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Defining the Genre

Since the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* in 1996 (in the United Kingdom) and 1998 (in the United States), chick lit has been a rapidly growing popular cultural force, spawning films, websites, publishing imprints, how-to manuals and a group of genuinely talented, interesting writers with compelling stories to tell about modern women struggling and succeeding with work, relationships, motherhood, infertility, finances and yes, the right shoes to wear with the right dress. This article makes a case for chick lit as a viable and necessary area of collecting for academic libraries by investigating its impact on the publishing world, exploring its relationship to women's writing and academia, and finally, by providing a roadmap to building a core chick lit collection.

The definition of chick lit varies widely and is tinged with shades of backlash. Carole DeSanti, the United States editor for Helen Fielding (*Bridget Jones's Diary*) and Melissa Banks (*The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*) notes:

> Initially, women writers were trying to find a way to write about their lived experience that was vibrant and authentic and creative and artful. Now there's a range of definitions for chick lit, but the one we seem to be settling in with is the one that trivializes and dismisses it (Danford 2003).

Jenny Colgan, author of *Amanda's Wedding*, said in an interview with *Utne Reader* in 2004, "Chick lit is a deliberately condescending term they use to rubbish us all. If they called it slut lit it couldn't be more insulting" (Razdan 2004). As for a formal definition, The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers the most reflective of the true intentions of the genre: "literature by, for, or about women; esp. a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences" (*Oxford English Dictionary* 2007). The website WordSpy also defines chick

lit in a positive light as "a literary genre that features books written by women and focusing on young, quirky, female protagonists" (WordSpy 1999).

The origin of the term itself tells an interesting story and perhaps sheds some light on why some are vehement in their disdain for the genre as a whole. Though the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* and the website WordSpy note that the one of the first uses of the term was in 1996 in a piece by Vicki Hengen in *The Boston Globe's* Living Section, Hengen's reference was actually in response to an article by James Wolcott in *The New Yorker*, in which he characterizes journalistic writing in the nineties as "sheer girlishness" and refers to "pop-fiction anthologies like 'Chick-Lit,' where the concerns of the female characters seem fairly divided between getting laid and not getting laid" (Wolcott 1996). The anthology he refers to in his article is *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, edited by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell and published in 1995, a year before *Bridget Jones's Diary* was published in the United Kingdom and three years before its publication in the United States. The choice of the term as the title of the anthology was completely unrelated to the term as we know it today, as Mazza explains: "This was the ironic intention of our title: not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype" (Ferriss, Young 2006a). What began as irony took a turn and morphed into a marketing and sales gimmick that simultaneously denies the authors assigned to the genre any claim of legitimacy or talent: "I find myself saying, 'I sold my first novel, but it's only chick lit'" (Danford 2003).

Reactions and Responses

The argument over the legitimacy of the genre remains alive and well, reflecting the long-standing derision towards women's writing. Literary figures George Eliot, who

called women's writing "frothy, prosy, pious, pedantic" (Eliot 1856) in her essay "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" and Nathaniel Hawthorne with his infamous quote "America is now wholly given over to a damned mob of scribbling women" (Ticknor 1913) are perhaps the two best examples of the antagonism towards women's writing. Virginia Woolf defends women's writing in *A Room of One's Own*:

> But it is obvious that the values of women differ very often from the values which have been made by the other sex; naturally, this is so. Yet it is the masculine values that prevail. Speaking crudely, football and sport are 'important'; the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes 'trivial'. And these values are inevitably transferred from life to fiction. This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war. This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing–room (Woolf 1929).

The negative attitude persists into the 21st century, especially towards chick lit. Author Jennifer Weiner echoed Woolf when she pointed out:

> It's sexist when critics automatically relegate anything concerning young women's lives to the beach-trash Dumpster bin – especially when they're automatically elevating anything about young men's lives to the exalted spheres of Literature (Weinberg 2003).

Professor Lola Young, chair of Britain's prestigious Orange Prize for Fiction panel, made national news in Britain when she publicly decried the "cult of big advances going to photogenic young women to write about their own lives, and who they had to dinner, as if that is all there was to life" (Bristow 1999). Esteemed authors Doris Lessing and Beryl Bainbridge later added their voices to Young's in criticizing chick lit, with Bainbridge using very similar language to Eliot's: "It is a froth sort of thing" (Davies 2001). Most recently, *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd discussed chick lit in her column, declaring "[T]hey're a long way from Becky Sharpe and Elizabeth Bennet. They're all chick and no lit" (Dowd 2007), setting off a firestorm of angry responses from readers and authors alike. In the *Chicago Tribune*, author Roxana Robinson mused,

> This is why the issue is so charged: It seems that the mere declaration of gender confers belittlement. And why is this? Could this be that old, outdated bugaboo, gender discrimination? Aren't we way past that? But it's hard to see this as anything else. […] No wonder this is all so confusing: sometimes "women's" applies to the subject, and sometimes to the author (Robinson 2005).

A troubling observation is how much of negativity towards chick lit comes from other women writers, and this begs the question why. One explanation may be that chick lit is seen as a betrayal of feminism and its call for equality, e.g., if women are writing unashamedly about clothes, shopping, drinking to excess and sex, then how far how we truly come? Another explanation is the confusing message sent by some chick lit about the joys of being single and a feminist vs. finding a man. Protagonists are well-educated single women with exciting jobs, but are unhappy because, despite all their accomplishments, they lack a fulfilling relationship with a man: "Bridget [*Jones's Diary]* neatly expresses the tensions of a woman who recognizes the rhetoric of feminism and empowerment, but isn't always able to relate this to her fulsome desire for a hero from a Jane Austen novel" (Whelehan 2000). Lastly, the sometimes intense focus on appearance, accessories and the body in chick lit is a source of discomfort for some. The tendency of critics to over-generalize detracts from the creative and interesting characters and plots in chick lit; however, librarians have the opportunity to go beyond generalizations to thoroughly explore and acquire the most compelling examples of the genre.

With all the controversy, chick lit is now a fixture on the popular culture and fiction landscape. Several major publishers responded to the popularity of chick lit by establishing dedicated imprints: Harlequin/Red Dress Ink, HarperCollins/AvonTrade, Pocket/Downtown Press, Kensington Publishing Group/Strapless. Opinions about this decision vary. On one hand, a separate imprint allows publishers, booksellers and readers

to easily identify what they are selling and buying. With the competition for chick lit readers becoming fierce, marketing can be tailored to a specific demographic. On the other hand, fulfilling the high demand may mean lower standards: "The field will start to blur, and you won't be able to distinguish the good from the bad," said literary agent Deborah Schneider (Jain 2003).

While some may group romance novels in with chick lit, representatives of the two genres acknowledge similarities – both are about women struggling with some aspect of the personal life, both genres have crossed over into Christian fiction – but maintain that the two are very different. First, chick lit has a broader focus on relationships. As one publisher explains: "There are only so many stories you can do with girl-finds-boy in NYC. We've expanded our list to include chick lit, meaning mother-daughter relationships, sister relationships, anything that's centered [on] women" (James-Enger 2003). The expansion of the genre into 'mom lit' and 'work lit' also sets it apart from the romance novel, and the growing number of voices and perspectives through books written by African-American, Latina and Asian authors is another significant difference. The audience for chick lit and romance is also markedly different: "This generation wouldn't be caught dead reading a bodice ripper. They're more cynical, more savvy" (Jain 2003). Another development in chick lit that sets it apart from romance noted in *The New York Times* last March is the internationalization of the genre. Authors from countries as varied as Finland, Italy, India and Japan are contributing to the market and selling copies. Some may see this as an example of Western literary colonization; others see it as proof that the chick lit genre is dynamic and adaptable. Helen Fielding described this trend, saying, "I think it had much more to do with zeitgeist than imitation" (Donadio 2006).

Academia's reception of chick lit as a legitimate area of study has been lukewarm, at least in the area of research and scholarship. Reasons behind the reluctance to study the genre could include a distaste for the term itself; a belief in the conventional wisdom that all chick lit is about stiletto heels, pink drinks, and men; or an assumption that very popular, highly marketed and lucrative literature must be too 'low culture' to warrant scholarly consideration. A search for "chick lit" in the MLA International Bibliography database yields less than a dozen results from peer-reviewed journals. Searching for "Helen Fielding" is more productive with 14 results, and the search results for "Bridget Jones's Diary" mirror those of the "Helen Fielding" search with the exception of one record. Searches for prolific chick lit authors such as Jennifer Weiner, Marian Keyes and Sophie Kinsella result in one to two items per author. Similar searches in the databases GenderWatch and Contemporary Women's Issues yield more results from independent magazines and journals such as *Bitch*, *Iris* and *Feminist Collections*, with insightful and often positive commentary on authors, on Bridget Jones, and on the sometimes misleading marketing of chick lit and of writing by women.

Another indication of interest in the genre as an area of study is the small group of dissertations (four) and master's theses (six) produced since 2005 in the subject areas of American, British and modern literature and women's studies. Topics of the dissertations range from examining consumerism, postfeminist sexual politics and representations of single women in popular fiction. It remains to be seen whether or not chick lit will remain an area of interest at the level of doctoral study, but there is anecdotal evidence that there are those in academia who see chick lit as a viable area of scholarly attention.

Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, editors of *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, recount the reaction to their call for proposals for their book:

> But we also received an astonishing number of e-mail messages from students grateful to see someone in the academic world taking their interest in chick lit seriously. We have since discovered that many of those women had been – and are being – discouraged by their (mostly female) professors in women's literature and women's studies from considering chick lit a legitimate area of scholarship" (Ferriss, Young 2006b)

Ferriss and Young go on to list potentially compelling themes in chick lit -- identity, sexuality, friendships as family, balancing work and relationships -- and ask, "Shouldn't feminist criticism be open to the latest crop of women's popular fiction?" (Ferriss, Young 2006b). Their argument is strengthened by the themes' timelessness and universality to any genre of writing. The authors' conclusions illuminate how chick lit could be used in the classroom to explore not only generational differences in feminism, but also to explore and discover why works of classic fiction endure, and to develop an appreciation for the "intricate plots, subtle characterizations, memorable language" of those works. Giving students a vocabulary to explain the strengths and limitations of a particular book or specific genre is powerful, as is allowing a student to use material they connect with as a basis of their exploration. In short, chick lit can be a starting point for discussions of why women's writing matters, the evolution of women's writing, and the importance of women's perspectives in fiction, whether it is popular or literary. Developing a collection of chick lit would connect students to those discussions and may help spark their intellectual explorations into the genre by lending credibility to the works and their authors.

Building a Core Chick Lit Collection

Ferriss and Young ask a question at the core of this article: if students want to study chick lit from a specific disciplinary perspective, why stop them? This article extends the question into the library sphere, arguing that the library has a responsibility to provide access to those works, just as we would to any other area of study. It is

perhaps even more important in the case of chick lit because of the disparagement of the genre and the controversy over the definition of the term. Librarians need to look beyond the "swimming in pink" (Dowd 2007) marketing techniques and see chick lit as an important representation of modern women's writing. Dismissing chick lit as unimportant diminishes the authors' voices, perspectives, and their experiences to the point of exclusion. Further, libraries are the place where users can immerse themselves in the development of new and emerging genres. Chick lit firmly belongs in the history and evolution of fiction – fiction in general and fiction by women – because of its popularity, its accessibility to the reader, and because it represents issues that modern women face. A collection of chick lit is especially key for those libraries that support popular culture studies, a field that has undergone much growth and is accepted as a legitimate field of study. The study of popular culture and chick lit is well-matched, as the former explores how our pastimes and entertainment define and shape our society, and chick lit is both a product of and influence on our society. Women's studies is another area that may be interested in chick lit, as the genre is one expression of how women see each other, themselves, their relationships, work and family life.

Librarians should build a collection that represents the genre, supports the needs of current and future scholars from a diversity of disciplines who wish to study the genre further, and goes beyond *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Standard collection development practices apply when developing a vibrant and foundational chick lit collection, especially for those unfamiliar with the genre: consulting bestseller lists, reviews, and reading the books that are considered core (several of which are listed below). Librarians who want to become more acquainted with the genre overall can take additional steps, such as consulting with the local public library to gather circulation statistics and reader's advisory

information to identify possible selections among the many titles in the genre and investigating blogs written by and for chick lit authors and readers. Booksellers are another avenue for gathering information about new authors with strong voices, interesting stories, or new premises that will help to provide a fuller picture of the genre as a whole. Further, surveying students and faculty is a very direct way of soliciting ideas for titles and authors, and may even open the door to discussing why it is important for the library to collect in this area.

After the research phase, there are five guidelines specific to chick lit to consider before embarking on the selection process. The first is how to strike a balance between seminal texts such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, *The Girls Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, and *Good in Bed* and subsequent titles that embody the best of the genre. Another important choice to make is whether to collect the complete works of prolific writers or to instead select the most representative works of those writers. The variations within the genre, e.g., mom-lit and work-lit, should be well represented by titles like *The Devil Wears Prada*, *I Don't Know How She Does It*, and *The Nanny Diaries*. The works that set the stage for Bridget Jones and that are important works in their own right should also be acquired: Candace Bushnell's *Sex in the City* and Terry McMillan's *How Stella Got her Groove Back* are two examples. Since the popularity of chick lit is holding steady and the genre is growing to include voices from ethnic, international and religious authors, attention must be paid to the works of these writers not only to support their perspectives but also to support diversity in the genre itself. Lastly, criticism of the genre deserves to be on the shelf to demonstrate that chick lit has a place in cultural and literary studies.

Future Directions

There are excellent opportunities for further research on this genre. First, investigating the foreign and domestic reaction to, the marketing and availability of, and the inclusion in library collections of international chick lit in the United States would be a fascinating look at women's writing from around the world and the international book market. Exploring the growing number of ethnic chick lit authors and their contributions to the genre is another valuable research area. Surveying users to gauge their positive or negative responses to having any popular fiction, much less chick lit, included in an academic library collection would provide interesting insight into how our users perceive our collections. Lastly, analyses could be performed of which libraries lead the way in collecting chick lit in general, highlighting which authors and titles are most represented. In a *Journal of Popular Culture* editorial, Gary Hoppenstand (2004) said, "the immeasurable value of those libraries and archives that collect and preserve popular culture cannot be overestimated." Chick lit is undoubtedly an economic and literary force in popular culture today simply by virtue of its success in the book market and entertainment industry. Modern women writers deserve their place on our bookshelves, and libraries have a responsibility to document their success and the development of this important genre for students and scholars alike.

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