

Chick Lit's Genesis. Background to the Advent of Commercial Literature for Women

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Abstract

In this article, we are going to examine chick lit from different angles, from its hatching till it became a cultural phenomenon, part of the puzzle called *consumerist society*, in which we all live in the present moment. Literature of consumption mirrors the present society, the sorrows and preoccupations of the middle classes. Literature of consumption has known a huge success since the role of the press and of the publishing houses grew in importance permitting the industrial development of writing.

Key words: profit, consumption, art, hyperreality, pink

The *Chick Lit* type of literature is manufactured upon the readers' demand, being in a permanent process of readjustment. It is written to sell and to make profit, literature having no more the status of art, but of business.

Its protagonists are based on stereotypes and are easily spottable without too much effort from the reader. They are invulnerable and have the possibility of transformation. Thus, characters have a mythical value, a fact which gives literature of consumption an immense power of fascinating the readers. This type of literature follows the reader's boulemaic, desire states. It is not the cultivated reader they are appealing to but a savage one, who searches for a sensational dream life and illusions of prosperity.

To grasp the superficiality of both American pop culture and its imitative counterparts in other countries, the theoretical concept of hyperreality as defined by Umberto Eco and Jean Baudrillard proves helpful – although the two European philosophers each provide different definitions. Both Eco and Baudrillard have identified American pop culture as a form of hyperreality while travelling through the USA, yet whereas Eco defines the hyperreality of America as consisting of artificial copies of authentic originals (hence the absolute fake), Baudrillard sees America as the ultimate simulacrum, no longer an artificial copy of an authentic original but an endless chain of copies referring to each other.

(Kooijman 2013: 19)

The approaches of the two philosophers are appropriate for the study of chick lit, as this type of literature either may be an "absolute fake" generated from an authentic original, or it may feed from itself and from society's needs, creating a strong chain of copies. The diversity which the literature of consumption has known of late is a result of its success among the readers.

The pink type of literature of consumption is addressed mainly to women, and we will refer to it shortly, as chick lit. McDonaldisation, Disneyization, chick lit, all these are forms of Americanization. In all cases, the plot in chick lit is mainly the same. The protagonist is a stereotypical figure who is capable of social ascension, ending up as a normal person whom the reader resembles in sharing the same reasons for happiness and sorrows. One important study which will help us analyze this type of writing is Heike Mißler's *The Cultural Politics of Chick Lit*. From Missler's point of view, chick lit can be seen both as a genre part of popular culture and a cultural phenomenon.

An understanding of the theoretical framing of the chick lit genre is needed, before moving on.

Chick lit entered mainstream popular culture almost immediately after the publication of Bushnell's and Fielding's novels, and the label "chick lit" itself

soon became a ubiquitous reference for all things pink, frothy, funny, and generally targeted at female readerships and audiences. Gripping popular media culture for little more than ten to fifteen years, chick lit became an incontestable moment of the nineties and early 2000s: entire sections in bookshops were reserved for the brightly hued novels, women got together to watch the latest episodes of *Sex and the City*, and words like ‘absofucking-lutely’, ‘brazilian’, ‘singleton’, and ‘smug-marrieds’ became common parlance. As with any hype, the market of chick lit and its television or film adaptations reached a point of saturation relatively quickly. Chick lit’s mass success slowly petered out towards the end of the first decade of the new millennium, triggering many voices in the publishing industries to proclaim its death and to celebrate publishing trends such as the vampire hybe following the *Twilight Saga* and the erotic turn in popular fiction promoted by the *Fifty Shades* trilogy.

(Mißler 2017: web)

As Mißler coins, chick lit knew success among readers through Fielding’s novel *Bridget Jones Diary* (1996), a book which was a mere copy of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, as Fielding herself admits in a BBC interview, that she has stolen the plot from Austen’s novel:

Jane Austen's famous novel *Pride and Prejudice* may have been published 200 years ago, but it still inspires today's writers.

Author Helen Fielding admits she "stole" Jane Austen's plot for her novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

She told BBC News how she was influenced by the 200 year old story.

(BBC 2013: web)

According to Mißler, who also takes into consideration Kooijman's distinction between pop and popular, "chick lit is both a product of pop culture and of popular culture" (Mißler 2017: web), because it may be viewed from both perspectives, either as a pop product, because it is a "mass-produced commercial commodity" (Mißler 2017: web), or a popular culture product, as it is "the culture of our everyday lives" (Mißler 2017: web), generated by people's needs.

Although some critics believe that chick lit may be traced back from the 18th century, more exactly from Richardson's *Clarissa* and *Pamela*, it knew its highest peaks in the 21st century, as they become a "big business" (Ferriss & Young 2006: 2), which generated millions of dollars both for publishing houses and chick lit writers. Some critics even called chick lit a "commercial tsunami" (Apud Ferriss & Young 2006: 2). Because of this profitable market, the chick lit genre generated an industry of writing, where books were mass produced, for money. In fact, some writers believe that the term *chick lit* functions as a brand, as publishing houses labelled some novels in this way as a selling guarantee, although some writers did not totally agree that their books fit to the genre. According to some authors, chick lit genre "has never been anything else but the invention of a few marketing brains to spur sales (...)" (Mißler 2017: web), a well manufactured strategy to make money fast.

The easy to read light plot formula with female protagonists especially, that readers can easily relate to, passionate of shopping, fashion, looks and internet addicted, represent key aspects which lead to the seduction of the normal readers. Thus, their disguised aim is to promote among readers consumerism, the American style of leaving, sexuality, taboos, addictions and violence.

The popularity and defenders of this genre created multiple virtual communities on the internet, based on many sites and blogs as: "www. chicklit.co.uk (...), www. chicklit.us and www. chicklitbooks.com" (Apud Ferriss & Young 2006: 2), where both writers and readers share opinions about the pink type of literature. By the process of the writers' chatting and permanently adapting their novels to the consumer's needs, this genre met success.

Visiting these sites for my scientific research, it popped into my attention an interview with a young chick lit writer, Amanda Brunker, who wrote the novel *Champagne Babes*.

How do you feel about the label "chick lit"?

To be honest, I class myself more 'raunch lit'! But I don't mind what label people tag me with. I just write to entertain people. I don't think there's enough women's fiction that makes you laugh as well as cry. I'm not trying to change the world with my writing. I just want to give people a break from the depression that's all around us.

(Brunker 2008: web)

I also found it particularly interesting the way she reviewed her book, for the interview:

Tell us about *Champagne Babes*.

Champagne Babes is a book about love, lust, lies and long-lasting friendship. My central character Eva Valentine is dealing with some major changes in her life. She ran up the aisle with the first man who asked her and learns soon after she's already 3 months pregnant. As she struggles with the mental anguish of some post-baby weight, she notices her new husband morph into a not-so-nice-guy! Thankfully she's got great back-up to distract her from her problems, but with friends like hers, more trouble is never far away.

(Brunker 2008: web)

For a complete picture of the chick lit phenomenon to be drawn, here is a print screen of the www.chicklithub.com.



(Figure 1 Image of *www.chicklitclub.com* 2018: web)

Although she aspires “to give people a break from the depression that's all around us” (Brunker 2008: web), it is obvious that *depression* is a small word to describe such pink trash kind of work, because it cannot be called literature, as it has got nothing to do with art, aesthetics, values or morals.

While normal readers embrace them as they are seduced by the bubble of “hyperreality” (Baudrillard 1994: web) which these types of books promote, critics permanently mocked this genre for its superficiality, labelling it as a cheap show, with no moral or aesthetic value: “Highbrows critics (...) have dismissed chick lit as trashy fiction” (Ferriss & Young 2006: 1). And these types of books are permanently mocked not just by critics, but also by respected writers as well, as Ferriss and Young coin:

Bainbridge describes chick lit as “a froth sort of thing” that “just wastes time”. Lessing added, “it would be better, perhaps, if [female novelists] wrote books about their lives as they really saw them, and no these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight” (“Bainbridge”).

(Apud Ferriss & Young 2006: 1)

These types of books will certainly not persist over time and will not influence or inspire writers in the future. As Mißler said, this genre may come to an end, but certain

publishing houses will find ways to camouflage it under other kinds of popular culture literature, because the lust for money is even bigger now than it was in the past, as in a consumerist society luxuries are turned into necessities, into “musts”. While searching on Google for a scientific updated definition for this genre, I came across this one: “stories written by women, about women, for women to read” (Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary & Thesaurus: web). So, these books are created by women for a certain target, with the purpose of seducing, entertaining, promoting consumption and generating fake illusions of prosperity, beauty and values, thus a fake world and reality-hyperreality.

These books are mainly about young and single women, in their twenties, who seek for their identity, in the process of womanhood in a modern society, as “chick lit brings into focus many of the issues facing contemporary women and contemporary culture-issues of identity, race and class, of femininity and feminism, of consumerism and self-image” (Ferriss & Young 2006: 2). These types of women illustrated in chick lit books, are modern heroines living in a modern society, who are somehow trying to create a balance between a successful career and personal relationships. Due to the use of this light theme of modern womanhood, the passive reader can easily relate to the protagonists, transforming himself into an addicted consumer, both of such type of literature and other commodities and superficialities promoted by a modern consumerist society.

Supporters claim that, unlike traditional, convention bound romance, chick lit jettisons the heterosexual hero to offer a more realistic portrait of single life, dating, and the dissolution of romantic ideals. Both fans and authors of chick lit contend the difference lies in the genre’s realism. Chicklit.us explains that it reflects “the lives of everyday working young women and men” and appeals to readers who “want to see their own lives in all the messy detail, reflected in fiction today.” The typical chick-lit protagonist is, as a result, not perfect but flawed, eliciting readers’ compassion and identification simultaneously. Heroines deploy self-deprecating humor that not only entertains but also leads readers to believe they are fallible-like them. “The heroine of these books can be rude,

shallow, overly compulsive, neurotic, insecure, bold, ambitious, witty or surprisingly all of the above-but we love them anyway!” (chicklit.us). Invoking the “physical stuff of everyday life” (Jernigan 70), chick lit’s often criticized investment in fashion and cocktails, from this perspective, is not simply superficial but a reflection of consumer culture.

(Apud Ferriss & Young 2006: 3)

As Ferriss and Young put it, the consumer society is full of flaws which authors of chick lit novels used in order to write their novels. By creating this kind of genre, flaws have been promoted and commercialized. The normal reader is an easy target to contaminate by the advertising of these flaws, as him may interpret them as the latest trends. Chick lit novels exposes the readers to society’s flaws, some of which are real, while some are hyperbolized in order to shock and impress, without giving any moralizing effect in the end or any piece of advice that all that it was written is fiction and has nothing to with real life. Once readers are seduced by this type of books, they become passive readers, addicted to such kind of writings, becoming friends with the protagonist who although is full of flaws, he still has all that it wants and a happy end, without too much work or sacrifice.

According to Ferriss and Young, “ambiguity lies at the genre’s core” (Ferriss & Young 2006: 9), as chick lit books may be interpreted as a miscellaneous mixture between feminism, postfeminism and antifeminism. As defined by the Cambridge Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, being a genre created by women for women, it may, on the one hand, sustain feminism as it portrayals “women’s struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women” (Ferriss & Young 2006: 9) and their urge for gender equality and access on the working market, and, on the other hand, it also promotes postfeminism as it may “portray the reality of young women grappling with modern life” (Ferriss & Young 2006: 9). Moreover, if feminism has as objective to improve the quality of life through social or political changes, postfeminism does not take into consideration the possibility of dealing so rationally with important issues of human existence. This genre may be also interpreted as antifeminist, as it coins a low quality

modern woman who is hunted by addictions, low values and superficiality. The two critics give as example Anna Weinberg's criticisms, who believes that chick lit is unserious: "Inside their dust jackets covered with shopping bags, martini glasses, shoes or purses, many of these titles really are trash: trash that imitates other, better books that could have ushered in a new wave of smart, postfeminist writing (qtd. In Skurnick)" (Apud Ferriss & Young 2006: 9).

Based on my chick lit readings for my research, we may sum up by saying that this genre is antifeminist, as it presents an altered version of the woman, contaminated by capitalism. This genre resembles with the format of a glossy magazine for teenagers, a trashy kind of reading which offers whole display of a mixture of pieces of advice, regarding relationships, fashion and beauty, having nothing to do with art.

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Figure 1, (2018), *Image of www.chicklitclub.com*. Retrieved from: <https://www.chicklitclub.com/amandabrunker.html>.

Biodata

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