup>12</sup> Both Bridget Jones, on the cover of the novel, and Fielding, on the back of the inside flap, are photographed in profile, smoking cigarettes.

In turn, book publishers responded to this need; as Sarah Bernard explains in "Success and the Single Girl," they began publishing texts with protagonists whose experiences mirrored those of their real-life readers. Bernard quotes Morgan Entrekin, a Grover/Atlantic publisher: "'Without question, 30-to-45-year-old women are currently the core readers of the fiction market. They are the strongest buyers and readers . . . If publishers are interested in these girls as characters, it's because they are the ones who read these days'" (34). Bernard continues, noting that not only are the protagonists similar to the audience for these texts, but "many of the editors and agents acquiring the books are women in their thirties as well" (34). In fact, characters, readers, and authors are so similar that often, in defining the genre, critics collapse the genre's characters, readers, and writers. In her 1999 article "The Plight of the High-Status Woman: Recent Fiction, Essays, and Self-Help Books," Barbara Dafoe Whitehead simultaneously defines the demographics for the main characters and readers of chick lit texts when she writes, "It is written for and about the privileged members of a new generation" (120) while Alyson Ward, writer for the *Washington Post*, acknowledges the confused relationship between writers and characters when she notes that chick lit is "written by and about young women" (D5). These observations stress the similarities that exist between heroine, reader, and author thus blurring what we might have previously considered a fairly stable distinction.

Arguably, chick lit texts are enmeshed in the present. However, in many ways, these novels, and the approaches taken by chick lit novelists, are not remarkably new. Rather, their roots are in the heroine-centered novels of the nineteenth century, novels like Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey*. Helen Fielding herself acknowledged her debt to such nineteenth-century authors such as Jane Austen in an interview for *Time* where she noted that she did indeed structure her novel after Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*: "'Yes. I shamelessly stole the plot. I thought it had been very well market researched over a number of centuries.'"<sup>13</sup> In "Mothers of Chick Lit: Women Writers, Readers, and Literary History," Juliette Wells discusses these connections between nineteenth-century women's fiction and chick lit while critic Stephanie Harzewski in "Tradition and Displacement in the New Novel of Manners" more specifically analyzes the structural similarities between chick lit and the novel of manners.<sup>14</sup> Harzewski also explores the

connections between chick lit, prose romance, and popular romance, noting how the genre relies on the conventions of the romance but updates them for its present day setting. And, as noted earlier, chick lit also draws upon the female-centered fiction of the 1960s and 1970s. Imelda Whelehan's *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City* connects the genre to Erica Jong's 1973 novel *Fear of Flying* as well as Marilyn French's *The Women's Room* (1977).

Chick lit authors are not the first women writers to connect their novels to contemporary popular culture mediums. In *Northanger Abbey* (1818), Austen explores the impact that Gothic fiction had upon her heroine Catherine Moreland; Edith Wharton mentions Tiffany & Co. in *The House of Mirth* (1905); American writer Sylvia Plath chronicles Esther Greenwood's summer spent interning for the fictional *Ladies' Day* magazine in *The Bell Jar* (1962); contemporary African American writer Toni Morrison's details her character Claudia's passionate hate for Shirley Temple in *The Bluest Eye* (1970); and author Diane Johnson, who "divides her time between San Francisco and Paris," concludes her novel *Le Divorce* (1997) with an action-packed scene set in EuroDisney.<sup>15</sup> Women writers have a long history of connecting their fiction with consumer culture, and in some ways, chick lit novels are merely continuing that trend with their direct references to magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies, and domestic-advice manuals. In these ways, then, chick lit is linked to the literary traditions that preceded it.

Yet, chick lit is fast becoming a new chapter in the history of the novel. The late twentieth and early twenty-first century has produced a cultural climate in which consumer culture plays an increasingly important role in the production and distribution of popular fiction, allowing texts to travel more easily than before. In an age where "Today's savvy authors hire their own manuscript consultants and their own publicists . . . go into the process knowing exactly when and where they'll compromise when the marketing department (not the editor) says they've got the wrong title, wrong protagonist gender, wrong plot," and where "agents and editors read a writer's marketing plan before they read the submitted manuscript," a more nuanced relationship between popular fiction and consumer culture has developed (Holt). Now, chick lit fiction not only directly references consumer culture mediums like women's magazines, other popular fiction texts, consumer products, movies, and television, but consumer culture mediums themselves publicize women's popular fiction.<sup>16</sup> For instance, women's magazines include women's fiction excerpts and recommended reading lists, the promotion of women's fiction through advertisements, and the mention of women's popular fiction heroines in articles. Websites like Vivianlives.com where Vivian Livingston, the

protagonist of Sherrie Krantz's *The Autobiography of Vivian Livingston*, resides not only promote certain products but also encourage readers' consumption of particular television shows, movies, and books. Krantz's character even made appearances in magazines such as *Elle*, *InStyle*, *Glamour*, and *Marie Claire* promoting such products as Herbal Essences True Intense Color by Clairol and Betsey Johnson clothing.<sup>17</sup> Chick lit authors have frequently worked in the consumer industry about which they are writing. Anna Maxted wrote for British *Cosmopolitan* before publishing novels in which her protagonist works for a teen magazine.<sup>18</sup> Likewise, Carol Wolper was a screenwriter, and Sophie Kinsella was a financial journalist before turning to fiction writing.<sup>19</sup> More indirectly, contemporary women's popular fiction often mimics the writing style of the glossies and targets an audience demographically similar to the audience of women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, *Glamour*, and *Marie Claire*. And, like women's magazines, which have consistently, and successfully, wooed women readers since the nineteenth century, chick lit has become wildly successful, spawning numerous publications and prompting such publishing giants as Harlequin Enterprises Inc. and Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, to launch their own lines of chick lit, Red Dress Ink and Downtown Press, respectively (Barrientos).<sup>20</sup>

Subsequently, chick lit texts have traveled across the globe. Though both British and American chick lit texts are often locally tied to a major city (London, New York City, Los Angeles, for instance), the books are still traded across the Atlantic and around the world. For instance, American *Vogue* published an excerpt of *Bridget Jones's Diary* under the title "Sex and the Single Girl" in their May 1998 edition, and the novel itself was published and became a bestseller in America that same year (Whelahan 67). The September 2001 American edition of *Glamour* magazine featured an article on actress Bridget Moynahan entitled "Bridget's Diary;" the subtitle reads, "No, not that Bridget" (Zanzinger 283), referencing Fielding's protagonist, and the subtext for the story in the table of contents reads "Mrs. Big," an allusion to Mr. Big from *Sex and the City* (20). And, as Whelehan notes in *Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary: A Reader's Guide*, the novel was not only embraced by the American public, but it also became an international bestseller, having been "translated into at least 33 languages" (33).

One of the major factors for chick lit's popularity rests with the television and film productions of chick lit texts, which have enabled an even larger audience to be exposed to the genre. The trajectory of *Bridget Jones's Diary* attests to this fact. Fielding's novel developed out of her newspaper column in the *Independent*, which first ran on February 28, 1995 (Whelahan 12). Two years after its publication in England, the novel traveled to

the United States where it became a bestseller (Whelahan 67). In light of this favorable reception, Miramax films produced the film in 2001; Fielding wrote the screenplay herself while her friend Sharon Maguire directed and Renée Zellweger, Colin Firth, and Hugh Grant starred (*Bridget Jones's Diary*). Similarly, Candace Bushnell, author of *Sex and the City* transformed her newspaper column for the *New York Observer* into a collection that was then adapted into the HBO series, premiering in June of 1998 (Sohn 14–15, 26). In 2001, Laura Zigman's *Animal Husbandry* was developed into the film *Someone Like You* starring Ashley Judd, Greg Kinnear, and Hugh Jackman (*Someone Like You*). Currently, Melissa Bank's *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* is being adapted into a feature length film, starring Sarah Michelle Gellar (*Suburban Girl*). According to the Internet Movie Database, the film is tentatively scheduled to be released in 2007 under the title, *Suburban Girl* (*Suburban Girl*). These adaptations have contributed to an even more wide-scale consumption of these texts and their transformation into popular culture relics. In "The Marriage Mystique," Daphne Merkin describes Fielding's novel as "the cultural artifact that is recognizably larger than itself" (70). As Merkin acknowledges, today *Bridget Jones's Diary* and Bridget Jones herself have become something other than what Fielding may have first conceptualized to both the British and American public. Merkin's description can just as readily be applied to *Sex and the City*, an equally influential twenty-first century cultural phenomenon.

The World Wide Web has also furthered this exchange of texts. Authors such as Jennifer Weiner include their web addresses at the end of their novels and encourage readers to visit their sites. Advancements in web technology allow booksellers such as Amazon.com to customize sites for their visitors. Registered users at Amazon.com who return to the website may receive suggestions for new books, or movies, that might interest them, and they can create their own reader/viewer lists that detail their favorite texts as well as read the lists of others. For instance, American reader Melissa Wilson, Senior Editor at Amazon.com, created the list entitled "The Singleton Life" which includes such books as *Getting Over It* (2000) by Anna Maxted and *Thirtynothing* (2002) by Lisa Jewell while on the Amazon.co.uk site, the list "great chick-lit for rainy afternoons" was created by Leahy2j, final year student, and includes novels by Jenny Colgan and Marian Keyes. These features add to the way in which both reading and viewing material is exchanged. As fiction is increasingly adapted into visual productions and as writers and readers increasingly exploit the World Wide Web, national boundaries continue to dissolve, allowing for texts to travel even further and providing for more nuanced and direct connections between fiction and consumer culture.

These connections further manifest themselves in the chick lit texts, as authors reference various consumer culture mediums. In the short passage from Fielding quoted above, we see four allusions alone to consumer culture mediums, and throughout Fielding's novel, she continually mentions products (Cadbury's Dairy Milk), television shows (*Eastenders*), books (*Backlash*), and media events (Prince Charles and Princess Diana's divorce). Likewise, other chick lit texts make similar references. Bushnell mentions movies (*Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *Disclosure*) while Kinsella consistently lists the stores that her protagonist frequents (Top Shop, Harvey Nichols, French Connection). And, chick lit authors often create fictional worlds in which their protagonists participate in the production of consumer culture mediums whether it be movies, as with Elizabeth West of *The Cigarette Girl*, television, as with Jane Goodall of *Animal Husbandry*, magazines, as with Helen Bradshaw of *Getting Over It*, or the music industry, as with Vivian Livingston in *The Autobiography of Vivian Livingston*.

Even more specifically, however, we see the protagonists engaging with advice manuals, specifically women's magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies, and domestic-advice manuals. For instance, Vivian Livingston might turn to the pages of *Marie Claire* for fashion advice or Jane Rosenal from *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* might consult a self-help book that eerily mirrors the 1995 dating manual, *The Rules: Time-tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right*. Helen Bradshaw espouses that movies like *Pretty Woman* taught her good always triumphs over evil, and Bridget Jones consults a Marco Pierre White recipe in the hopes of impressing her friends and love interest, Mark Darcy. Consistently, these protagonists are found consulting these advice manuals as they navigate their everyday lives.

It is commonly accepted that such mediums as magazines and self-help books present their readers with prescriptive instructions regarding how to live their lives. The rhetoric of these texts is directive, using the second person to appeal to their readers and to incite those readers to action. Robina Dam's article "Love Bites" which appeared in the February 2000, British edition of *Marie Claire* reads:

You've promised dinner to a man. It's the first time you've invited him to your home and, according to the rules of etiquette (OK, according to Ally McBeal), that means you're probably going to be the dessert. What you need are some ground rules to make the evening a perfect seduction scene. A combination of these plus some delicious food and he'll be (firmish) putty in your hands. (172)

The article continues to offer specific instructions such as “Think simple,” “Keep it tactile,” and “Candles are a must” (172). Readers of this article, then, are promised results, “(firmish) putty,” and provided with instructions that, according to the magazine, guarantee this result. Self-help books adopt this instructional formula, too. Books such as Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider’s *The Rules: Time-tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right* promise readers that if they follow their instructions, which include such advice as “Don’t Stare at Men or Talk Too Much” (33) and “Always End Phone Calls First” (45), they will obtain “A marriage truly made in heaven” (5–6). Again, female readers are encouraged to consume the advice offered in order to attain a desired result.

Like magazines and self-help books, domestic-advice manuals are explicitly prescriptive, sometimes even more so than other advice manuals. *Martha Stewart’s Living* magazine contains articles detailing do-it-yourself projects, and cooking shows such as *Nigella Bites*, which first aired in England in 2000, provide viewers with step-by-step instructions for making the perfect meal. However, other domestic-advice manuals are less obvious in their attempts to guide their readers. A catalogue such as Williams-Sonoma does not offer readers much instructive text, rather the blurbs that accompany products are descriptive; however, its pages, filled with Jadite Waring 60th Anniversary Blenders and KitchenAid Artisan Stand Mixers, construct an ideal for its readers, visually encouraging them to reform their homes (*Williams-Sonoma: The Catalog for Cooks* Spring 2001). A properly equipped home, according to Williams and Sonoma, is one complete with all necessary accoutrements, ranging from monogrammed wine coasters to egg frying rings.

Romantic comedies, perhaps, offer the least obvious form of instruction to their readers. Unlike the other mediums mentioned, very few romantic comedies use direct address as a means of connecting with and encouraging their readers. Yet, though not explicitly instructive, romantic comedies can serve, as Gwendolyn Audrey Foster notes in *Troping the Body: Gender, Etiquette, and Performance*, as a form of conduct literature.<sup>21</sup> Foster notes the way in which many contemporary cultural mediums, including movies, offer advice in a way similar to that of conduct literature, and her work seeks to “redefine the boundaries of conduct literature through a theoretical examination of the gendered body as it is positioned in the conduct book, etiquette texts, poetry, fiction, and film . . . to develop an interdisciplinary approach to conduct literature and literature as conduct” (x). Like Foster, I wish to extend the consideration of texts that can be considered conduct literature. Though a romantic comedy’s primary purpose may not be to instruct, these

films nonetheless often deploy specific and scripted gender ideologies and have the potential to influence a person's conduct. For instance, a romantic comedy like the 1998 remake *The Parent Trap* reinforces in its construction certain gendered behaviors. As Mark D. Rubinfeld notes in *Bound to Bond: Gender, Genre, and the Hollywood Romantic Comedy*, the pursuit plot is an important element of that film, which makes the remake "significantly deviate from the original version of the movie" (9). Rubinfeld argues that the twins' mother, Elizabeth, reinforces gendered stereotypes when she explains how she felt upon leaving her ex-husband Nick. She says, "I packed. And you didn't come after me." Her response reinforces the idea that women wait to be pursued and men actively pursue. While Disney's remake might not have intended to instruct its viewers, the film indirectly encourages gendered behaviors. Romantic comedies, then, though not implicitly instructive, script expected, gendered behaviors for both readers and viewers.

What is interesting about the presence of such advice manuals in these chick lit texts is the way in which they operate. Some might argue that their inclusion contributes to the perpetuation of the gendered ideologies offered by these manuals. After all, how does referencing Top Shop, Calvin Klein, and Karen Millen discourage consumer behavior? Doesn't Sophie Kinsella's descriptions of Becky Bloomwood's shopping sprees in *Octagon* actually encourage women readers to indulge, rather than curb, their spending? Don't these novels, then, become prescriptive in the same, often damaging, ways that these behavior manuals do? How, if at all, do these novels challenge readers' expectations about women's reading practices, their consumer behavior, and ultimately female agency?

In Melissa Bank's *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, we see an example of the complex relationship that can exist between a reader and her reading material. Bank's novel preoccupies itself with its main character's concerns about her unfulfilling job as an editor and her less than perfect romantic life. The novel becomes, on one level, a chronicle of Jane Rosenal's attempts to correct these unsatisfying situations. Directly connected to these struggles, however, is the role that behavioral guides, from etiquette books to dating manuals, play in Jane's life. Jane is consistently bombarded by advice from her mother, her father, *The Girl Scout Handbook*, and a self-help manual remarkably similar to the 1996 publication *The Rules: Time-tested Secrets for Capturing the Heart of Mr. Right*. Of equal importance to Jane's struggle to find happiness with her career and romantic life becomes her ability to successfully navigate these texts, particularly because Jane often blindly follows the advice offered to her, which consistently leads her to unhappiness. Only when she can successfully recognize which advice to follow and which

advice to disregard, in other words only when she becomes a more discerning reader, does the reader of Bank's work feel as though Jane has found some fulfillment in her life. Bank creates a representation of female reader/consumer that challenges the idea of passive consumption and encourages women to become active and discriminating readers of the instructional manuals that they encounter.

In *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*, Sophie Kinsella takes a different approach to critiquing consumer behavior; she satirizes her protagonist's extreme consumer behavior.<sup>22</sup> Unlike Jane Rosenal, Becky Bloomwood, Kinsella's heroine, makes little to no attempt to become a critical reader of the advice manuals that she reads. Rather, Becky represents what I deem the "ideal" reader of women's magazines—the woman who reads and abides by the advice offered no matter what the obstacles. Though Becky spirals into crippling consumer debt, she continues to purchase those items promoted by women's magazines in the hopes of achieving the lifestyle associated with them. Yet, Kinsella's narrative structure makes it clear that Becky's behavior is not one to be followed by readers. Rather, throughout the novel, Kinsella comments ironically on her behavior. For instance, in the American edition of the text, Kinsella depicts Becky observing a man seated near her on the tube. She writes:

As the train finally gets going again I sink into my seat with a dramatic sigh and look at the pale, silent man on my left. He's wearing jeans and sneakers, and I notice his shirt is inside out. Gosh, I think in admiration, did he read the article on deconstructing fashion in last month's *Vogue*, too? I'm about to ask him—then I take another look at his jeans (really nasty fake 501s) and his sneakers (very new, very white)—and something tells me he didn't. (25)

The humor in this moment comes from the fact that Becky is not aware of the ridiculousness of her conjecture. She immediately jumps to the conclusion that the man's clothing reflects an article that he may have read in *Vogue* not that, perhaps, he just chose to dress that way for reasons that rest completely outside of the realm of women's magazines. Significant, too, is the fact that Kinsella chose to add this detail in her later, American edition of her text, further highlighting the exaggerated consumer behavior exhibited by Becky in the original, British edition. Kinsella crafts this moment in such a way that allows for the reader to laugh at the absurdity of Becky's hypothesis, and in doing so, Kinsella simultaneously acknowledges the hold that women's magazines can have on their readers if not kept in check and critiques the

reader/consumer who is unable to maintain perspective on the role that these publications should have in her life.

The assumption that novels such as these cannot challenge the consumer industries that they reference is again indicative of the deeply rooted, historical bias against popular fiction—a bias that exists against women’s fiction as well. As Jean Radford explains in *The Progress of Romance: The Politics of Popular Fiction*, a common presumption is that “Literature [operates] transformatively on ideology, producing a ‘knowledge’ of it, whereas popular fiction merely reproduces and transmits that ideology” (2). Therefore, it becomes common to assume that since chick lit is popular fiction it reiterates, rather than questions or challenges, dominant ideological discourse.<sup>23</sup> As Janice Radway notes in *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature*, to believe that romances merely reiterate established ideologies is “troubling because its conception of ideology and domination seems to preclude the possibility of any kind of social change or resistance from the very start. It does so by reifying human process itself and by according extraordinary and preeminent power to the commodities produced and used within such processes rather than the human activities themselves” (6). Though Radford and Radway’s comments apply to popular fiction generally, their scholarship examines women’s cultural productions, specifically romance novels.<sup>24</sup> Their comments, then, resonate even more, revealing that historically rooted biases against both popular fiction and women’s writing have existed and continue to exist even today, as evidenced by the heavy criticism aimed at chick lit.<sup>25</sup>

This study, then, is not unlike previous studies that have critically engaged with female cultural productions. Feminist critics in the 1980s and 1990s, writing about the genres of romance novels and soap operas, have acknowledged the bias toward women’s cultural productions that exists in literary studies and have worked to shift the focus from value to an actual analysis of these important cultural texts. In her 1982 book *Loving With a Vengeance: Mass-Produced Fantasies for Women*, Tania Modleski opened by noting, “Although Harlequin Romances, Gothic novels, and soap operas provide mass(ive) entertainment for countless numbers of women of varying ages, classes, and even educational backgrounds, very few critics have taken them seriously enough to study them in any detail” (11). Modleski’s study and Janice Radway’s subsequent 1984 work *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* acknowledge the fact that women’s cultural productions are often deemed less worthy of study than men’s. Modleski and Radway then move on to discuss those cultural productions, often placing an emphasis, as in Radway’s study, on the readers of these texts and showing

the ways in which these readers can, and do, use mass produced texts subversively. These studies opened the door for a host of other critical analyses of women's cultural productions, all of which recognized the criticisms railed at their given genre of study, often deeming that criticism unnecessary, but then proceeding to analyze the texts regardless of the stigma that was often attached.<sup>26</sup>

Just like Modleski and Radway, I wish to examine female cultural productions, both chick lit and behavioral guides, that have been consistently marginalized and to begin a critical, scholarly consideration of these texts. As these critics have done, I argue that this literature is adept at revealing and/or reflecting the society that produced it, interfacing with the dominant ideologies of the time period, and challenging, rather than deploying, the ideologies transmitted by women's magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies, and domestic-advice manuals. Rather than taking a sociological approach as Radway has done, however, my study is grounded in the literature itself, concentrating on the way in which chick lit authors represent their characters as readers and consumers. This examination, in turn, has implications for our perception of chick lit writers and readers for their portrayals reflect upon and/or question dominant ideological discourse—a move that asserts agency and reverses the perception of women as unthinking, “passive” consumers, mindlessly “ingesting” messages imparted to them without further discrimination.<sup>27</sup>

I begin by examining two popular, British novels considered forerunners of the chick lit phenomenon, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, arguably the übertext of the genre, and Sophie Kinsella's *The Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic*. These novels present heroines who are obsessed with women's magazines such as *Cosmopolitan* and *Marie Claire*. Both authors satirize consumer behavior by creating protagonists who could conceivably be women's magazines “ideal” readers; Bridget and Becky blindly follow the advice of these publications, and in doing so, often find themselves conflicted. Fielding's protagonist contradicts herself from entry to entry (she's satisfied as a singleton, she's dissatisfied being alone; she's happy with her weight, she desperately wants to lose a few more pounds) while Becky struggles to control her compulsive shopping habit, encouraged by the glossy advertisements that grace the pages of her favorite magazines. Through their depictions of this exaggerated consumer behavior, Fielding and Kinsella mock the advice given by these publications and comment ironically on both women characters as readers and consumers.

In my third chapter, I examine two, American novels, Melissa Bank's *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* and Laura Zigman's *Animal Husbandry*.

These books present protagonists preoccupied with their relationships and searching for emotional fulfillment. In order to better understand their past relationships, Jane Rosenal (*The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*) and Jane Goodall (*Animal Husbandry*) turn to self-help books as their guide. What they discover, however, is not the key to a successful relationship but a host of advice that is ill fitting for their personal circumstances. The concluding story of Bank's collection shows Jane rejecting the dating manuals that she has been so desperately trying to follow in exchange for her own set of "rules" while Zigman's Jane goes so far as to construct her own self-help book—an action that leads to her recovery from a badly broken heart. These protagonists serve as models for female readers suffering through emotionally draining relationships, and the novels, in turn, become "self-help" in and of their own right, providing readers with an alternative instructional guide. In their novels, Bank and Zigman present protagonists capable of critically reading the texts presented to them, accepting and rejecting self-help advice when it is appropriate and creating their own texts when the manuals they encounter fall desperately short.

My next chapter looks at *Sex and the City*, American author Candace Bushnell's collection of newspaper columns for the *New York Observer*, and Carol Wolper's *The Cigarette Girl*. In the opening pages of Bushnell's novel, she mentions another important consumer culture medium, the Hollywood movie, and her novel responds to contemporary, Hollywood romantic comedies in pointed ways. Bushnell's protagonists, like Elizabeth West of Carol Wolper's *The Cigarette Girl*, attempt to lead their lives in the face of the ideologies about female sexuality offered by these romantic comedies. In examining both the 1962 movie *Sex and the Single Girl* and the 2002 movie *The Sweetest Thing*, I argue that romantic comedies of the past and present posit that female sexuality is something that needs to be controlled; by emphasizing a "happily ever after" ending, these films imply that women can only be completely fulfilled if they enter into a monogamous, heterosexual relationship. Both Bushnell's characters and Elizabeth West find these definitions of female sexuality limiting, and they rebel against these sexual standards, finding romantic alternatives to what they have grown to expect from a classic Hollywood ending. These novels offer readers an option to the often times innocent and demure females depicted in romantic comedies and present readers with an additional, sexual-behavior model.

Chapter Five examines the multiple ways in which chick lit authors construct homes for their protagonists. Though chick lit characters are single women seemingly far removed from occupying a "traditional" domestic space, chick lit authors, from Helen Fielding to Candace Bushnell to Anna

Maxed, often preoccupy their characters with household tasks and the home. This preoccupation is thus informed by the characters', and ultimately their authors', familiarity with domestic-advice manuals, that, like women's magazines, present their readers with an "idealized mirror image" of what their home should contain and what their given behaviors within that private sphere should be (McCracken 13). These protagonists are often drawn to the goods and skills marketed to them by these domestic-advice manuals because these household goods signify something more to these women—the domestic sentiments that they currently lack. A reoccurring theme in many of these novels, then, is a longing for perceived domestic bliss. Characters such as Bridget Jones, Jane Goodall, and Carrie Bradshaw discover, however, that anxiety about what these goods and skills represent accompanies this longing. These characters are often shown questioning whether they will ever achieve the sentiments associated with domesticity if they choose to make untraditional life choices and create a home devoid of husband and family, as exemplified in particular by Elizabeth West of *The Cigarette Girl*. Though I examine multiple texts in this chapter, I organize this section around British author Anna Maxted's book *Getting Over It*—a book in which anxieties about the home play a key role. Following the death of her father, Maxted's main character, Helen Bradshaw, is forced to redefine what family, and in turn home, means to her, and as a result of this renegotiation, she struggles to understand who she is and how to make a home space for herself. In Maxted's novel, "moving on" has dual significance, for Maxted consistently realizes Helen's emotional recovery through her attempts to find and buy a flat. Displaced from her apartment and then from her mother's house, Helen finally "gets over" her intense grief when she purchases, furnishes, and finally inhabits her new flat alone. Like other chick lit authors, Maxted depicts her protagonist as struggling with the ideologies of domestic-advice manuals that offer particular constructions of family and home, yet she ultimately writes a heroine who finds an alternative that more adequately fits her lifestyle.

My afterword synthesizes my observations about female consumption and reading practices through the lens of Sherrie Krantz's *The Autobiography of Vivian Livingston*. I begin this chapter by discussing the various off-shoots and sub-genres that were inspired by such texts as *Bridget Jones's Diary* and *Sex and the City* before moving to discuss Krantz's text more specifically. All of the elements of my study converge in this text. Vivian Livingston, Krantz's character who began as a cartoon, web-based character and morphed into her own consumer culture icon, makes appearances in such publications as *Elle*, *InStyle*, *Glamour*, and *Marie Claire* to promote products such as Clairol Herbal Essences, Cingular Wireless, Betsey Johnson, and Audi TT® Roadsters

(Mack 6).<sup>28</sup> Much like other chick lit texts, Krantz's novel encourages women readers to simultaneously embrace and interrogate the advice being offered to them by women's magazines, self-help books, romantic comedies, and domestic-advice manuals. However, Krantz's text differs from early chick lit text in so far as it expands upon the connections to consumer culture previously made by chick lit authors and, in some ways, becomes representative of the direction that current chick lit texts are headed. As a result, Krantz's texts have obvious implications for the history of the novel, particularly in understanding the ways in which contemporary global society has altered the consumption of fiction.

Nancy A. Walker concludes her book *Shaping Our Mothers' Worlds: American Women's Magazines* with a paragraph that begins, "It would be disingenuous for me to pretend that my interest in women's magazines of this period is purely scholarly" (xvii). Walker's statement resonated with me as I embarked on this project. Throughout my life, I have continually felt drawn to women's magazines, purchasing several different publications each month ever since my junior year in high school when my mother bought me the back to school, August issue of *Seventeen* magazine, which is currently housed in a place of honor on my best bookshelf in my small, studio apartment. While I voraciously consume these magazines each month, I am simultaneously disturbed by and wary of the messages that they impart to their readers, and I see the negative effects that these images and articles can have upon their consumers when I teach *Bridget Jones's Diary* in my college classes. Many young women in my classes speak fervently about their identification with Bridget, and I worry that they, like Bridget, are unable to dissect or critique the messages conveyed to them everyday by consumer culture. In class, we discuss ways to become more discerning readers, and together, we work toward improving our critical reading skills. Mass media and all its components will not soon disappear, and I adamantly believe that it is extremely important to become informed consumers. I hope that this study further encourages readers to appreciate, yet at the same time interrogate, the products of consumer culture that we encounter each and every day.