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UNH Instructor's Book Analyzes 'Chick Lit' Genre

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Media Relations

UNH Instructor's Book Analyzes 'Chick Lit' Genre

January 31, 2011



Why is Chick Lit Popular?

from UNH News

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genre that is both a commentary on the rise of the singles lifestyle and arguably the most defining writing of the postfeminist era -- a media phenomenon that has been frequently pointed to a symptom, if not the cause, of feminism's debilitation.

"The strappy \$500 high heels -- on waxed or shaved legs -- we associate with chick lit book covers are a decided contrast to the Birkenstocks of second-wave 1970s feminists. Postfeminism sees itself offering sleeker, more 'fashionable' models to the 'humorless' and dowdy older generation. In some ways, chick lit's somewhat antagonistic relation to feminism is but one iteration of an age-old battle between youth and elders. At worst, it perpetuates a misreading of second-wave feminism," says Harzewski, author of "Chick Lit and Postfeminism" (University of Virginia Press, 2011).

Though once believed the bright light of postfeminist writing, according Harzewski, in the past half decade chick lit has established itself as a literature of bourgeois escape. It supplies source texts for romantic comedy movies. It questions feminist archetypes, such as the 1980s Superwoman, and the aftereffect of the sexual revolution for women, such as the double-edge sword of sexual "freedom" -- that license to a high number of sexual partners guarantees neither fireworks nor intimacy.

Chick lit is a product of "singleton" lifestyles: the mainstreaming of online dating, the rising age of first marriage, declining rates of remarriage, and the phenomenon of the "starter marriage" -- a first-time, childless marriage of less than five years. (In 2005, married couples became a minority of all American households for the first time.)

"Chick lit is both a commentary on and a product of the singles market, which expanded in the late 1990s from matchmaking services and Club Med to a large-scale commercial sector and e-business niche. It also emerged from a crisis in romance publishing when editors found their leading novelists growing older, with no new crop in the wings. Chick lit was a marketing venture by Harlequin to attract a younger, more urban demographic: 20 to 30-something 'career women' with disposable income," Harzewski says.

Author Jane Austen has been dubbed "the mother of chick lit." Her most widely read novel, "Pride and Prejudice" offered the template for Helen Fielding's "Bridget Jones's Diary," which references the 1995 BBC adaptation of "Pride and Prejudice," starring Colin Firth as Darcy. The publication of Fielding's novel, together with the HBO adaptation of Candace Bushnell's column compilation "Sex and the City," were the principal catalysts in establishing chick lit as a genre. Harlequin's launching of its Red Dress Ink imprint (2001-09) caused the market to burgeon, and ultimately, saturate.

"Chick lit is a variant of the romance: it is a more realistic version of the popular romance, often called 'the Harlequin,' after its leading romance publisher. Romance has been the best-performing genre fiction since the

DURHAM, N.H. – Without Carrie Bradshaw, women may never have discovered Manolo Blahniks. As one of the best-known characters in "Sex in the City," Bradshaw encapsulates the typical postfeminist, career-minded, single gal, a gal who a University of New Hampshire instructor says is part of the explosive popularity of the genre "chick lit."

In one of the first full-length studies of chick lit, UNH instructor

Stephanie Harzewski analyzes the popular fiction

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1950s, with no signs of abating. Add in humor, one of chick lit's main contributions to romantic formula, and female protagonists, and even better for sales," Harzewski says.

Chick lit is also a strain of the long-existing subgenre of novel of education, as it offers coming-of-age stories in a post-adolescent context. Finally, until about 2005, chick lit novels were replete, sometimes to the point of simply name-dropping, with observations about women's consumer items—chick lit has been called "the stepsister to the fashion magazine" —and offered both a fiction story and a Zagat's guide to women's designer commodities, she says.

Harzewski will teach an online English literature course at UNH in the summer of 2011 based largely on the research she did for her book.

The book has received critical acclaim.

"The explosion of a new type of novel by and for women -- dubbed, for better or worse, chick lit -- has provoked much controversy in the mainstream press and in the literary world. Despite all the commotion over the works by the latest mob of 'damned scribbling women,' as Nathaniel Hawthorne called women writers of the 19th century, little scholarly attention has focused on these texts. Harzewski's is one of the first full-length studies devoted to chick lit, and the most wide-ranging to date. 'Chick Lit and Postfeminism' is written in a clear, readable style and is a solid book that will be read with interest and no doubt taken up and debated," says Tania Modleski, with the University of Southern California and author of "Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a 'Postfeminist' Age."

"Like Carrie Bradshaw in her Manolo Blahniks, 'Chick Lit and Postfeminism' steps out in style. Smart, thoughtful, and well-written, it offers a historical understanding of this decidedly postfeminist genre, while offering insight into contemporary gender politics and femininity," says Janet McCabe, with the Birkbeck, University of London, and coeditor of "Reading Sex and the City."

The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

VIDEOS

UNH Instructor Stephanie Harzewski discusses why chick lit is so popular.

<http://www.vimeo.com/19138977>

UNH Instructor Stephanie Harzewski discusses why she studies chick lit.

<http://www.vimeo.com/19138833>

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