

Michele M. Glasburgh. Chick lit: the new face of postfeminist fiction? A Master's Paper for the M.S. in L.S degree. November, 2006. 97 pages. Advisor: Brian Sturm

This study is a content analysis of ten chick lit books, a genre of women's fiction. Books were analyzed for five postfeminist characteristics as defined by Susan Faludi's backlash theory, outlined in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women* and in further research on popular culture's notions of womanhood: 1) negative reaction to second wave feminism, 2) focus on the individual instead of a collective sisterhood, 3) desire for more traditional femininity through domesticity, consumerism, romance, and motherhood, 4) female identity crisis causing fears of a man shortage, a loudly ticking biological clock, and career burnout, and 5) feelings of anxiety over ability to make the correct future decisions. Analysis has found that chick lit does generally reinforce the notions of postfeminism/backlash, however the characters displayed anxiety over how to incorporate feminine paths into their lives and generally disregard motherhood.

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CHICK LIT:
THE NEW FACE OF POSTFEMINIST FICTION?

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I. Introduction

It's at the bookstore, the library, your local book discussion group, on bestseller lists, and even at the box office; it's everywhere and it's unavoidable. Chick lit: those books with the pastel-colored covers depicting swirly, cartoon-ish women are selling wildly and being turned into movies and television shows, such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1998) and Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1999). Starring a young female protagonist in her twenties and thirties, who is usually white, heterosexual and urban (Smith, 2005), these books take the reader on a humorous romp through their everyday lives, focusing on "their generation's challenges" of relationships, careers, and consumerism (Ferriss, 2006). Having been dismissed by some as "a froth sort of a thing" (cited in Ferriss, 2005, p. 1) for its seemingly shallow characters and predictable plotlines, many have relegated chick lit to what are considered 'beach reads,' books only worthy of entertaining when any sort of deeper thinking is undesirable. Reactions to women's literature are generally divided into two camps: those who would rather have literature by and about women to promote feminist thought and to depict inspiring and strong female characters and those that want it to portray the reality of young women "grappling with modern life" (Mabry, 2006, p. 193). The big question is whether or not chick lit actually satisfies either of these desires.

To begin contemplating this question, one must understand chick lit's place in the history of women's writing. Women's fiction has been around for centuries, with some

tracing the original chick lit back to Jane Austen in the early 1800s (Wells, 2006); Helen Fielding does not try to hide the fact that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is very much inspired by Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (Wells, 2006). Harzewski (2006) believes that this alone anchors the genre in respectable literary origins, lending to it more weight than it has received. She also notes that chick lit has adapted several major literary traditions, "including traditional prose romance, popular romance, and the novel of manners" (p. 31), indicating that it is influenced by past women's writings. Also, like most women's fiction before it, chick lit has brought about the question of the genre's value of literary merit, mainly based in gendered debates (Harzewski, 2006). Harzewski suggests that although second-wave feminist scholarship had accomplished a salvage and "more nuanced consideration of so-called silly lady novelists" (p. 30), there has been a resurgence of antinovel criticism focused at chick lit: "[t]o judge whether an individual work of chick lit, or the genre as a whole, has literary merit is to participate in a long tradition of discounting both women writers and their readers (cited in Wells, 2006, p. 15). With this in mind, chick lit can be seen to have merely taken its place as the most recent format in a long history of women's fiction, complete with the 'literature versus entertainment' debate.

Despite criticism, readers are eating it up at a price of \$71 million, just in 2002 alone (Ferriss, 2006). Why this sudden explosion of chick lit in the market? The literature has a few ideas: Mabry (2005) suggests that as traditional romance readers age (their average age is about forty-five), publishers are honing in on the next generation of female readers. These younger readers are looking for something sassier, funnier, and with more romantic choices than the traditional romance formula has to offer (Harzewski,

2006). Others liken it to a return to consumerism; chick lit's preoccupation with shopping and fashion compounds its relationship with mass culture and legitimizes the reader's own assumed preoccupation with "these indispensable features of the feminine universe" (Radway, 1984, p. 193). It is safe to say that there is some reader interest in consumerism as no one is completely immune to the powers of mass marketing.

The most pervasive reason as to the skyrocketing popularity of the genre is in its claimed relatability to contemporary women's lives. Chicklit.com seems to sum it up with their definition of chick lit, "It's hip. It's smart. It's fun. It's all about you!" (cited in Ferriss, 2006, p. 1). The website claims that readers want to "see their own lives in all the messy detail, reflected in fiction today" (cited in Ferriss, 2006, p. 3). Compare this to romance novels, which contain an element of fantasy that is hard to transfer into everyday life (Radway, 1984). While romance novels, as a rule, almost always end with the couple together, chick lit offers a more realistic look at romance and the single woman. Add to this the protagonist's ability to laugh at herself and the genre's typical first-person narrator or confessional formula and it is hard not to relate to these women. Thus, while not traditionally considered well-written, chick lit's ultimate draw lies in its relatability of the protagonist to the reader.

If chick lit is so relatable, why are there so many critics of the genre? Besides "froth", it has also been cast off as a "veritable Pepto-Bismol tidal wave" and its protagonists as "powderpuff girls" (cited in Harzewski, 2006, p. 33). What the most vocal critics are airing is distaste for the seemingly superficial and undeniably predictable formula the genre has taken on. It would seem that these critics are looking for substance

through more feminist characters who they feel better represent women of today, or at least what women of today aspire to become. They want role models to counteract what mass media is feeding society (Mazza, 2006). This argument is not without merit, but it overlooks the notion that maybe women of today are not aspiring to be strong feminists anymore. It may just be that critics are hesitant to accept that chick lit is closer to what is happening in women's lives today than feminist theory. Contemporary women seem instead to be grappling with the notion that they can aspire to be whatever they want to be, which can either include or dismiss feminist principles. Enter popular culture's delivery of postfeminism to the masses.

This treatment will investigate the relationship between chick lit and postfeminism and discuss whether or not chick lit has the potential to be accurately representational of young, modern women's lives. To begin to understand how postfeminism plays into these narratives, this treatment will discuss postfeminism in relation to Susan Faludi's backlash argument, one of the most well-known formulations of postfeminist theory.

The problem this study addresses is two-fold. First, because the genre is so new, there has not been much serious analytical research done yet. Since chick lit is such a well-read and highly-marketed genre, it is easy to see the potential impact it could have on its readers. While some literature has asked whether or not chick lit can be understood as postfeminist texts, few have gone beyond that initial question (Ferriss, 2006; McRobbie, 2004).

Second, this study intends to address the knee-jerk reaction of critics to the genre. By literally judging these books by their pastel covers, many critics are tossing off the latest female voices, some very influential, to a corner of the literary world as fluff. It is important to determine whether this type of fiction is reflective of women today. Chick lit may be offering women the opportunity to connect with characters that are truly having the same experiences they are, for better or worse; the light tone of the books may even make it easier to digest the idea that women, like everyone else, are unavoidably swayed by popular culture. If we consider why it is so relatable, especially when critics are tossing it off as irrelevant, we are forced to consider the popular theories of postfeminism. The question this research intends to answer is ‘How does chick lit portray the notion of postfeminism?’

II. Literature Review

Postfeminism is a term that has been knocked around for at least twenty years, but one cannot be sure exactly when its inauguration occurred (Ferriss, 2006). The most general understanding of postfeminism is a shift away from the feminist idea of needing to right the wrongs of a patriarchal society with regard to women. Beyond that, definitions take different paths depending on whether or not one believes this shift is positive or negative. Because discussion of all theories of postfeminism is a treatment unto itself, the focus here will be on postfeminist discussion directly related to popular culture; this is what has become known as the ‘backlash’ theory, coined by Susan Faludi’s bestseller, *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991).

Faludi (among other feminist writers) claims that popular culture has been the direct cause of a backlash on feminism, understood as ‘postfeminism,’ by attempting to blame it for the supposed misery of women today and calling for a return to a more traditional femininity (1991). The media claim that, despite *and* because of their multiple gains from the women’s movement, women are grateful for the freedoms and equalities made possible by the feminist movement, yet at the same time blame it for making them miserable with pressures and high expectations (Braithwaite, 2004). Women feel forced to apply what feminism won for them: juggling a bona fide career *and* a family. Further, the feminist claim that women could ‘have it all’ has been construed by popular culture to mean ‘all’ that fits under the umbrella of feminism. Many women were/are

resentful at having to forfeit things that the movement considered hindrances to their cause, such as men, sexuality, and consumerism (Faludi, 1991). According to popular media, “[f]eminism came to mean denigrated motherhood, pursuing selfish goals and wearing a suit” (cited in Rye, 2003). To illustrate, law student Mona Charen, writing an article for the *National Review*, is quoted in *Backlash*,

In dispensing its spoils, women’s liberation has given my generation high incomes, our own cigarette, the option of single parenthood, rape crisis centers, personal lines of credit, free love, and female gynecologists. [...] In return it has effectively robbed us of the one thing upon which the happiness of most women rests—men. (as cited in Faludi, 1991, p. x).

Whether or not this statement is true, it exemplifies the point that some women feel the pressure to sacrifice traditional feminine desires for the good of the cause and are realizing that they really do not want to. Is this cause for sacrifice real or merely created by popular culture?

Faludi argues that popular culture has indeed invented this ‘sacrifice’ as a marketing scheme; body image, sex, and the home are hot topics for commercialism. Evidence of the backlash is in popular culture’s emphasis on a return to feminine traditionalism through such media as advertising, fashion, and popular news media (Braithwaite, 2004). To this end, Kim (2001) suggests that, since feminism has turned into the ‘f’ word, popular culture has given it a makeover, “from Murphy Brown into Ally McBeal,” from an independent, no-nonsense single woman to a young, neurotic lawyer obsessed with finding a man and looking good (p. 320). We can now find in the media a renewed enthusiasm for attractiveness and preoccupation with consumerism and romance; it promises to offer all of the things that the ‘f’ word could, or would, not. There are two opposing views as to how this affects women: those that see the backlash

as undoing years of hard work on the part of the second wave feminists and those that find it liberating for women of today.

The return to a more traditional idea of femininity has some critics up in arms. Faludi and Naomi Wolf, author of *The Beauty Myth* (1991), and others, are especially worried about the media's depiction of women in this light, warning that it will erase any social and political equality women have attained since the 1970s. Several recent studies have suggested that media still maintain an important role in the development of body image, establishing gender roles, and shaping world views (Andsager, 1999; Beggan, 2005; Crane, 1994; Strelan & Hargreaves, 2005; Tiggeman, 2005). Tiggeman (2005) found that young adults who use television content to learn about life "tend to have more negative body image" and as a whole, teens are active consumers of media content (p. 376). This study, and many others of its kind, tells us of the importance of popular culture in shaping our world views. A recent study done of country music videos suggests that traditional gender roles, with few exceptions, are greatly upheld (Andsager, 1999). Women artists tended to portray themselves in a more independent light than male artists portrayed women, which can be seen as having gained some ground, but more stuck to the traditional feminine image of sex object or lover. Concerning written media, romance novels, for example, are still the bestselling fiction genre, with \$1.41 billion in sales for 2003, 33.8% of all fiction sold, and 48.8% of all paperbacks sold in 2003 (rwanational.org). Although several reasons for their popularity have been argued, such as hunger for romance, cheap thrills, and escape from reality, some are concerned that their popularity indicates "a reactionary return to definitions of women's happiness as realizable only through men" and that they maintain traditional and stereotyped gender

roles (Crane, 1994, p. 257). Crane's study of romance readers and feminism determined that, while these women appreciated the feminist contribution, they "did not regard feminism as a guiding force" in their lives (p. 268).

These media-driven images of women, it is argued, do not reflect reality and provide a false and stereotypical depiction of beauty and femininity. Faludi contends that women's misery does not come from the pressures of the feminist movement. Instead, these "supposed female crises are a closed system that starts and ends with the media, popular culture, and advertising—an endless feedback loop that perpetuates and exaggerates its own false images of womanhood" (xv). Don't blame feminism, blame the media for these unhappy images.

Hall and Rodriguez (2003) found empirical evidence to support Faludi's claims against the media through a study conducted to determine the existence of her postfeminist backlash theory. Through content analysis of postfeminist literature and public discourse, specifically public opinion data, they deduced that postfeminism is indeed a myth; women continue to support feminist principles and find them valuable in their lives. However, they concluded that, despite their findings, "the postfeminism perspective already is operating as a frame that people use to understand what happens around them" (Hall & Rodriguez, 2003, p. 899). Whether or not public opinion actually reflects this matters less than its existence as such; if it has the appearance of truth, that seems to be good enough. They conclude their findings with the suggestion that, because postfeminism is so emphasized in popular culture, it has the potential to turn feminism on its head and deem it unnecessary.

The other side of the coin wants to *thank* the media for liberating women more than feminism could. By taking back what feminism has supposedly made them do without, women have seemingly gained even more freedoms. These may include motherhood, family, romance, fashion, beauty, sexuality, sexiness, fun, pleasure, and men—those facets traditionally defined as feminine (Braithwaite, 2004). This signifies a change from feminism to a time to “have fun again” and a return to “lifestyle choices and personal consumer pleasures” (Braithwaite, 2004). This idea sees postfeminism as (re)paving a more appropriate course for today’s woman. It seems, however that this ‘freedom of choice’ comes with some baggage of its own.

Instead of feeling the pressures of choosing a feminist or feminine path in life, postfeminism tells us that women have the ultimate responsibility of choosing *any* path they want. How are women dealing with this? Interestingly, it would seem not as well as when they were ‘confined’ by feminism. Young women today are said to live with much more self-doubt than their predecessors (Dickerson, 2004). They have the pressures of “how to find a partner, determine their careers, achieve financial independence, and create their living situations, social lives, and life direction, not to mention look good and be thin” (Dickerson, 2004). McRobbie (2004) takes this one step further, stating that women’s responsibility entails not only making all choices, but making the *right* choices, to be responsive to this newfound freedom of personal responsibility and not “*fail miserably*” (p. 261) [italics added]. This smacks of the same responsibility popular culture claimed that feminism created when they told women to ‘have it all.’

To add even more pressure, it seems that the correct choices are for women to fall somewhere between prefeminism and feminism. Gerhard (2005) tells us, “[w]omen, if

they so choose, can work, talk, and have sex “like men” while still maintaining all the privileges associated with being an attractive woman” ([1]). This idea of walking a line between the feminine and masculine is illustrated in a study done of the images and biographical text accompanying *Playboy* Playmate centerfolds from 1985-2001; it found that the majority of women had attributes consistent with the identity of a “New Tough Woman” as defined by Sherri Inness in her book *Tough Girls* (1999), which was comprised of four characteristics: body, attitude, actions, and authority (as cited in Beggan, 2005, p. 799). Their findings, they surmised, suggested that men find images of tough women alluring. More specifically, the juxtaposition of the sensuality of the female images and their supposed tough-girl attitudes and adventurous natures is the real turn-on (Beggan, 2005). Here, the message sent by popular culture is if women want to be alluring, they should find a balance between sensuality and bitch. Marilyn Rye (2003) conducted a comparison of male and female detective characters in J. A. Jance’s Beaumont and Brady mystery series. She found that female detective stories have to “negotiate between the reader’s expectations raised by the traditional detective formula and expectations raised by conventional representation of female gender that readers accept as ‘natural behavior’ ” (p. 105). The female character has to walk the line of being independent enough to make her detective character convincing while still maintaining a modicum of femininity as to be believable as a woman.

The literature has shown there to be five characteristics for this popular view of postfeminism. The first is women’s general rejection of feminism in their lives. This manifests itself in several different ways: Many critics and theorists have touched on the idea of feminism becoming the new “f” word (Beck, 2001; Hall & Rodriguez, 2003;

Walters, 1995; Wolf, 1993). It has been deduced that although studies have shown that the majority of women support feminist principles and issues such as equal pay, day care, job discrimination and reproductive choice, they are resistant to the label “feminist.”

This is largely due to the negative connotation that popular culture has placed on the idea of a feminist; lesbian, man-hater, badly dressed, mean and hairy-legged, and scowling, to name a few (Walters, 1995; Wolf, 1993). The phrase “I’m not a feminist, but…” is a common refrain heard amongst these women, many of whom have taken a liking to the more neutrally-recognized “humanist.” Also, many women are supposedly angry that feminism has weighed them down with high expectations, specifically with balancing a career and home/family life; they are miserable in striving to “have it all” (Black, 2006; Braithwaite, 2004; Faludi, 1991). Postfeminism also tells us that women today feel that feminism is outdated. It has done its job of providing gender equality, thus rendering it irrelevant today (Braithwaite, 2004; Kim, 2001; McRobbie, 2004; Ouellette, 2002).

Women are ready to move on.

The second characteristic is a focus on the individual instead of a sisterhood. Women are not interested in representing a movement or speaking for women everywhere; they are out to find their own voice and good time. This deviates from feminist discourse focusing on sisterhood and the idea of only engaging in ‘good for the cause’ social activism. This allows women to reemphasize “lifestyle choices and personal consumer pleasures” (Braithwaite, 2004). Also, by not being confined to spokesperson status, it allows contemporary women the room to explore other avenues that they may not have otherwise considered, particularly being true to their own desires instead of prescribing to others’ notions of womanhood. Some critics go so far as to label

this sense of individuality as self-obsession (Bellefante, 1998). Using Ally McBeal to illustrate this point, Bellefante quotes McBeal's response to the question, "Why are your problems so much bigger than everyone else's?" as "Because they're mine" (p. 56).

The third characteristic is the media's attempts to revive more traditional femininities that were not allowable through feminism. These include an unabashed return to men, a focus on consumerism, reconsideration of motherhood, and attempts at domesticity. Men and motherhood are considered two aspects of female lives that fell under scrutiny during the reign of feminism, culminating in the message that neither one were needed. Braithwaite (2004) and Walters (1995) tell us that today, elements of popular culture are dominated by a preoccupation with a particular definition of femininity, presenting images of women as engrossed with romance and trying to be attractive to men and with "motherhood, children, and a desire to retreat from the workplace in favor of the 'mommy track'—in short, with being 'a woman again' " (p. 20).

Domesticity plays a large part in postfeminism urging women to return home. According to postfeminism, women feel the pressure to flourish domestically (Smith, 2005). With the rise of domestic-advice manuals and mass media promoting home goods as posh and necessary, women are feeling the tug to return to the home. Unfortunately, women of this generation are not as prepared for the domestic life; "The problematic place of domesticity in 2nd wave feminism has influenced debates about post-feminism and its ability to deal with the domestic" (Hollows, 2006, p. 126). With feminism placing so much emphasis on career, women experience confusion and frustration about incorporating both aspects of career and domesticity into their lives. Women feel

unprepared, unequipped, and often pressured to “buy into [the] ideologies [of domestic-advice manuals and purchasing household goods and yet] are skeptical about how fitting these models are” to their lives (Smith, 2005, p. 675). However, these women are not really concerned with the acts of cooking, organizing or decorating, but with the feelings invoked by them. Also, they desire the security and warmth that the notion of home encompasses, but are unsure how to reconcile that with their untraditional life choices. It seems common to question, “[if] it is possible to attain the sentiments associated with domesticity if one...creates a home devoid of husband and family” (Smith, 2005, p. 675).

Consumerism plays a part in this ideology. Household goods are still seen to symbolize things associated with “married life - order, security, and everlasting love” (Smith, 2005, p. 683), which is an important consideration for a single woman who has not yet decided if she is happy being single. Media are using femininity as a means to market products and women are feeding into it under the guise of deserved indulgence, which is now a right we have under postfeminism (Black, 2006). Also, the act of shopping has predominantly been considered a female sport, frivolous and fraught with negative messages about women. Returning to this as a means of indulgence and a focus on individual desires constitutes a rebellion against the old regime of feminism (Braithwaite, 2004).

The fourth characteristic of postfeminism is the idea of a female identity crisis, which states that women today do not have an adequate relationship with womanhood because feminism has put it on the back burner. Since supposed little attention has been paid to these aspects – women instead turning their attention to careers – women today are conflicted about what actually makes them a woman. Walters (1995) reinforces this

with claims that popular culture is using motherhood to define womanhood; feminism has stripped women of the one thing that truly makes them women: the natural act of becoming a mother. Through analysis of popular movies, she illustrates popular culture's use of the biological clock argument to depict the misery of modern women.

Postfeminism tells us that divergence from the traditional acts of marriage and motherhood has led to disorientation and women's focus on career has led to burnout and disappointment (Walters, 1995). Postfeminism claims that women have real cause to worry that waiting for marriage or motherhood will result in spinsterhood. Although Faludi (1991) asserts that notions of a man shortage and ceasing biological clock are proven myths, it seems that the seed has already been planted. Whelehan (2000) adds that there is cultural pressure on women as reproducers and that the popular culture backlash is emotionally blackmailing women "to return to their role as moral guardian of society and the family" (p. 174).

The fifth characteristic of postfeminism is women facing overload when considering future choices. This newfound responsibility to develop a life plan causes self-doubt and anxiety for many women (Dickerson, 2004). McRobbie (2004) addresses the pressure on women to make the right choices and succeed in this new postfeminist structure, claiming that "new lines and demarcations are drawn between those subjects who are judged responsive to the regime of personal responsibility, and those who fail miserably" (p. 261). McRobbie (2004) explains that traditionally women have not grown up within a structure that is capable of dealing with the mounting number of choices that have been supplied through the freedoms of feminism, and are therefore completely overwhelmed, ever fearful of failure, and unsure about their abilities to achieve.

This study will attempt to illustrate the notion that chick lit is currently an adequate mirror of the lives that modern women live. Much to the critics' dismay, it may even suggest that the genre should be examined more closely and its underlying messages be taken more seriously. Analyzing ten chick lit texts will determine whether or not these works are indeed indicative of these postfeminist times and have the potential for real impact on its readers and the direction of women's fiction.

III. Methodology

This study will be using the method of content analysis to examine the sample of chick lit texts for postfeminist characteristics. As described in Babbie's *Practice of Social Research* (2004), content analysis is ideal for the study of "recorded human communication" and suggests its use for making inferences by *objectively and systematically* identifying characteristics of communication (p. 319). Latent content analysis gets at the underlying meaning of the text, rather than just looking at the "visible, surface content" that manifest content analysis allows, thus affording the research more validity (Babbie, 2004, p. 319).

The sample consists of ten books that blatantly fall into the category of chick lit. This sampling was determined by several factors. First, a list of titles mentioned in any literature found about chick lit was generated. Also, titles discussed in online threads pertaining to chick lit on the listserv Fiction-L were included. Finally, a search of various online bibliographies created by public libraries and by websites dedicated to the genre in the United States were used. In the interest of narrowing the topic, only novels written in the likes of the origin of the genre were chosen. This means that the main character is white, in her twenties or thirties, and lives in or near a metropolitan area. These criteria exclude 'Ethnick' lit, which is a genre unto itself and covers multiple subgenres within, including 'Sistah' lit and 'Chica' lit. Also excluded were titles that fell into subcategories of chick lit, such as 'hen lit' (books about older women), 'baby lit' (women with babies), and 'lad lit' (male protagonists). Some titles could be considered chick lit, but were

excluded because they actually belong in another genre, usually romance, such as works by Jennifer Crusie. Due to the disposability of the genre, earlier works described in much of the critical literature are no longer readily available, even in many public libraries, such as Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City* (1999) and Amanda Brown's *Legally Blonde* (2001). Although they fit the criteria, titles such as these were excluded from the final list. Also, no author was used more than once so as to not skew the results with one author's sentiments.

To determine defining characteristics for chick lit novels, several books were read that were clearly defined to represent the genre through the sampling technique described above. These titles appeared on most, if not all list sources encountered. These titles include *Sex and the City* (Bushnell, 1999), *Girls' Poker Night* (Davis, 2002), *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1998), *Confessions of a Shopaholic* (Kinsella, 2001), and *Good in Bed* (Weiner, 2001). These defining characteristics were then used to rate the rest of the titles chosen (see Appendix 1 for analysis of chosen titles for chick lit characteristics):

Based upon the criteria garnered from the aforementioned five titles and literature describing characteristics of chick lit, the list of included titles is as follows:

- *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Helen Fielding (1998)
- *Confessions of a Shopaholic*, Sophie Kinsella (2002)
- *The Devil Wears Prada*, Lauren Weisberger (2003)
- *Dumping Billy*, Olivia Goldsmith (2004)
- *Getting Over It*, Anna Maxted (2000)
- *The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, Melissa Bank (1999)
- *Girls' Poker Night*, Jill A. Davis (2002)
- *Good in Bed*, Jennifer Weiner (2001)
- *Jemima J*, Jane Green (1999)
- *Sushi for Beginners*, Marian Keyes (2003)

Each book was coded for incidences of postfeminism as characterized by the table located in Appendix 2. These criteria were derived from a review of the literature dealing with postfeminist theory, with specific authors noted. Incidences will not be counted; this research was looking for clear signs that these characteristics exist as a distinguishing part of the text.

Limitations

There are several unavoidable limitations to the study being proposed. Specific to my particular research study, it is difficult to define postfeminism through characteristics with which all or even most feminist theorists will agree. There are a number of theories at work when dealing with postfeminism and not all agree that my concluded definition is the right one. Generally, latent content analysis is limited in reliability. It is difficult to recreate the study, even if the definitions created for coding are as specific as possible. Babbie (2004) suggests that “even if you do all of the coding yourself, there is no guarantee that your definitions and standards will remain constant throughout the enterprise” (319). For this reason, it is difficult to obtain the same chick lit sample using the same criteria that defines this study’s sample characteristics. Also, there may be some discrepancy over the novels I choose for my sample. Since the inception of chick lit in the mid 1990s, chick lit has undergone some changes, specifically in becoming more mainstream and formulaic. The novels I ultimately chose may or may not be adequately reflective of this change and therefore less pertinent to the understanding of present-day chick lit.

IV. Analysis

The Women

There is an annotated list of the analyzed books in Appendix 3, but here is a synopsis of the female protagonists that this analysis will be discussing. Bridget Jones, of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, is in her early thirties and struggling between happiness as a Singleton and a possible nervous breakdown over not being married, having a good career, being able to cook or be organized, and not being a perfect size six. *Confessions of a Shopaholic's* Rebecca Bloomwood, journalist for a financial magazine, is in her mid twenties and attempting to unearth herself from credit card debt and overdrawn her bank account with a get-rich-quick scheme or a better job. Trying to land her dream job at the *New Yorker* as soon as possible, recent college graduate Andrea Sachs takes an administrative assistant position for one of the cruelest bosses in the fashion magazine industry in *The Devil Wears Prada*. Kate Jameson, in her early thirties, has tried very hard to separate her Brooklyn past from her Manhattan present in *Dumping Billy*, and when the two worlds collide she realizes that her career-driven life is not enough for her anymore. Helen Bradshaw, in her mid-twenties, is also trying to work through her father's death while taking care of her depressed mother and has been thrown into the role of caretaker before she is really ready, forcing her to grow up in *Getting Over It*. A collection of vignettes, *The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing* gives us Jane's search to understand love, from her teenage years through her late twenties. Ruby Capote from

Girls' Poker Night tries to work through the lasting effects of her parents' divorce and her father's death in an attempt to open up to the idea of love and take charge of her life. Cannie Shapiro is the overweight and feisty Philadelphia journalist in *Good in Bed* who is determined to be happy, regardless of her body size, her slandering ex-boyfriend, and her rocky childhood. Desperate for a promotion and a love-life, overweight journalist Jemima Jones begins Internet dating and joins a gym (getting both the promotion and a man), only to discover that she liked her larger self in *Jemima J.* *Sushi for Beginners* has one main protagonist, Ashling Kennedy, and two women in her life that we get to know almost as well: Ashling, a timid thirty-one-year-old who wants desperately to start her career at a real women's fashion magazine and, when she lands one, begins to feel her oats with her overbearing boss and her very handsome editor; Lisa Edwards, twenty-nine and Ashling's overbearing boss, makes the switch from obsessively career-driven to softening through the help of her move to Ireland, her new office staff and some neighborhood kids; Clodagh Kelly, Ashling's homemaker best friend, is married with two kids and hates it. She ends up feeling so trapped that she has an affair with Ashling's boyfriend, ruining her marriage, but starting anew.

What follows is an analysis of these characters, outlined by the five postfeminist characteristics.

General Negative Reaction to Feminism

One of the most important characteristics of postfeminism is women's blatant rejection or refusal of feminism in their lives. The characters do not pretend feminism

did not happen, but experience it as part of the past that is now passé and unattractive. All of the novels remark on this feeling either as situational or as a direct address.

There are several instances in *Bridget Jones's Diary* where Fielding directly addresses this shift away from feminism. One occurs when Bridget's friend, Shazzer, goes on a tirade about men and the emotional games they play, claiming that men try to wriggle out of "commitment, maturity, honor, and the natural progression of things between a man and a woman" (p. 18). Since they are in public, Bridget and friend Jude embarrassingly shush her; Bridget tells the reader, "After all, there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism" (p. 18). Here, the focus is not on being annoyed at game-playing men, but at Shazzer for calling them on it in public and possibly ruining their chances at playing, too.

There is also specific mention of Faludi's *Backlash* (1991). Bridget and Mark Darcy are trying (unsuccessfully) to make conversation at the Annual Turkey Curry Buffet when she tells him that she is reading Faludi's bestseller. He replies, "Didn't you find there was rather a lot of special pleading?" (p. 13). Since Bridget has not actually read it, but was trying to be impressive and scholarly, she throws out a noncommittal answer and quickly changes the subject. Darcy's negative reaction to the book and the fact that Bridget has not even read it, although it is supposedly an important text, speaks directly to the popular notion of feminism being thought of as insignificant. Those who have read it are dismissive of the accusations on popular culture and those who have not read it do not really care enough.

As Bridget's mother develops through the story, we see her experience a sort of feminist awakening. After forty years of marriage, she experiences what Betty Friedan

calls “the problem that has no name”: she is deeply dissatisfied with her role as housewife (cited in Smith, 2005, p. 691). She leaves Bridget’s father and begins dating someone new in an attempt to create her own path, but it backfires and she comes back to her husband with renewed fervor for their relationship. She attempted a feminist route, but ended up rejecting it for the traditional, domestic role by which she had once felt so trapped. This is a direct reaction to the feminist idea that domestic life is not fulfilling enough. Fielding also shows her lover as an overly-tanned host for a TV shopping network. He does not fit it with Mum’s other friends and ends up scamming them out of thousands of dollars in a shady business deal, with Mum as an unknowing accomplice. Here, traveling the feminist road caused alienation, damaging of friendships, and illegal activity.

After finding her boyfriend’s strange collection of the square plastic clips used to hold bread bags closed, Ruby questions why he couldn’t have just hoarded porn magazines. Feeling like she would be better prepared to handle such a collection, she says, “I could yap endlessly about how the magazines give me a negative body image and so on. But no, that would be too normal.” Here, she suggests that the feminist idea of negative body image in the media is old, used, and played like a broken record. Although there might be something comfortable in that for her character in regard to her boyfriend’s obsessive collection, it is still regarded as a staple argument of things past.

Cannie and her gay mother’s partner, Tanya, are set in juxtaposition to each other, whereby Tanya represents feminism and times gone by and Cannie, postfeminism and the present. Tanya is a butch lesbian that likes to get in touch with her feelings, attends sisterhood support groups, and drives a little green car with the bumper sticker, “A

woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle” (p. 194). She also has two cats named Gertrude and Alice, after Gertrude Stein and her life partner, Alice B. Toklas. She does not want men in her life, period. In contrast, Cannie, is more open-minded about men, and not just in the realm of dating. She owns a dog named Nifkin, which is slang for the area between a man’s genitals and his rectum (he was named by three bachelors). Weiner makes it clear that Tanya’s character embraces the strident feminist that Bridget and Jude are so afraid to be associated with. Weiner also shows that there are new ideas about sexuality, both in depicting Tanya’s refusal of men as narrow-minded and Cannie’s acceptance of both gay and straight lives, as well being okay with her dog’s namesake.

Andrea’s boss, editor-in-chief Miranda Priestly, is described as a piranha.

Growing up, she was the exception to her blue-collar family, who married young and began having large families. She made her way on her own, made a name for herself and then a career. She is the stereotypical middle-aged workaholic female who clawed her way through an all-male business during the 1980s to come out on top, and she has maintained a state of ruthlessness to stay there. She is a mother to bratty, spoiled twin daughters whom she adores, but is far from present in their lives, due entirely to her grueling work life (that she loves). Her relationships with her daughters and husband suffer and she has no social life outside of work-related events. She never smiles.

Miranda’s life is a cautionary tale, warning us that the feminist ‘having it all’ idea just does not work. This is compounded by the fact that Andrea hears about a daycare center in the basement of the office building, “but I didn’t know anyone who actually had children, so I still wasn’t entirely positive” (p. 153). Miranda seems to be the exception here, and her attempts at career/home balance leave much to be desired.

Andrea knows that journalism is a hard field to navigate when trying to climb the career ladder and it is rumored that one year in Miranda's employment is equal to several years elsewhere. The price Andrea pays for this opportunity is subsisting on a substandard diet, consistently working 12-15 hour days, and the loss of her personal life, complete with friends, boyfriend, and family. Andrea attempts the ambitious career route, but finds it is to the detriment of the rest of her life. When she gets out of the rat race and begins writing fiction pieces for magazines, her first one is autobiographical, "[y]oung girl gets super caught up in achieving something and ends up screwing over all the people who matter in her life" (p. 427). The warning illustrated here is that women cannot 'have it all' and must be prepared to choose.

Kate is one of two characters in this study that begins the book with a feminist mindset and changes her mind by the end. Raised in Brooklyn, she decided to leave behind the "Bitches of Bushwick," her stereotypically Brooklyn friends from high school. While the other Bitches "set their sights on nondemanding jobs, good marriages, and babies" Kate declared that not only was she going to "sleep-away" college, but also intended on getting her doctorate in psychology. The Bitches response to her plans? "She thinks who the fuck she is" (p. 30). Independence and ambition, characteristic of feminist women, are interpreted as uppity. Kate had always viewed marriage as trapping; "When Kate saw an older woman cry at a wedding...she often thought they cried because unconsciously they remembered their own hopes and the subsequent disappointment that marriage had brought them" (p. 81). She never wanted to feel that way. The story unfolds through traditional feminine events such as weddings, baby showers, brunches, and trips to get makeovers, all involving her gay male friend and the Bitches. The more

Kate is around them, the more she realizes that she has been hiding in her Manhattan career to avoid admitting that she really does not want all things feminist; settling down with kids and a husband are surprisingly on her agenda. Kate's character is a clear indication that traditional feminism is not the way to go, it is too lonely.

In *Sushi for Beginners*, feminism is rejected through the life of the secondary character, Lisa, the second in this study to change her feminist ways. She is an unhappy, status-hungry, workaholic editor for a fashion magazine. Her commitment to her career and subsequent veto of motherhood resulted in the breakdown of her marriage. She is not afraid to sleep around and considers one night stands "human Milky Ways—the man you can eat between meals without ruining your appetite" (p.126). She actually uses the empty phrase "I'll call you" after one of her encounters. When the unsuspecting man asks her why she said it if she was not really going to call, she replies, "How do I know? ... You're a man, your lot invented the rule. Bye!" (p. 236). Her feminist ways are shown to really be a woman playing at a man's game, a game that Lisa eventually realizes leaves her unhappy and yearning for family and a personal life. Again, ambitious feminism is the culprit.

Clodagh, the other secondary character in *Sushi*, is our token prefeminist; she is married with two kids and very unhappy. When she tries to break out of her rut and find some independence through a job, she realizes that she is not qualified for anything. This is upsetting because "Clodagh was vaguely defensive that she wasn't one of those superwomen who did a full-time job as well as rearing children" (p. 111). She finds that she just cannot make that happen, no matter what she is told by feminist principles. Much like Bridget's mum, she cheats on her husband in a frenzied and misguided attempt

at seeking independence. He leaves her, kicking off her struggle as a single mom that now *must* find work, living in a far away suburb. She wanted independence, but got it at a price. Clodagh's situation illustrates that having it all does not come easy and, in some cases, is impossible.

For Helen, feminism seems passé. She displays the understanding that it once had its place, but its outdated notions do not fit into her life. Her very gorgeous landlord, Marcus, is telling her how ugly his glamorous pop star girlfriend is and Helen tells us "I do a token feminist tut to disguise a large smirk" (p. 41). She does not disapprove of his slandering his girlfriend, but actually revels in the age-old catfight that has women pinned against each other, the beauty competition. The "token" disapproval is just a formality so Marcus will not think that she subscribes to petty female rivalry when the truth is that many women feel the competition as Helen does.

Overall, Jane does not seem concerned with feminism, for better or worse. She treats it as something that is passé, but mainly by not mentioning it. The book centers around Jane's romantic relationships and how she evolves through them. The only instance of a direct reference to feminism comes during her maid-of-honor speech at her best friend's wedding: "We were always asking each other, "Is this all we can expect [of love]? Then...there was our sea-horse period, when we were told that we didn't need mates; we were supposed to make ourselves happy just bobbing around in careers" (p. 233). This is a period of their lives past; this notion will not be revisited. Using the descriptor "bobbing around" denotes the lack of serious weight she has placed on the idea of happiness and security through career only. The message here is that women need more and they cannot find it through feminist ideals.

We see rejection of the feminist doctrine of sexual liberation in *Jemima J* through secondary characters. Here, women that are sexually aggressive are seen in a negative light. Ben, Jemima's heartthrob coworker, almost allows himself to be picked up by aggressive Sam at a bar. He changes his mind when he realizes that she is a sure thing, "[h]er aggression, which became more and more apparent as the evening wore on, suddenly started to turn Ben off" (p. 60). At first Ben is flattered that Sam is pursuing him, but her sexual surety bores him; "Where is the challenge? Where is the thrill of the chase?" (p.62) Female sexual liberation is shown to not only be generally unattractive, but repellent. Since the reader is supposed to see Ben as a good guy, we are told to empathize with Ben over being turned off by Sam's forward behavior.

In an interesting twist of feminist gender roles, Ben is described as being too involved with his career to think about women. He even goes so far as to describe a likely candidate as one who is "uncomplicated" and "willing to fit in with Ben's life, and just see him occasionally, i.e., on the occasions when he's not working, working out, or seeing his friends" (p. 62). The reader understands his stance to be self-absorbed and unattractive, just as we would a feminist woman that put her career first. Later in the book, Ben's new career-driven boss, Diana, gets him drunk and sleeps with him. Not only is her feminist persona sketched as a status-hungry middle-aged woman with something to prove, but her sexual aggression is portrayed as manipulative and desperate.

Sisterhood is Out

For all of the protagonists in these novels, deciding what is right for them as individuals always overrides any notion of a collective sisterhood. Sometimes this individuality borders on and even steps firmly into self-absorption.

Many times throughout the novel, Bridget rants with her friends about taking a stand against “emotional fuckwittage” on the behalf of datable men. They continuously resolve to never be duped again by men that want to play games and to embrace their single status as independent and happy women. For example, in retaliation to smug married couples making Bridget feel inadequate for being single, Shazzer exclaims,

And because there’s more than one bloody way to live: one in four households are single, most of the royal family are single, the nation’s young men have been proved by surveys to be *completely unmarriageable*, and as a result there’s a whole generation of single girls like me with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don’t need to wash anyone else’s socks. (p. 37).

In a feminist, rally-type manner, Bridget replies, “Singletons!...Hurray for Singletons!” (p. 37). This diary entry is immediately followed up with Bridget’s thoughts the next morning, “Still no word from Daniel. Cannot face thought of entire Sunday stretching ahead with everyone else in the world except me in bed with someone giggling and having sex.” (p. 37). Fielding is illustrating the fact that although Bridget engages in these rants with her friends and tries to establish feelings of comradeship with other singletons, this really does not mesh with her personal feelings of needing to be in a relationship.

Ruby wants nothing to do with a collective sisterhood. She writes a humorous lifestyle column and she likes it “mainly because it’s all about me” (p. 3). She is not using her column as a soapbox for women’s issues, but is just earning a living through

talking about her own life. This gives her personal voice a space that may not have been afforded to her under feminism. Also, when Ruby is debating whether or not to stay with her boyfriend of three years, the deciding factor was the importance of her time, “And it started feeling like my life was flying by and that I was being careless with the one thing I always claimed to value – my time” (p.11). She was not questioning his feelings, or even how to improve the relationship, but that her time was being wasted and she would not stand for it.

Ruby’s friend, Jennifer, convinces her to go to a women’s empowerment gathering and Ruby finds it difficult to relate to the women and the situation. The text sets up a silly scene whereby full-grown women sit in a circle, call each other Sister Goddess, and talk about giving their vaginas personas, complete with wardrobes and vocal skills. This is a direct stab at feminist ideals of tuning into the power of womanhood, of becoming intimately acquainted with your body, and sisterhood. Ruby refutes these ideas by calling the gathering “manufactured intimacy” (p. 90), a staged evening geared towards imitating human connections with no permanent gain. Here, feminist ideals are depicted as just as easily manufactured and hokey as those promoted by popular culture.

Rebecca is so self-involved, it actually borders on ridiculous. She is obsessed with fashion, money, self-image and being rich (more purchasing power). According to feminism, she possesses the characteristics that make women targets of commercialism and diminished respect as intelligent beings. Postfeminists would applaud her for being real. Contemporary women *are* targets of commercialism and succumb to it like anyone else. They are concerned with body image and keep up with fashion trends. Although

Rebecca may be an extreme illustration, she is clearly unconcerned about how her choices fit into a larger feminist framework; she is only worried about herself. Whether or not one finds this lifestyle unredeemable or socially irresponsible is irrelevant to postfeminism; simply the focus on oneself is indicative of a shift away from the constraints of feminism.

Helen is similar in that she is terribly self-absorbed. Her father's death leaves her mother in a state of serious depression during which Helen must look after her. Her response to this is, "It's just that I am, in my head, still eighteen, and used to looking after myself and only myself. I am not used to parenting and protecting other, helpless people" (p. 118), illustrating her self-absorption and that she is unprepared to change. She looks after herself. This only mildly changes by the end of the book. At one point she directly addresses feminism vs. individuality when reacting to her flatmate and friend, Lucas, calling her "mate," "I don't wish to set feminism back, but I'd rather be called "darlin'" (p. 220). Her decision to address the fact that choosing "darling" over "mate" may actually be a blow to feminism *yet* she does not care clearly illustrates her choice of self over the collective.

In *The Devil Wears Prada*, the only way to get ahead is to watch your own back, and only your back. There is no 'we' present in this novel, ever. This is illustrated every time the office scrambles to accomplish one of Miranda's outrageous tasks. The staff seems to be working together to get it done, but the propelling force is saving oneself from being fired. There is much cattiness and competition between the female staff members with regards to aptitude for the job and, moreso, fashion style. There are also no loyalties here; someone out of the loop yesterday could get her comeuppance today

and lose it by mid-afternoon. This is illustrated by Andrea's observation, "As if it wasn't enough for the *Runway* girls to mock, terrorize, and ostracize any and every person who wasn't one of them, they had to create internal class lines as well" (p. 154). There is no sisterhood felt amongst these women.

Sushi for Beginners's Lisa and Clodagh are completely self-absorbed. Much like Andrea, Lisa's focus is on her career. She will lie and backstab at the slightest chance of getting ahead. She is not interested in making friends after moving to Ireland, although she is lonely, because she does not trust her co-workers. Although she is lonely and a bit sad about it, she sees depression as an easily curable weakness, "if you had enough nice shoes and ate in enough amazing restaurants and had been promoted over someone who deserved it more than you, there was no need to feel bad" (p. 124). Clodagh is equally as self-absorbed, but about her lost years of independence before kids and a husband.

For Kate, stepping outside both feminism and femininity and turning inward provides the answers for which she was seeking. Prescribing to her Brooklyn upbringing of marriage and motherhood did not suit her, but her decision to follow a career track left her unfulfilled. For her to warm to the realization that she needed to find her own way took introspection, a focus on the self. Her story shows feminism and femininity as both dealing in the collective; her Brooklyn friends are like carbon copies of each other, both in physical appearance and in traditional ideas of womanhood. It is only when Kate steps outside the boundaries of these female camps that she finds the answers that work for her: the only way to go is individualism. Women cannot prescribe to any preconceived notion of womanhood, feminist or otherwise.

Cannie seems to always be an individual and always concerned with what is best for her, but not self-absorbed. Although she wants to be thin, her obsession with it seems to stem from her breakup with her ex-boyfriend and rejection from her father rather than any real issue she takes up with her body. She does become a sort of spokesperson for the overweight participants at a meeting for a clinical trial for a new weight loss pill, but ultimately does not relate to them enough. Her character is set apart from all others in the book with regards to deciding on single motherhood, proactively improving her career, and her physical size. Although she gets traditional feminist/feminine advice for each issue, it is she alone that figures out what is best for her and abides by that.

Jemima tries to prove herself at a tiny rag of a newspaper while fantasizing about all of the things her weight hinders her from attaining: a boyfriend, friends, great clothes, dates, fun, and a promotion. When she does lose the weight, she finds that everything she's always wanted comes to her, but she realizes that it is only because of her new look. When her boss sits her down to discuss her promotion, she understands that it is "...the chance I've been waiting for for years, but then it's also sexist, and really I'm speechless, and half of me wants to tell him to stuff his offer, while the other half wants to pounce on it" (p. 183). She ends up pouncing on it. She is more concerned with her own life than standing up to sexism. She worries that if she does not take this promotion, she will be missing her career boat.

Although other protagonists in chick lit either have a group of friends with which they share commonalities or their characters are generic enough to fit in on their own, Cannie and Jemima stand out singularly because of their weight. They are honestly overweight, not in that superficial 'I'm so fat' whiney way that many of these characters

embody, and have a hard time relating to people that are thin. They are much more alone when dealing with their body image than other characters. Also, although they do have friends, they are not the typical sleepover, cry-your-heart-out-over-a-bowl-of-ice-cream group of friends that we so often see in these types of books. They do not offer the same sort of group support; they either relate one-on-one or leave Cannie and Jemima to fend for themselves much of the time.

Cannie and Jemima both come to terms with their weight differently. Cannie is tired of her weight being an issue, something that began with her demeaning father, and ultimately unleashes herself from her self-imposed constraints and learns to love herself as well as putting her weight in perspective; she has a beautiful, healthy daughter, a supportive family, and a man that loves her. Jemima, equally as frustrated by her weight, takes another road and slims down to a size 4. By the end of the book, she realizes that she does not feel like herself in this small body and vows to gain back enough weight to be healthy. For her, the experience of being thin and deciding for herself how she felt about it was necessary for her to understand how she fit into the world of women. For both women, they needed to evaluate their situations singularly and do what was right for them. For Cannie, it was the high road of loving her larger self and for Jemima, it was experiencing and rejecting thinness.

For most of the book, Jane's life is described through vignettes of her relationships. It is not until her final relationship that we see her struggle with collective ideals of the feminine. Unsuccessful in romance, she begins to feel like she is always getting it wrong. When Robert comes along, she is afraid that she will screw it up, so instead of being herself she entrusts her actions to a self-help book that is akin to *The*

Rules, which assures her that men are going to love her if she plays hard to get. It has the opposite effect on Robert and he dumps her, telling her that she was not who he thought he originally met. It is not until then that she realizes that being herself is the best answer, not prescribing to others' ideals. Trying to explain to Robert, she says, "[y]ou get all these voices about what a woman is supposed to be like—you know, feminine....And I've spent my whole life trying not to hear them. But...I wanted to be with you so much that I listened" (p. 273).

Rescuing Feminism's Hostages

Although these novels show a general desire for the traditional femininities that were felt unallowable under feminism, the protagonists struggle when trying to incorporate them into their lives. This characteristic is broken down into four attributes: attempts at domesticity, a return to consumerism, a reconsideration of motherhood, and more of a focus on romance. All of these books display two or more of these characteristics to varying degrees. The following analyses are divided into discussions of these four attributes, but I have combined domesticity and consumerism as there was a pattern of overlap in the two attributes.

Attempts at Domesticity and a Return to Consumerism

Attempts at domesticity, specifically through purchasing home goods and romanticizing culinary expertise, address this supposed feminine revival, in what seems to be an attempt to redefine home in light of the multitude of afforded possibilities. Five women try and fail to varying degrees. Two women do not even attempt at any form of

domesticity; this was addressed with the same note of failure and disappointment as the botched attempts. Two women struggle with reconciling a broken home in the past with creating their own now. Three women do not seem to have any significant relationship to domesticity. It seems that consumerism is tied into the return to domesticity through the purchase of ‘must-have’ home goods, especially items for the kitchen. Indulgence in consumerism, mainly illustrated through shopping or owning designer clothing, was illustrated about half of the time and to varying degrees.

Bridget is envious of her married friend, Magda: “Sometimes I stay at their house, admiring the crisp sheets and many storage jars full of different kinds of pasta, imagining that they are my parents” (p. 35). She thinks that Magda is so much better off because her married life affords her domestic abundances like different shaped pasta in individual jars. In equating Magda and her husband to parents, she is affording them a level of maturity that she has not yet attained and fears she never will. She feels much too overwhelmed and disorganized to consider a move to that level of maturity. Just as Bridget daydreams about Magda’s life, Ruby (*Girls’ Poker Night*) similarly reflects upon her friend Megan’s ‘perfect’ suburban household and her wife and mother status. She takes it one step further, suggesting, “[s]ometimes I wonder if she’s faking all of this. She must be. Nobody has a life like this” (p. 55). Megan’s life is beyond the realm of Ruby’s understanding.

Bridget daydreams of being a domestic wonder, of marrying a doctor for whom she will “cook [...] little goat cheese soufflés” (p. 43). She is not concerned with the actual act of cooking the soufflés, but the sentiments that the act invokes: those things associated with married life – “order, security, and everlasting love” (cited in Smith,

2005, p.683). These are all things that she lacks in her single life and thinks domesticity will bring her. We see this at the birthday dinner she decides to prepare for her and friends. She chooses a complicated menu, excited at the idea of becoming “known as brilliant cook and hostess” (p. 72). Again, the idea of being recognized for her culinary wizardry is more important to Bridget than actually being a culinary wizard. She makes a mess of dinner; Fielding sets up a nice juxtaposition of Bridget stepping in a pan of mashed potatoes in her new designer black suede shoes and ruining them. Here, Fielding shows how difficult it is for women to have both a career and domestic life: Bridget can’t have the great shoes (read: life of a single, independent woman of the 1990s) and know what to do with potatoes (read: the domestic dream).

Most of Bridget’s purchases are for the sake of self-improvement. She buys self-help manuals, cookbooks, fancy kitchen appliances, and clothing on impulse, much of which will never be used. She begins the book with a New Year’s Resolutions list; immediately following not smoking and drinking, she resolves to not “[w]aste money on: pasta makers, ice-cream machines, or other culinary devices which I will never use” (p. 2). This is just one of many resolutions she breaks. After one particularly disappointing shopping spree, Bridget comes home with four items, all “unsuitable and unflattering.” Knowing that none of them will be worn and she has wasted good money, she says, “It is all a punishment, I realize, for being obsessed by shopping in a shallow, materialistic way instead of wearing the same rayon frock all summer and painting a line down the back of my legs” (p. 105-106).

Rebecca, our shopaholic, finds that her shopping skills come in handy when she tries her hand at making a gourmet meal. She decides that she will get out of the trendy

singles habit of eating out and opt for home-cooked meals, prepared flawlessly by herself. She attempts to cook a decently difficult recipe and comes across several stumbling blocks. First, the recipe calls for expensive ingredients and culinary gadgets that she, *being single and inexperienced*, does not own. She has to buy a spice grinder, a special type of wok, a blender, a kitchen scale, and a wooden spoon. Although she is trying to save money, she easily gives in to these purchases. Her excuse? “I’ve merely been succumbing to the Western drag of materialism—which you have to have the strength of elephants to resist” (p. 64). After countless mistakes, she finishes cooking the meal and proudly begins to eat when she discovers that it is much too spicy to consume and has to throw it all away.

This botched attempt at domesticity makes her feel like a complete failure: although cooking began as a money-saving venture, it turned into a test of her domestic strengths and she fell short. She did not have the right equipment, ingredients, and expertise to succeed on the domestic front. She bounces back from this episode and regains her strength through her career and other aspects of single life, which demonstrates the battle between the home and career for contemporary women, not the happy coexistence of the two as claimed by feminism.

Shopping for Rebecca is a way of life. She is the only woman in these books that is so absolutely obsessed and drunk with the desire to select and purchase. This becomes a dirty secret when she discovers she is in trouble for spending more than she makes, beginning the string of lies that ties this plot together. While on a date with wealthy Tarquin, he brings up the subject of shopping and how she must love it. Trying to impress, she tells him that she *hates* shopping. “Really?” says Tarquin in surprise. “I

thought all girls loved shopping.” Rebecca replies, “I’d far rather be...out on the moors, riding along. With a couple of dogs running behind” (p. 219). She does not want to be known as a stereotypically frivolous, superficial female shopaholic, but she and the reader understand that this is exactly what she is. It stays a dirty secret until the end of the book, when her shopping and financial troubles actually land her a well-paying television job. In the end, consumerism has won.

Ashling is in love with two domestic items: her recently purchased flat and her designer Dyson vacuum. She bought the flat three years ago, in the hopes that her then boyfriend, Phelim, would want to buy it with her; he did not. Sad at first, she quickly turned the flat into her sanctuary, “her nest, her first real home” (p. 37). The problem was that she did not have any apartment accoutrements and no money to buy them. Shocked at how unprepared she was for this, Phelim tells her, “I thought you’d be great at this sort of thing. Whatjacallit? *Homemaking*” (p. 37). She was not, but she learned enough to get by. Still, her domestic skills are lacking: tidying her flat consists of bringing all dirt dishes to the kitchen, opening windows, picking up empty cartons of take-out, and spraying pledge around the room, “the smell instantly ma[king] me feel virtuous” (p. 36). Again, the feelings of domesticity and home are what she craves, not necessarily a tidy, organized household. In trying to justify the purchase of the Dyson vacuum cleaner, the narrator tells us, “The only conclusion she could draw was that she was finally a grown-up. Which was funny because in her head she was still sixteen and trying to decide what to do when she left school” (p. 36).

Clodagh is the queen of domesticity for this group of women, but far from these single women’s ideas of such. She is the only one that begins the book as a mother and is

the token prefeminist of the bunch; her life is portrayed as one of boredom and resentment, at her children for taking her independence and at her husband for having a job outside the house. On paper she has a great life—a good husband, two kids, and no money problems, but she feels that “lately everything felt like unrelenting drudgery[...]. The thought of this mind-set crystallizing into anything like permanence was terrifying” (p. 85). She is constantly dreaming of having Ashling’s carefree, late-night, morning-hangover life instead. Clodagh’s life is in opposition to the posh, Martha Stewart images that single women have of domesticity; there is no time to embroider linen napkins, create dried flower centerpieces, or cook a five-course dinner for ten. Clodagh’s day includes trying to stop her children from yelling at each other and crying, washing seven loads of laundry, and wiping jam off the walls, all with Spaghetti-Os down the front of her t-shirt. Not only is domesticity lacking in glamour, but it is unfulfilling, thankless work that never ends. This is reinforced by Clodagh’s positive outlook with ending up divorced and a single working mom.

Helen’s negative attitude towards domesticity only changes after her father’s death, when she is forced to keep house for her depressed mother. She feels resentful that she must come over to do these things when she does not even do them for herself, but feels a responsibility to look after her mother. Generally subsisting on flat champagne from the night before and take-out or packaged foods, cooking and cleaning are new ideas to her. She finds them quite difficult. Helen states,

I made vegetable risotto from the recipe on the back of the risotto rice pack (on the fifth attempt I stopped writing off saucepans and burning the rice), Tina’s coriander chicken recipe (chop and fry onion and garlic in olive oil, chop and add chicken, the coriander, white wine, and half-fat crème fraîche - in deference to her my father), and—because I can—potato wedges. (p. 102-103).

Her mother responds to her kindness by smashing the plate against the wall, upset by having to eat potato wedges four nights in a row. This begins the cooking lessons twice a week, Helen unhappily “spoiling the broth and being shouted at” by her mother (p. 103). Although she may not really enjoy the cooking, these little domestic tasks are her and her mother’s way of trying to recapture feelings associated with the home before her father died. Unfortunately, they do not find it. Helen makes tremendous progress towards reconciling this later in the novel when she buys a dilapidated flat that needs much work. She and her mother become a domestic tag team, hiring builders and plumbers and scouring the town for thrift store home goods. They make a home here, but not in the traditional way or the perfected Martha Stewart way. Helen takes what already constitutes her life and molds it into her new space and calls it home. She seems to have reconciled other possible definitions of home, specifically one without a father or man around the house. Traditional domesticity is once again shown to not fit young women’s lives, that alternatives are more appropriate for their current social structure.

There are two women who do not even attempt to be domestic, which is shown to be inappropriate and unsuitable. *Sushi*’s Lisa does not even spend much time at her rented cottage, let alone do housework or entertain. She pays one of the neighborhood women to clean her small house, where moldy coffee cups and such are discovered under the bed. Lisa neither cares nor apologizes for this, but it is portrayed as a negative characteristic of a career-hungry woman who does not have time for anything else, least of all her home. Helen is actually evicted by her (live-in) landlord for being messy to the point of dirty. Unapologetically, she tells the reader, “Now I don’t mean to boast, but I

am not overly pristine. I keep as many cheesy green, fluffy mold-filled coffee cups under my bed as the next woman” (p. 85). Why moldy coffee cups are a trend is not identified.

Similarly, Andrea is too busy trying to pay her journalistic dues to an overly demanding boss to be domestic. She cannot even distinguish between her two roommates because of how little time she spends at her apartment. When she does eat, it is take-out and eaten on her bed, bedspread protected by large garbage bags. She has no relationship with any room in the house, even though she went to the trouble of (unsuccessfully) attempting to decorate her bedroom. When she bought furniture for her new room, she mistakenly ordered too much, having not measured. Also, when trying to tack up framed art on her unfinished (brick) wall, she cannot figure out how to do it. The frames end up leaning on her window sill instead. It is clear that interior decorating is not her forte, nor does she care. The five hours a day that she spends at her apartment are usually spent sleeping. Although these women have chosen a life outside of domesticity, and postfeminism should be about choice, the books make these choices seem inadequate and, by the end of the books, these women feel embarrassed about the states of their homes (and their lives) and rectify it somehow: Lisa moves back to London and in with her husband and Andrea quits her job and moves out of her apartment to a more homier atmosphere.

Cannie does not feel a desire to create a sense of home through traditionally feminine means, but does end up stumbling into it, partially through her unexpected pregnancy. She has always struggled with the idea of home, being raised in a divorced (read: broken) household and subsequently ostracized by her father. Her childhood bedroom, always a sanctuary for her, has been taken over by Tanya’s loom and self-help

manuals. She is not sure what would make up 'home' for her now as an adult. It is only after deciding to have the baby, taking a trip to the west coast, and getting a real handle on her life that she is able to create her own feeling of home, through her child, her friends, and what is left of her family.

Kate begins to wonder what her desired idea of home actually encompasses. Having grown up surrounded by Bina's family because of her absentee, alcoholic father, she never really had her own home or family life. She used to think that it did not interest her and that her little nest in Manhattan was all she needed, but as she becomes immersed in her Brooklyn friends' domestic lives, she is not so sure anymore. At Bev's baby shower, she looked around at her friends and thought, "Each one was committed to a life that would almost inevitably include children, PTA meetings, family holidays, trips to Disney World, and all the trimmings that came [...] with the comfy order of family life" (p. 218). She begins to ache for it, the feelings of security and warmth that come with these domestic dreams. She is not exactly prepared for it, though, and does not know how to make it happen.

For Jane, Jemima and Ruby domesticity does not seem to play a major part in their lives, but it is also not so consciously ignored. Their apartments are mentioned, but in no great detail as to the state of them, they cook at home, eat take-out and go out to restaurants. They have a particular fondness or obsession over certain brand appliances or home goods. Although Ruby comes from a broken home, this issue manifests itself more in her romantic life than it does in her ideas of home or anxieties in creating one herself.

Aside from Rebecca, our obsessive shopper, and the purchasing of home goods, consumerism is shown in about half of the books through designer name dropping. This can be seen to a large extent at Andrea's job at *Runway* magazine and in Lisa's character, who also works at a fashion magazine as an editor. Every so often they tell us about their Prada bag or Manolo Blahnik shoes, but it is not a central focus of most of these women's lives and they do not usually go into great detail. Instead of these women saying "I put on my boots" they might say "I put on my Jimmy Choos," understanding that this is a detail in which the reader might be interested. We see these types of mellow examples with Bridget and Kate. Otherwise, the rest of the protagonists do not have a serious relationship with consumerism.

A Return to Men

"I will not...[s]ulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend" (Fielding, 1998, p. 2). Although these women have been told they can and should be strong enough without a man, they all want one. More importantly, they are not afraid to say so, most of the time. In some of these books, we see a fight between the desire for the traditional dream of a knight on a white horse and the insistence that they should be able to strongly face life alone (and be happy about it). Sometimes, it seems that these women want the guidelines of dating to be laid out very clearly, just as they were in the past, so they would not seem so neurotic and obsessed. Other times, they display more nonchalant, feminist attitudes when desiring casualness in relationships. The message is clearly mixed and these women confused. They want to

date, but are more often blindly stumbling through relationships than displaying confidence. All of the women in these books are concerned with romance. Eight of the twelve women agonize over wanting a man. Three want one in their lives, but it is not the major focus. Only one begins the book by caring about having a man, but changes her mind midway and does not look back.

Eight of the women are obviously bumbling their way through serial dating, some looking for Mr. Right and others looking for Mr. Right Now. *Girl's Guide* is centered completely around several of Jane's romances and discusses how they help shape her. She goes through these relationships unknowing of her needs and feeling unprepared. When she was younger, she took unreliable advice from her brother, "He tells me that the best man I will ever find will be attracted to other women. I hear this as another fact I am too old to not know. More proof of how unprepared I am to love anyone" (p. 60). She has a long-standing relationship with a man twenty-eight years her elder whom she loves very much, but does not want to marry. She never tells us why. She stumbles through the confusion of several more relationships before she meets a man that could be serious. After nearly losing him to her anxiety over being desirable, the book ends with their passionate reconciliation. Jane and Robert are wonderfully in the moment and nothing more, "We are just two mayflies mating on a summer night" (p. 274). For Jane, this relationship may not be the "one," but romance is forever in her life, whether or not she knows what she is doing.

The plotline that propels Jemima through her story is also a search for love, about which she knows little. It begins as a search for a man and ultimately turns into trying to love herself, but not until the very end. For the first half of the book, she obsesses over

Ben, her co-worker, doing things like making herself agreeable, “[...] I nod my head vigorously, because I would agree with Ben no matter what I thought” (p. 25) and almost passing out when he’s near, “I can feel my breath coming out in short, sharp bursts, but Ben doesn’t notice a thing. He doesn’t even notice how I involuntarily catch my breath when he puts his hand on top of mine on the mouse” (p. 39). Once Jemima is convince that Ben is not interested, she puts all of her efforts into becoming the perfect woman for California gym owner, Brad. This means quitting smoking, slimming down to a size 4 and generally pretending to be whatever he says he wants. This proves exhausting and futile as Brad does not want her, either. After much despair and some binge eating, Jemima finally learns to love herself and take responsibility for her happiness. Realizing her capabilities in attaining her desires, she seeks out Ben, who loves the new confident Jemima.

For the ladies of *Dumping Billy*, relationships are the drive behind much of the action; there is excitement and anxiety over men from almost all of the female characters. To counter her unstable upbringing, Kate decides to date dependable, sensible, intelligent men that hold down jobs. She comes upon a dilemma when her current stable boyfriend, Michael, shows that he struggles with compassion and is narrowly focused on his career, and she becomes attracted to the risky and fun Billy Nolan. Much of her storyline is derived from her battle between logical romantic decisions and what she really wants. The secondary characters also have men at the forefront of their minds. The Bitches are obsessed with finding a husband for themselves and each other. Oddly, “[t]he gang had a very split but pragmatic view of marriage: that it was necessary to have but easy to

ignore” (p. 159), treating husbands as mere accessories instead of worrying about finding “the one.”

Ruby is terrified of and hypersensitive to romantic relationships, which causes her to obsess. We see this when she is consumed by anxiety over seeing her (kind of) ex-boyfriend, “And I guess this is...a date? But I haven’t been on a date in ages, so I don’t really even know if I can identify one. Maybe it’s just dinner and not a date at all” (p. 34). Her indecisiveness and mistrust in her judgment go on for another paragraph. When obsessing about her budding romance with her new boss, Ruby frets, “Maybe it would be easier just to have casual sex and balance the caring part by volunteering at an animal shelter or something” (p. 107), because full-package dating seems like too much work.

Although she knows that opening up to Michael and to love in general will make her happy, she is too afraid to do it. She traps herself in a cycle of fear and anger over being afraid to create her own happiness. We see her projecting these fears when Michael tells her that his wife is divorcing him and he sees her unhappiness as an indictment of himself, she retorts with, “Right, because everyone knows your wife’s happiness is your responsibility. I mean, she’s just some girl, right? She can’t possibly know herself well enough to choose a life that makes her happy...” (p. 118). She seems insulted on the part of all women, insinuating that Michael’s ex-wife is more than capable of knowing and going after what makes her happy, but the reader knows that Ruby is angry at herself for relying on others to make her happy. Ruby makes her romantic choices based on least emotional risk; her decisions have nothing to do with happiness.

Ashling bumbles through two relationships upon returning to the dating scene after a five-year relationship went sour. She finds dating today more difficult because expectations are different and more ambiguous and is having trouble finding a comfortable place between not seeming too frigid or too easy. Sex is still seen as a pawn in the game, but now the rules are blurred, more for women to navigate and decode. This leads to anxiety for Ashling. At one point she deduces that the next date with Marcus will be the one in which she gives it up, “Dinner. On a Saturday night—what a meaningful combination. It meant, Ashling realized, that he wasn’t pissed off with her for not sleeping with him. It also meant, of course, that she’d really better sleep with him this time” (p. 242-243). Although she does sleep with him, she completely misreads him as he is cheating on her with Clodagh. She was not that attached to Marcus and is more upset with Clodagh for hurting and betraying her, and herself for allowing herself to be victimized. Her relationship with Marcus was more instrumental in getting her back into the dating scene than anything else.

This dichotomy between wanting to be courted and sexual liberation is felt by Helen, who really does not know which she wants more. She tries casualness, but feels too much. When she tries for something more serious, her lack of experience and understanding about relationships guarantees failure. When reminiscing about meeting her latest ex-boyfriend, Jasper, she tells us that Jasper offers her a cigarette and she refuses, claiming that she is a “good girl.” Jasper replies, “Well, you look filthy.” Helen claims this “was the best compliment I’ve ever had. What could I do but shag him out of gratitude?” (p. 7). She does and they begin dating, but Jasper eventually leaves her for someone else. She is mad, but seemed to expect this emotional constipation from him.

Opposing Jasper is Tom; he is wonderful, understanding, patient, and funny and Helen is head over heels for him. They go on a date and when Tom calls two days later to make another one, Helen tells us, “[b]ut I am also disappointed. Why didn’t he have the decency to wait a few more days and make me sweat?” (p. 184). The rules and rigors of traditional romance seem nostalgically wonderful. From here, we see Helen bumble through a series of mishaps with Tom, their encounters full of misread intentions and seriously lacking communication. It is not until they both trust themselves enough to be in a serious relationship that it takes off.

Although Rebecca is no better at dating than any of these women, her relationships are decently superficial and she seems to lack anxiety over them. They all seem to be a means to an end, but the end never moves beyond the fantasy, honeymoon stage into anything resembling a long-term relationship. This does not relieve her from making a fool of herself. Her flatmate sets her up with her cousin, Tarquin. Only after Rebecca learns that he is a millionaire does she decide to go on the date, spending all day primping to give a good impression. When he writes a check for £5000 to a charity she invented, made out to her, she almost takes it, thinking that her financial troubles will be over. Her conscience gets the better of her and she sadly refuses. She does not date him again, knowing his money was the only attraction. The main male is a financial PR company CEO, Luke Brandon. He is attracted to her because she is not like the other masked women he dates, but she seems to be attracted to him because he is rich, sophisticated, and gorgeous. After a few silly encounters in which she makes a fool of herself, she decides to put him out of her mind. When she unearths and then goes public with bad business practices endorsed by his company, they go head to head on a morning

talk show and she must pay him (and her feelings) attention. The talk show banter finally ignites the sparks of romance between them, culminating in a dinner date and a night at a fancy hotel, where she tells us endlessly about the food and wine and how he makes her laugh. We never see her get past the beginning stages of the relationship or really sound head-over-heels about Luke, and it does not matter to Rebecca. She just wants to have the token hot boyfriend, she is not looking for Mr. Right.

This is clear when Rebecca is talking to her flatmate about the last guy she broke up with, because he would not sleep with her, “No. He—“ I closed my eyes, barely able to believe this myself. “He doesn’t believe in sex before marriage” (p. 36). Her flatmate was equally appalled at the man’s reaction. Her description of the scenario is the sex struggle and miscommunication that stereotypically occur between men and women, but here we see a role reversal,

Well, what was I *supposed* to think? There he was, there I was—and make no mistake, if his mind was saying no, his body was certainly saying yes, yes, yes. So, being a modern girl, I reached for his trouser zip and began to pull it down. When he reached down and brushed me aside I thought he was playing games, and carried on, even more enthusiastically. Thinking back, perhaps it took me longer than it should have to guess that he wasn’t playing ball, so to speak. In fact, he actually had to punch me in the face to get me off him—although he was very apologetic about it afterward. (p. 36).

Rebecca has discovered that aggression does not work. Her flatmate, claiming that waiting until marriage is “hideous,” wants to know, “[w]hat about sexual compatibility?” (p. 37). Sexual compatibility is the reason cited by others in these books for refusing to abide by *The Rules* any longer; they are not willing to wait until the man is completely in love to have sex. Relationships are theirs to have any way they want them, and they do want them.

Unlike the other protagonists, Clodagh goes from having a serious relationship to desiring the less stable world of dating. She feels that her husband is stifling, but only because he is part of her world by which she feels suffocated. For her, a return to men would be a return to single life, having wanton sex with whomever she wants. When her husband finds out about her affair and leaves, she is initially upset and wants to return to the stability of a home and family. In the midst of her tears and guilt, she realizes that she did not really love him, telling Ashling, “I should never have married Dylan. [...] I just thought he was the kind of man you married—he was so good-looking and charming and had a good job and was responsible...” (p. 420). Moments after leaving Ashling and feeling helpless in her broken situation, she passes a group of boys that whistle and shout compliments at her. She responds with a flirtatious smile and “all at once her heart lifted. Hey, life goes on” (p. 422). Being noticed by and attractive to men are important, even uplifting, albeit superficial.

Lisa changes her tune from superficial to serious romance during the course of the book. Throughout most of the book, Lisa, considers men, as the saying goes, like Kleenex: soft, strong, and disposable. The catch is that she always wants to have someone, serious or not, which runs the course of her story. She is so lonely in Ireland, not knowing anyone and has much more alone time to really miss having men around. She engages in one-night stands, flirts to get what she wants, and tries fervently and unsuccessfully to get her editor interested in her. Her relationships barely scratch the surface of anything intimate. She seems to like it this way; Lisa is too concerned with her career to allow a time-consuming relationship to get in the way. Once she begins to soften, slow down at work, and develop a life outside of her career does she see that she

really misses her ex-husband and the real connection they had. She begins to allow herself to hope in the relationship, develop trust and expectations in herself with regard to really loving someone else. By the end, she and her ex-husband agree to try again.

The confusion we see in some of these books about how to deal with men is compounded by the characters' relationships with dating advice manuals. There is a running theme to address the dating tips provided in modern self-books and popular materials such as *Cosmopolitan* for returning to traditional courting ideals; there is even specific mention of *The Rules*, a self-help book about getting back to the traditional and more manipulative ways to ensure 'getting a man' in *Jemima J* and *The Girl's Guide*. Although the protagonists or supporting characters attempt the suggestions made in these manuals, they always end up seeing the folly in it and returning to their regular selves, to the betterment of themselves and their relationships. The general consensus of these books is that they are a detriment to dating, illustrated by Elliot's accusation after Kate agrees to have coffee with her emotionally dangerous ex-boyfriend, "[y]ou're a disgrace to your sex. It's because of you that women need to read *The Rules* and those other stupid self-help books" (p. 216).

The best example is Jane; after years of romantic heartbreak while remaining true to herself, she attempts the manipulative antics suggested in a self-help book akin to *The Rules*. It provides such tips as, "[d]on't accept a date less than four days in advance" (p. 243) and "Don't be funny" (p. 241). There is even a paragraph from *The Rules* at the beginning of the chapter, which ends with, "You might feel offended by these suggestions and argue this will suppress your intelligence or vivacious personality. You may feel that you won't be able to be yourself, but men will love it!" (p. [225]). Not only

does this dating advice not help Jane, but it drives away her target, almost to the point losing him forever. Specific mention of a real dating self-help book makes this all the more pertinent to real life. Many women have bought these types of books and are willing to try the suggestions.

Lauren, Jemima's California friend, admits to trying the 'hard to get' approach described in the rules. Although she initially thought it was working, playing hard to get ends up backfiring. Its suggestion to wait to have sex until the man is madly and completely in love leaves Lauren in a lurch when the long-awaited night reveals that they are totally incompatible in bed. Lauren decides, "I'm fed up with playing hard to get and then discovering they can't satisfy you when it's too late. This time round I'm going to make sure he's good at sex right from the beginning" (p. 308). Only once these women have tried more traditional courting rituals do they see that it does not mesh well with a modern woman's life and needs.

Throughout most of the book, Andrea is too busy with her job to have any time for romance. She has a long-term boyfriend, who leaves her after almost a year of broken dates and disappointments. She makes a half-hearted attempt to win him back after she quits *Runway* magazine, but he is uninterested, "But who knows? Maybe once we've both had a lot of time to figure things out..." he tells her (p. 423). Although she is upset, she chalks it up to a learning experience and begins to move on, owning the blame for the breakup. They do not get back together by the end of the book.

There is a superficial spark of romance, however, between Andrea and a man she meets through her job. All day long, she is surrounded by suave, toned, styled successful types. She wants to make a good impression and is positive that her lack of

sophistication will be a deterrent. When Christian, the epitome of these hunky men, shows an interest in her and asks how she is doing, she replies,

“Fine. Great, actually,” I lied quickly, remembering a *Cosmo* article I’d read that had exhorted me to “keep it light and airy and happy” when talking to a new guy because most “normal” guys don’t respond well to hard-bitten cynicism.... *Don’t talk about yourself too much, don’t dominate the conversation, get him comfortable enough to chat about his favorite and most familiar topic: him*” (p. 176).

This tactic fails not because Andrea sees the error of her ways or feels wrong about it, but because Christian does not fall for it. Andrea does not argue with him when he calls her out on her performance and they just continue the conversation without anymore stumbles. This *Cosmo* line of thinking is unmasked by one of the smartest, sexiest men in the book, clearly stating that this game playing does not work for either party involved.

Cosmo has also been a fair-weather friend to Bridget, giving her seemingly important dating advice and making her aware of just how much she does not add up to the ideal datable woman. She is fretting about Daniel and says, “[w]ise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am, but I am a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture, have been 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. I can’t take the pressure” (p. 52). The demands of unattainable beauty and of being the perfect girlfriend or lover is more than she can handle. When contemplating how her mother seems to be moving easily from her father to new lovers, Bridget muses, “Maybe their generation is just better at getting on with relationships? Maybe they don’t mooch about being all paranoid and diffident. Maybe it helps if you’ve never read a self-help book in your life” (p. 53). She is well aware that these types of popular media have an adverse effect on the modern woman,

but the effort to resist is almost futile. Bridget ends up winning over Daniel when she stops trying; ironically, she stops trying because she is no longer interested and has moved onto Mark Darcy, the handsome intelligent barrister that likes her just as she is.

Cannie, although influenced by dating and sexual advice in magazines, her relationship to it is different than other characters'. When discussing her sexual ability, she contends, "I might've been a big girl, but I'd been reading *Cosmopolitan* since I was thirteen, and I knew my way around the various pieces of equipment" (p. 22). Because weight was a hindrance in the dating scene, she learned how to please a man to improve her datability. The end result is still the same: it did not work. She and Bruce are broken up at the start of the story and, in an attempt to rekindle their relationship, she provides him with one night of sympathy sex when his father passed away, making sure to do all of the things she knows that he likes. Although this works for the evening, he still maintains his ex-boyfriend status, uninterested in trying again with Cannie. Cannie realizes that she has lost on the final playing field: the bedroom. *Cosmo* has officially let her down.

Motherhood

Overall, these women do not express the desire to have children, thus not supporting postfeminism's notion of returning to motherhood. Only two protagonists seriously express a desire to have children and one of them actually has a child. Only one protagonist expresses nostalgic yearnings for a child or of being pregnant, but quickly dismisses them after pondering the realities of motherhood settle in. One character is a mother and hates it. Two characters have experience with caregiving, their only

connection to the idea of motherhood, and both have negative experiences. One has no interest in being a mother, but is softened to the ideas of femininity (not necessarily motherhood) partially by her experiences with children. Five of the twelve characters have almost nothing to say about motherhood one way or the other.

Cannie is the only protagonist that gets pregnant during the course of the book and must make decisions about single parenthood. She does not have nostalgic ideas about motherhood at all. In direct opposition to the message from the rest of the books, she takes a feminist stance, understanding that this is her decision to make and if she decides “not to stay pregnant, there’d be no reason for him to know” (p. 168). She understands the hardship she may experience being a single mother, seeing the situation with clear eyes, “Single motherhood might be getting more acceptable among the movie-star set, but from what I’d seen from my divorced colleagues, it was nothing but a hardship for real-life women, and it certainly wasn’t a cause for celebration, or pride” (p. 205). Once she decides to keep the baby, the next step is figuring out how she was going to provide for the two of them. Although she would like some answers as to how this will work, she relies strongly on herself, “[b]ut if God wasn’t going to speak up, I’d figure it out myself” (p. 203). And she does. All the drama that Cannie has been through, her demeaning father, being overweight in a cruel world, her parents divorcing, boyfriends leaving, and struggling in her journalism career, is wiped away the moment her little girl, Joy, is born premature and in intensive care. Even after Joy comes home, rosy-cheeked and smiling, her birth has put everything else in perspective. Cannie seems renewed through motherhood, finding a connection, a purpose, and a better understanding

of herself. She is the only protagonist to find happiness through this traditional rite of passage into womanhood.

Kate, our feminist turned more traditional, at first felt that when her Brooklyn friends began having children, she would be closed out of the circle. She was not in a rush to have children of her own, but would still feel that gap between her and her friends. By the middle of the book she starts to feel the tug when she sees her pregnant friend, “Bev’s belly looked as if it had doubled in size since the wedding. Kate tried to avoid staring at her in horror, although she couldn’t escape a twinge of jealousy as she felt her own flat stomach” (p. 128). She continues to struggle with reconciling her desire for motherhood with her strict feminist principles. At Bev’s baby shower, Kate becomes so upset about lacking a family of her own, “Kate felt so very far from that reality that tears of envy and despair filmed her eyes. She had to turn her head away so no one would notice her sudden rush of emotion” (p. 219). When Elliot and the Bitches stage an intervention to talk her out of her growing love for Billy, she gets irrationally mad at Bev for pointing out the obvious, “I know how it is, Katie,” she said. “You want a home of your own. You want a wedding and a husband and a baby” (p. 288). This was Kate’s deep, dark secret. She takes steps towards admitting and accepting it when she accepts Billy’s proposal at the end of the book. Her wedding and any discussion of children are not actualized in the text.

Bridget visualizes motherhood and rejects it in one sitting. At one point she thinks she is pregnant and begins to fantasize about her designer motherhood, “[a]m starting to get carried away with idea of self as Calvin Klein-style mother figure, poss[ibly] wearing crop-top or throwing baby in the air, laughing fulfilledly in advert for

designer gas cooker, feel-good movie or similar” (p. 100). Bridget is describing the feeling that motherhood invokes, but not the realities. Her fantasy takes a turn when she realizes she would have to relinquish her childless extravagances like drinking, going out with her friends and wearing tight jeans. She decided that her indecision is “the price I must pay for becoming a modern woman instead of following the course nature intended my marrying Abnor Rimmington off the Northampton bus when I was eighteen” (p. 103). Her confusion about motherhood is blamed on feminism, but even if early marriage and motherhood really was the way nature intended, she makes that decision seem so ridiculous; neither world fits.

Understandably, Clodagh has no nostalgic notions of motherhood; she lives it every day. Her two children are misbehaved and she spends much of her time cleaning messes off the floor and walls, straightening up after they tornado through the house, and appeasing their cries with candy and toys. The only clue that motherhood was different than she expected is a comment about her domestic position in general, “But something had changed. Not so long ago she was fueled by anticipation and optimism. What was different, what had gone wrong?” It sounds like Betty Friedan’s “problem that has no name,” and unfulfilled with her life as a homemaker, Clodagh has lost any romantic notions of home life and now only wishes to find her lost independence. Clodagh serves to show the reader the real side of motherhood. Also, when she ends up divorced and a single mother, she realizes just how hard it is. She tells Ashling that it is, “a steep learning curve” (p. 420) and refers to single motherhood as “grim” (p. 421).

Helen does not ever discuss the idea of her becoming a mother, but she does engage in an interesting role reversal with her mother where Helen assumes the position

of the parental figure during her mother's depression. She finds it exhausting and detrimental to other parts of her life, specifically her career and her social life. When friend Lizzy gets a promotion, Helen is envious and depressed. Trying to comfort her, Lizzy, tells her, "It's been difficult for you, Helen [...]. "You've had too much on your mind to...to focus on your career. You're practically a full-time caretaker!" (p. 111). Motherhood and career are at odds, not allowing a balance but vying for women's time and energy. Here motherhood loses, depicted as a sacrifice these women do not want to make.

Ashling has an interesting understanding of what it means to be a mother. She has always been in the position of caretaker and feels trapped by it. Her mother suffered from debilitating depression from the time Ashling was of schoolage and was not available to her children in the typical ways of mothers. Being the oldest, Ashling took care of her mother and two siblings while her father traveled for his job all week. Forced into responsibility unprepared, she felt alone and scared. Unable to shrug that sense of responsibility as caregiver, it manifests itself in her tremendous purse, packed with items such as band-aids, pen and notebook, a sewing kit and the equivalent of a mini pharmacy, all 'just in case.' Interestingly, when she agrees to babysit Clodagh's two children, her friend Ted wants to come along because he has a crush on Clodagh. When Ashling refuses, he counters, "Look, will you ask her if I can come? You'll never be able to watch two kids by yourself" (p. 156). She only agrees when she realizes that he is right. This is not addressed any further, so one can only guess that she is too traumatized by her past to want to revisit it through Clodagh's kids or she really does not feel capable, maybe she never has. When she finally gets involved with her wonderfully kind boss, he

convinces her to unleash herself from the past. While at the docks, she ceremoniously swings the bulging purse over her head and, “then, in terror and exultation, simply let it go” (p. 426). With her purse went her anxious need to be ready to play caretaker. She does not look back.

Lisa, one of our career-driven characters, begins the novel by having no use for not only children, but families in general, “Lisa wanted nothing to do with families. She wanted to be surrounded by other singles and to bump into attractive men at her local Tesco Metro buying kettle chips and Chardonnay” (p. 95). She loved her career girl life so much that she lost her husband for it; he wanted kids and she didn’t. Upon transferring to Ireland, she ends up in a small cottage in a neighborhood full of kids that insist on talking to her, asking for help refereeing their soccer games, and generally intruding on her life. At first they are aggravating, but then she finds herself joining in their games and even having a good time. Feeling herself begin to soften, she is confronted with doubts about her lifestyle. She realizes that her edge in business that she was so afraid to lose is the source of her unhappiness. She does not ever actually want to be a mother, but she opens more to the idea of family in general. Her ex-husband sees this change in her and they embark on the beginnings of rekindling their relationship. Playing with those kids forced Lisa to see that there are missing pieces in her life that needed to be filled, maybe not with motherhood, but certainly not with her career-driven ambition.

Five of the twelve protagonists have almost nothing to say about motherhood, relating to them or to women in general. Rebecca and Jemima do not ever mention the idea. Jane, Ruby and Andrea and make little mention of motherhood, usually one

sentence a piece. When Michael asks Ruby what her plan for the future is she replies, “Work and love,...like everyone else” (p. 120). Children are not mentioned. In fact, the only child in the book is Meg’s thirteen-month-old son, whose cuteness is mentioned once in passing. Similarly insignificant, one of Jane’s pregnant acquaintances begins to talk to her about originally mistaking her pregnancy for becoming fat and incontinent. Jane replies, “Since I have nothing to add about pregnancy, I tell her I read that Tiny Tim wore Depends in his final years. He wasn’t incontinent, just thought it was a good idea” (p. 231). This omission of motherhood speaks just as loudly as the others’ negative reactions.

Female Identity Crisis

Walters (1995) discusses the notion of a female identity *in crisis*. This is defined by popular culture’s stoking the fears of a man shortage, focusing on women’s biological clocks, and detailing career-driven burnout and depression in women as a result of feminist pressures. Five characters fully address these concerns, usually about not finding a man or waiting too long to have a baby. These comments usually they come from an outside influence and then are internalized to some degree by the protagonists. Two discover the detriment of career burnout and missing out on the ‘mommy track.’ Five characters do not express concern for this supposed crisis.

Several of these books address these issues of female identity crisis directly, even labeling their feelings as an established ‘syndrome’ or using the term ‘biological clock.’ Ashling, upon deciding to get back in the dating game after a serious breakup, she begins to get nervous about her dating status: “Once awake, she was suddenly seized with an

urgency about her age, the ticking of her biological clock, and all the usual thirty-something, single-woman angst. The fuck!-I'm-thirty-one-and-not-married! syndrome" (p. 243). Ashling is still recuperating from a five-year relationship gone belly up and feels the empty longing of being alone. She purchased a flat three years prior on her own, although she had been waiting for her ex-boyfriend to jump in on the mortgage at last minute. "But to her heavyhearted disappointment he didn't and the purchase went ahead. At the time it had seemed like an admission of failure" (p. 37). Instead of feeling independent and responsible for making her own decision, she felt like she was no good with men. These feelings are compounded by Ashling's conversation Joy about her sorry dating life. Joy tells her, "You'll just have to try harder. You're thirty-one, all the good men will be gone soon" (p. 39). Although not her mother, Joy has taken on that role for Ashling, instilling in her the fear that she may miss her love boat.

One of the reasons Kate left Brooklyn was to get away from the traditional idea of womanhood, from people

asking her about her "love life" and whether "wedding bells" were in her future, too. People from the old neighborhood [...] took no notice of how she had managed to add a "Dr." before her name. All everyone here would talk about was when there would be a "Mrs." in front. (p. 85).

Kate is inundated throughout the book with comments about her settling down and having kids, both from her friends and acquaintances from Brooklyn. When trying to win her boyfriend back, Bina tells her, "Neither of us has found the fountain of youth. Don't you worry about your biological clock?" (p. 160). In an interesting twist to the usual response, Kate's friend, Elliot, cuts into the conversation. "Like every modern girl...Kate has had her eggs frozen for future reference" (p. 160). The rest of the Bitches are amazed and appalled by the idea. After she realizes that she may want to marry and

have children, she begins to internalize these fears of being too old or waiting too long. When she realizes that her dependable Michael is not the one, she decides to break it off. “Even if she was ruining her last chance of settling down, Kate couldn’t settle for him” (p. 229). The idea that Michael really might be her last chance at the family package is a real fear. She is miserable after the breakup, but more for herself and the chance she let slip by because she would not settle.

Bridget is constantly angry at her married friends for making her feel inadequate and dried-up for being single, while at the same time she internalizes the fear that she really is inadequate and dried up. While at a party with the Smug Marrieds, the conversation turns to men getting more attractive with age, while it is the opposite is true for women. Bridget sits, “quivering furiously at their inferences of female sell-by dates and life as a game of musical chairs where girls without a chair/man when the music stops/they pass thirty are “out” (p. 186). She also feels the insult from the media; she becomes incensed with an article ironically entitled “The Joy of Single Life.” It states that singletons are “young, ambitious, and rich but their lives hide an aching loneliness... When they leave work a gaping emotional hole opens up before them...Lonely style-obsessed individuals seek consolation in packeted food of the kind their mother might have made” (p. 213). In an attempt to defend their lifestyle, she and her friends angrily write an imaginary rebuttal citing unhappiness in marriage. Unfortunately, the reason Bridget is so angry is because it hits too close to home. In her next diary entry, she confesses her loneliness and mollifies herself by making a microwavable steamed ginger pudding.

She is also afraid of remaining alone if she sticks to her sexual morals, but does not want to be used. Daniel, her boss, takes her out to dinner and then tries to get her into bed, saying that it “is just a bit of fun, OK? I don’t think we should start getting involved” (p. 29). She tells him that she is not interested in emotional fuckwittage and leaves, smug in her self-respecting decision. She immediately backpedals, saying, “I may have been right, but my reward, I know, will be to end up all alone, half-eaten by an Alsatian” (p. 29).

Cannie displays concern about not finding a man. Throughout most of the book, she is concerned that her current body type will not allow her a happy relationship. Since she is in her late twenties, she is concerned about running out of time and ending up alone. During her interview for the weight loss drug trials, Cannie tells the doctor, “I’m miserable [...] ‘I’m lonely. Nobody’s going to date me looking like this. I’m going to die alone, and my dog’s going to eat my face, and no one will find us until the smell seeps out under the door” (p. 44). This is compounded by her pregnancy. Her friend, Samantha, does not want her to have the baby, claiming that it will ruin her social life, “A single mother...I mean, it’s hard enough to meet decent men as it is...” (p. 208). Cannie decides to have the baby despite being single and the possibility of a halted social life. Never does she claim to be having the baby for fear that this may be her only chance. Her reasoning is that she is mature and financially stable, so why not? When Samantha asks about the baby needing a male figure, Cannie admits that she’s thought about it, but is convinced that she will manage.

Helen shows no signs of a female identity crisis, but she does get some flack from her grandmother about motherhood. She calls Helen to discuss a television program

about freezing your eggs. When Helen does not understand, her grandmother begins yelling, “Freezing your eggs! Putting your eggs on ice! You’re not courting! You’ve not settled down! You’re not getting any younger! Your eggs are dying inside you!” (p. 200). Helen has no interest in pursuing this conversation, not because it has struck a nerve, but because she does not care: “[...] But I’ll let this pass as I have a more pressing matter to discuss. My impending homelessness” (p. 201). Helen’s priorities are about her getting by, not about fears of her reproductive abilities. This subject is not brought up again.

Lisa and Andrea both suffer from career burnout that results in their yearning for what they left behind, namely family, friends, and lovers. Lisa undergoes her own personal female identity crisis when she begins to realize that she has given up her middle-class, family-focused upbringing for empty career ambition. Surrounded by her neighbor’s family at a noisy and confusing dinner table, she begins to recognize and mourn what she’d given up for her career: “She’d never really considered what she was sacrificing as she’d rocket-launched herself away from her roots. [...] But sitting in [her neighbor’s] kitchen, she could see no evidence of the glamorous life she’d constructed for herself. Instead she was walloped by what she’d forfeited—friends, family, worst of all, Oliver, and for nothing” (p. 381). This realization leads to a career change, a renewed interest in her family, and an eventual reconciliation with Oliver.

Andrea nearly ruins her personal life for the sake of her job. As her year stint at *Runway* magazine gets underway, she justifies her lost personal time with the fact that this temporary job is the dues she must pay at the start of her career. Before she even realizes what has happened, she lost her boyfriend, has not yet met her new nephew, now

two months old, and cannot remember the last time she spoke to her parents or saw her roommates. It is only when her best friend is hospitalized and in a coma and she is considering not going to see her that Andrea realizes what has happened to her. She recognizes that her career, no matter how important, is not as important as what she left behind. She makes the journey back to her friends and family.

There are several characters that do not display anxiety over becoming too old to find men or have babies. Jemima just wants to be happy with her body and find love; she does not feel any pressure to do this by any certain time in her life. The only character in the book that displays this kind of notion is a middle-aged, career-focused secondary character. Diana, in her early forties, “has never thought of herself as a woman, more of a working machine, but for some strange reason she’s started fantasizing of late about relationships, marriage, babies” (p. 300). This comment is an aside and is not followed up for the duration of the book. Clodagh, our token prefeminist, is more afraid of being stuck in a marriage as a stay-at-home mom. Although Jane is concerned about love, she is not ever afraid of expiring from the dating or mother scene. Rebecca is too concerned with sorting out her finances and finding a satisfying career to care about marriage or motherhood at the moment. Although she does end the book at the beginning of a relationship, it is not yet serious and she is not worried about its future. Finally, Ruby is not worried about missing out on motherhood and marriage, she is afraid of them. For example, she does not understand how her married friend, Meg, can be excited about having twins. The thought terrifies her.

Overwhelmed by Choices

McRobbie (2004) claims that women are not equipped with the structure necessary to deal with the responsibility of choosing a life path from comparatively limitless choices, which causes anxiety over life choices. Four women adequately fit this description; they do not know what they want and show clear signs of being in over their heads. Two women thought they knew what they wanted, but, due to a shift in their circumstances, are rethinking and confused. Two women seem to bounce between being focused and breaking down. Two women are excited about having so many choices. The last woman does not fit the description of being confident or overwhelmed, but rather ambivalent.

Ruby is the most scared protagonist of the ten books. She has trouble opening up, even to her friends, is very careful to never take risks for fear of losing, and has no expectations for fear of disappointment. This has gotten her nowhere. She has a decent job, a decent apartment, a decent group of friends and a decent life, but she does not know anything about herself or how to get what she wants. When talking to her therapist about opening up and taking risks, she says, “It feels like I’m setting myself up.” Her therapist responds, “You are,” she says. “You set yourself up for happiness or you set yourself up for sadness. Either way, it’s your doing” (p. 165). The need to take responsibility for the future is palpable. Ruby is also terrified to make decisions; she would rather leave things alone and have the situation be settled for her. Her anxieties are plainly shown when she and her friends are gathered for poker one night and they begin talking about what they want and need. Ruby tells the reader, “And I’d like to join in this conversation, but I don’t know what I want or need” (p. 121). She feels

completely overwhelmed with the choices afforded her and does not have the capabilities yet to handle choosing. Interestingly, the final chapter of the book is called “Happy Ending.” She finally tells Michael that she wants to be with him and owns up to the responsibility of making her own happiness. She may not know exactly what is going to happen, but she knows she is going in the right direction, “We’re not heading towards my apartment, and we’re not heading toward the place with the tables outside. I don’t have a clue where we’re going. But I keep walking anyway” (p. 247).

Bridget’s life consists mainly of bouncing back and forth between being confident in supporting herself as a modern “woman of substance” (p. 38) and falling to pieces over “career[ing] rudderless and boyfriendless through dysfunctional relationships and professional stagnation” (p. 68). She contemplates her future from any number of angles, including a professional television personality, the wife of a doctor, the mother of Daniel’s designer baby, and a single and wonderful hostess/chef, yet none of these aspirations are ever realized or even seriously considered. They all seem too far out of reach and teeming with serious responsibility. Her lack of confidence over her future possibilities causes self-deprecating feelings about her seemingly bleak present situation, “I’m no good at anything. Not men. Not social skills. Not work. Nothing” (p. 195). When she tries to talk to her mom about how difficult it is to be a woman, her mom replies, “Oh, honestly, darling. You girls are just so picky and romantic these days: you’ve simply got too much choice” (p. 169).

Rebecca is overwhelmed in trying to get her life on track. She knows nothing about her job, about how to get out of financial debt or finding a better job, or about how to take responsibility for her actions. She feels like a mess. She does not take her job as

a financial magazine journalist seriously and considers what she does as copying press releases. She does not know anything about financial advising, “Of course, I still know nothing about finance. People at the bus stop know more about finance than me. Schoolchildren know more than me. I’ve been doing this job for three years now, and I’m still expecting someone to catch me out” (p. 11). She does not get found out until her parents’ neighbors ask her for financial advice about moving their savings fund. Although she has heard of the company, she cannot remember anything about them, but has a feeling there has been some talk lately, “I wrinkle my nose, trying to remember...but it’s gone. I’ve probably got it wrong, anyway” (p. 54). Not only is she not that involved with her chosen profession, but she does not have much faith in her abilities. Later, we see that they decide to transfer their money, which results in their losing a large sum of money.

After her financial journalist friend, Elly, decides to get more serious with her career and works towards a promotion, Rebecca begins to worry about her future, “I don’t have a game plan, I don’t have prospects. Maybe I’m hopeless, too. Maybe I should rethink my career. Oh God, this is depressing” (p. 128). Her anxiety here is clear. The book does not wrap this up; she ends up writing an article for a rag equivalent to the *National Enquirer* and lands a spot on a morning talk show as a “financial guru meets girls next door” to offer viewers financial advice (p. 313). Both kind of fall into her lap and end up saving her from financial starvation and debt.

Helen has no idea what she wants out of life. After her father dies, she feels as if her life structure has been torn down. She does not know who to turn to with questions previously reserved for her father. When Helen misunderstands the procedure for closing

on her new flat, she appears for the signing without her deposit and cannot easily access her bank account. She must call her mother. She feels like a failure, “I am a clueless fraud aping a dependable adult and the worst has happened. I’ve been exposed for what I am” (p. 304). She later bemoans the fact that her father would have advised her. Helen’s situation illustrates the postfeminist notion that feminism has broken down the traditional patriarchal structure to the point that women are having trouble functioning and accomplishing tasks for which they have not prepared. Helen is learning from the ground up.

Three protagonists thought they knew what they wanted, but changed their minds and are now left with more choices than before. In making her breakthrough to realizing that she wants more out of life than just a career, Kate is faced with the fear of not being able to have everything she wants. She feels there must be sacrifices, but what is she willing to give up?

What was it that she really wanted? Of course, that was easy to answer: a perfect life with a rewarding job, a loving, dependable, and passionate husband, healthy children, and good friends. Good fucking luck, she told herself. [...] If you got one part, you wouldn’t get the other. Yet Kate had promised herself for all these years that she wouldn’t compromise. (p. 225).

The book does not really answer her dilemma. She ends up deciding to marry Billy and the assumption is that she keeps her job and they eventually have kids of their own, but the wedding and children are not realized within the book’s pages, thus we never know if she follows the feminist track of ‘having it all’ or a combination thereof. At the beginning of their relationship when things were going so well, Kate was at work and contemplating how well things were also going with her job as a school psychologist, she begins to worry, “A small but dark voice within her whispered that she would never be

allowed so much personal happiness without suffering a professional loss of some sort” (p. 267). She is already working within the framework of postfeminism, which is telling her that she will be asked to sacrifice her career for her family or her family for her career because doing a good job at both is almost impossible and miserable. This may or may not be true, but the feeling of impending compromise and consequence is present.

Lisa also undergoes a change that leaves her hanging a bit more precariously than her previous life. She decides to turn her back on the career she has spent the last fifteen years building from nothing. She is stepping way outside of her comfort zone and, although she is scared, her head is held high and she has tentative plan. She also does not know what will come of this turn of events, but she is no longer shying away from it.

Jane seems to bounce between feeling overwhelmed and exhibiting confidence and surety in both love and career. She is involved in a long-standing relationship with a man twenty-eight years her elder. When he proposes, she gazes at the ring and thinks, “It was just the ring I would’ve wanted, if I’d wanted a ring from him” (p. 198). This sounds confident and definitive, but her real reason for turning him down is mistrust in her ability to make the right decision. In trying to come up with a response to his proposal, she thinks, “*I can’t make a big decision right now—I can barely trust myself to decide what earrings to wear*” (p. 199). While in another relationship, she undergoes treatment for breast cancer and although her boyfriend is a wonderful support, he does not really know her. The relationship has been about him moving past his demons, not a partnership. When she decides to leave, she tells herself, “You will say goodbye for all the right reasons. [...] It’s you who has to hold on to earth. You have to tighten your grip—which means letting go of him” (p. 222). Here, she is taking responsibility for her

future. We see her quit her job as an associate editor when her boss essentially demotes her by assigning her secretarial tasks. She is straight-forward and confident in her assertion that she deserves editorial work. However, she quits without a back-up plan and ends up applying with a temp agency. The fact that she opted for a transitory job shows an unwillingness to commit to a career. Later on in the book she admits that she has a semi-permanent job at an ad agency. There is no further description.

Cannie is one of the more confident protagonists of the bunch. She does not hate her job as a journalist and she is good at it. She has written a screenplay and is trying to get someone to look at it; although she has had no luck so far, she does not give up. She knows what she wants: to be happy with her body, her career and in love, but she is not sure how to attain these things. She meets an overweight yoga instructor that is comfortable with her body, a feeling that Cannie only dreams about. She begins to ask her, “How do you...” I couldn’t find the words for what I wanted to ask her. How do you find happiness in a body like yours...like mine? How do you find the courage to follow anything anywhere if you don’t feel like you fit in the world?” (p. 290). Cannie’s question is initially about her body image, but she is really asking this amazingly self-confident woman how to be just as amazingly self-confident. The instructor responds to the unasked question with, “I grew up.[...] I learned things. You will, too” (p. 290). Until she really begins to know and love herself, she will be incapable of making positive choices and continue to feel overwhelmed. By the end of the book, she has begun the process of growing up.

Andrea, in contrast to other protagonists, is not overwhelmed by the choices afforded her, but by the consequences with which her one, miserable career choice came.

She takes the job at *Runway* magazine knowing that it is temporary and when it is over, she will be awarded her prized position at the *New Yorker*. She just did not realize that it would take *all* of her time and almost cause her lose everything else. She was not overwhelmed by the amount of choices in front of her, but overwhelmed by the consequences with which her one choice came. She felt a responsibility to her dream to make this choice and it was the wrong one for her. She does not make it through the appointed year and does not get her job at the *New Yorker*. Andrea is different from the other protagonists in that she was not afraid to make a choice and be wrong. Reflecting on her year of experience and sacrifices, she muses, "And even though my resume now sported a scarlet "F," even though my boyfriend had called it quits, even though I'd left with nothing more concrete than a suitcase full of fabulous designer clothes---maybe it had been worth it?" (p. 423). It is still a question, but Andrea is open to the idea of the disaster being a growing experience.

Clodagh, in deciding to cheat on her husband, took the risk of envisioning another way to live. She married young with the understanding that her husband would make a good father and provider, but she was not exactly in love with him. She looked for an outlet from feeling trapped, albeit selfish, and was not initially prepared for the consequences. She now must face the future as a single, divorced mother of two. At first consumed with grief and guilt over the changes in her life, she ends the book with her head held high, ready to start over. The life she now leads has different limitations and greater responsibility than her married life, but they are hers. She is more than ready for the power she will have over her decisions and willing to face the unknown.

Jemima is one of the only protagonists that end up being excited about having a myriad of choices. She begins the novel anxious, depressed and confined by her fear to actively seek desperately needed change; the choices are too immeasurable, making the task seem impossible. The narrator tells us that “Jemima Jones used to believe that there was such a thing as an exciting, glamorous life, only that it would never happen to her” (p. 274). Although she knew that there were more possibilities, she narrowed her focus out of anxiety; she did not think she had the capabilities to reach for the seemingly unreachable. It is only when her self-confidence rises through self-awareness does she become excited, not anxious, about actualizing her desires, “[This is] a whole new chapter: mine to write however I choose. [...] Once upon a time this would have terrified me, but now I can’t wait to get started, to set off on a new journey [...]” (p. 371). We do not witness Jemima’s new journey, only the one she took to trust her own capabilities.

V. Discussion

The ten chick lit books analyzed for five postfeminist characteristics revealed that, as a group, they all illustrate most – but not all – of the five characteristics. They all reinforce the notion that women seem uncertain and anxious about their futures with respect to their careers, romantic relationships, and their ability to make good life decisions. They all reject feminism and a collective sisterhood, rather focusing on themselves as individuals. Although these women adequately reflect the desire for romance and creating a sense of home, they do not adequately subscribe to notions of consumerism and returning to motherhood. Although there is an even split in how these women handle a supposed female identity crisis, the fear of failing to realize their womanly calling is felt more strongly for the protagonists by secondary characters rather than the protagonists themselves. Generally, they are not afraid of waiting out their biological clocks, but are clearly terrified of being without a man – and not necessarily a husband. All of the protagonists that led career-focused lives experienced career burnout and a subsequent change of heart about their future paths. In light of this research, it can be deduced that these women of chick lit do generally portray characteristics of postfeminism. Based on the supposed relatability of these books to women today, this research also suggests a kinship between these characters and modern women. Further research would be needed to satisfy this speculation. The following is a discussion the above findings.

All of these women display a negative reaction to feminism, whether in the form of rejection of feminist principles or just the label itself, or in an awakening to the notion that their previously feminist-based lives are inadequate or unfulfilling. It is clear that feminism is out, shown to be outdated, constrictive, and out of touch with what womanhood means to these women. What I found most interesting was the blatant rejection of the stereotypical feminist image, not necessarily feminist principles such as equal pay and reproductive rights. These women want and make use of feminist gains, but do not want to be mistaken for one. An issue to consider is the fact that the stereotypical feminist image is the *only* feminist image that recurred in these books. This can be seen in the characters' reactions to feminists and in the characters that embodied feminist characteristics. They were generally portrayed in a negative light, such as the workaholic career woman or the desperate single woman over forty. This directly coincides with Faludi's contention that the media have created a perpetual feedback loop with regard to visions of feminism: media depict feminism negatively, which causes people to internalize these images to varying degrees, incorporating them into their life framework, which reveals itself through the creation of more media within this framework, therefore propagating the negative (and stereotypical) images. Chick lit seems not only to depict these postfeminist characteristics, but acts as a media tool to convey the message.

Add to the negative portrayal of feminism the disappearance of a sisterhood. All of these women, regardless of a presence of a small group of female friends, have shed the idea of a collective female voice in favor of individualism. They do not need or want their actions to reflect the ideals of a movement; rather, they tend to do what is best for

them. This may mean that they display dependence on men for emotional support, indulge in consumerism, or that they accept a promotion even though they know they got it for sexist reasons. Although these women rely on female friends as confidantes, there is no indication that any of them consider their group of friends a collective female front with agreed-upon values. A focus on the individual helps to further disjoint the feminist movement and also explains the fact that so many of these characters are self-absorbed. This focus of self-concern inevitably spills into other facts of their lives, affecting such notions as motherhood and romance. Both avenues need room for compromise and sacrifice. If these women of chick lit are not willing to extend themselves beyond their own needs and desires, it is difficult to envision success for them in these areas.

Most of these women displayed conflicted emotions when trying to decide between the life of a single career girl and that of wife and mother. Goldsmith (2004) sums it up perfectly in *Dumping Billy*, ““Kate looked out the taxi window and wished that she could stay forever suspended on the bridge between the two boroughs in her life” (p. 225). Like Kate, none of the women feel that they can have both; this feminist principle is rejected early on as impossible and undesirable. These women cannot envision the possibility of ‘having it all’; just ‘having some’ seems hard enough. Since all protagonists but Clodagh are single and without children, we see most struggle with choosing from the perspective of trying to imagine marriage and motherhood mixed into their self-focused lives; these choices are obviously considered the ‘other.’ Clodagh, unhappy wife and mother, tells them that any dreamy notions they have of that ‘other’ life really are just dreamy. All but three women choose to stay unmarried and childless, and only the proposals (not weddings) are realized in the books.

When considering the proposal that women want to return to the aspects of womanhood that are taboo under feminism, it seems that although these women do have a real desire, they are struggling with incorporating these notions into the framework of their lives. They were all reared in a shadow of second wave feminism, where aspects of femininity were not at the forefront. Instead, they were encouraged, even expected, to go to college and be capable of taking care of themselves; for many, maintaining a Martha Stewart household was not on their agenda. Perhaps because these domestic notions were not central to their upbringing, women today are curious about them as an alternative lifestyle. With some exceptions, most attempts end in failure or renegotiation of their desires in light of their perceived abilities. They generally do not feel capable of incorporating these aspects into their lives, as much as they fantasize or attempt them. The angst they feel about these femininities seems to also stem from their general feelings of unpreparedness about making life decisions.

The only traditional aspect that these women really embrace is romance. Each one is involved with a man to varying degrees and this relationship runs the length of the novel. Men are never far from a central concern for these women. They all want to be in a romantic relationship, their reasons ranging from wanting to settle down to falling madly in love to having a date for national holidays. Sometimes men are merely an accessory, but most of the time a real relationship is desired. It is important to note that these women's love lives leave much to be desired. Engaged in serial dating, they are usually struggling into or out of a relationship with much anxiety over whether or not these men really care for them. Eight of the ten books end with the protagonist beginning the 'right' relationship with an honest, understanding, respectful, fun-loving man that

could very possibly be the one. Of course, we do not learn if this is true; the book only focuses on the tumultuous journey to get there. As with other aspects of traditional womanhood, although women want men, the experience is generally filled with disappointment and anxiety over their abilities to find a man, keep him, and be a desirable woman.

Although postfeminism is trying to convince women to return to motherhood, these women of chick lit are not biting. Very few consider motherhood and only one chooses it. The fact that almost half of the books do not even mention the idea of motherhood, either positively or negatively, speaks just as loudly as their negative reactions. There are many possibilities as to why motherhood is still on the back burner, or not even on the stove, in these books. One reason may be that most of these women subscribe to the postfeminist notions of being self-absorbed or lacking confidence in themselves; these feelings could hinder them from adequately caring for a child. Further research may discover social trends that lend themselves to understanding this aspect of modern women's lives.

Consumerism, one of the central characteristics used to describe chick lit, does not appear consistently in these novels. Some protagonists, such as Rebecca, Bridget and Andrea, clearly illustrate women's desire for and even obsession with designer brands and purchasing power. We also see some characters buy home goods in the hopes of creating that domestic sense of security they lack in being single. Consumerism is understood as an indulgence that is now a right of all women to enjoy, part of the focus on self we see through their turn to individualism. The rest of the novels do not illustrate this point nearly to the degree of the three aforementioned protagonists and sometimes

not at all. The most prominent instances here came in the way of designer name dropping. This wide variation indicates that a relationship between this postfeminist characteristic and chick lit protagonists is not strong. Perhaps, the notion is that women are *now allowed* to partake in the consumer market. Since postfeminism does not care to defend women as a collective, there is no guilt for not boycotting companies and products that convey demeaning images and messages about women. If this is the case, not all women in chick lit take advantage of this perk.

Rather, it would seem that the marketing of these books, with their covers depicting sassy caricatures of women shopping, holding shopping bags and wearing sophisticated and feminine clothing, coupled with the subsequent purchasing of the books by women are the real links to consumerism. Harzewski (2006) claims that chick lit's association with the color pink is no coincidence; the books participate in a "feedback loop with fashion trends, as pink for several seasons has been the new black" (p. 35). The idea that these books are marketed as accessories creates a direct relationship between reading and purchasing power, one that this researcher found to be stronger than the protagonists' actual relationships to consumerism.

With regard to a female identity crisis, this seems to play out with respect to making choices about the future. Most of the actual comments about waiting too long for motherhood or snagging a husband come from other characters and are then internalized to varying degrees by the protagonists, some not at all. The characters that do focus on their careers all experience career burnout and move toward a less stressful work environment, usually integrating personal relationships into the new space and rounding out their lives. Overall, it appears that the threat of spinsterhood is real. Any fears of

being alone are relieved when they find that one promising man, whether or not that relationship is forever. The question one must ask is if that relationship falls through, will they feel like spinsters again until they find another man? For most of the protagonists, their biological clock is not ticking too loudly for them, but older women consistently warn that they are not listening hard enough. A pattern is established whereby the older generation is concerned with the younger generation's lacking a sense of responsibility in becoming real women.

These books are not all doom and gloom; they all end happily, whether or not the protagonist has a man or serious career or a concrete plan for the future. She usually gains self-awareness and happiness at her position in life. Eight of ten of the books end with the protagonist maintaining the same status as when the story began: unmarried with a career and still playing the romantic field. Although they constantly agonize over what they want out of life, most of them do not make dramatic life changes like marriage or motherhood. We do see more independent changes such as buying a house, finding a more suitable job, learning self-love, and a general sense of maturing. These alternatives to the traditional fairytale 'happy ending' shows us that although it might be a rough journey filled with overwhelming decisions, it is possible for women to find happiness down other avenues. Even with these independent changes, finding their place somewhere between feminine and feminist does not get resolved. This, perhaps, is the most pertinent message chick lit is sending; with the multitude of choices afforded to these women, they are trying to navigate their own way on over-paved territory.

VI. Further Research

Since chick lit is still a relatively new genre, it will be interesting to watch the path it takes as a female narrative. Some feel that it has served its purpose and is beginning its descent in popularity. What had begun as insightful and fun works of fiction, such as Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed* (2001) and Melissa Bank's *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999), is being reduced to "brand-identified trade paperback[s]" (Danford, 2003, p. 20), similar to the way romance novels are written and packaged. Harlequin and other publishers have already created separate imprints, such as Red Dress Ink, dedicated to chick lit (Ferriss, 2006). This shift has been an argument for the genre's staying power, but one must wonder what it will do to its ability to reflect women's relationship with popular culture. Since this research focused on analyzing texts that possessed characteristics of the beginning of the genre, further research could examine this shift in the genre as a whole. This would shed some light on the changes the genre has undergone and possibly ascertain how relevant these changes are to modern women's lives. More in-depth research could also be done on any of the postfeminist characteristics discussed, especially with the relationships of women to notions of domesticity, romance, and motherhood. These three aspects seemed to give women the most trouble when trying to find a comfortable place for them in their lives.

VII. Conclusion

It is easy to point out the frivolities of a genre like chick lit. Marketing schemes have created a pastel paradise that appears to be slowly sweeping across book store displays, spotlighting chick lit from a mile away. The characters have been accused of being obsessed with unimportant nuances of life, finding Mr. Right, shopping, and on a perpetual mission to look fabulous. Even the name of the genre has lost its original intentional irony. Cris Mazza (2006), who claimed that she and her co-editor coined the term for their 1995 anthology *Chick Lit*, was trying to point out the “second-class differentiation” of ‘writers’ and ‘women writers,’ the latter writing ‘women’s fiction’ and rest is unconditionally ‘fiction’ (p. 28). They wanted to point out that this dichotomy exists, not shy away from it. Unfortunately, this intention has been swallowed up by the momentum of the genre into the mainstream.

What is important to remember with a genre like chick lit, just as with romance or fantasy or science-fiction, is that there are usually underlying meanings and reflections of society in each that are worth exploring. We must be careful to not fall into the trap of casting them off as literarily inadequate. When considering the portrayal of women in popular culture compared with how today’s women are really feeling about the freedoms and choices they have, chick lit provides a clear picture of just how liberating and immobilizing their current positions can be. Although chick lit is not without its shallow moments of body obsession, shopping, and silly romantic mishaps, neither is popular culture and, in turn, women’s lives. It seems that critics would like to devalue chick lit

on the basis of frivolity and its supposed divergence from reality, when they may just be scared that its reflection of women in society is more accurate than they would like to admit. For defenders of feminist principle, this might seem like a tremendous blow to their hard work, but literature has shown that the constrictions of feminism are just as responsible for this as popular culture's promotion of traditional femininity. The idea of more choices has led women to increased anxieties over life decisions and a (re)turn to focusing on the self instead of a social movement.

The literature on postfeminist backlash theory is illustrated adequately in chick lit. Popular culture seems to be sending the message that women are free: free from the constraints of feminism, tradition, objectivity, and stereotypes. They are free to choose anything and everything they want and *they are happy about it!* Chick lit tells another story. It shows the darker side (albeit, with a light tone) where pressures about career struggles, the fear of being forever single, and the responsibility of taking charge of it all are still ever present. It shows women struggling through the myriad signals from the media and social culture to find their own voice and their own place of comfort. Take away the pink advertising and the silly titles, and we've got postfeminist text on our hands.

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Wolf, N. (1993). *Fire with fire*. New York: Random House.

IX. APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Characteristics of Chick Lit								
Books	Female, in 20s or 30s and live in metro?	Tone Humorous?	Dealing with relationship issues?	Obsession with body image?	Indulge in Consumerism?	Rely heavily on female friends?	Focused on some kind of self-improvement?	Grow/Learn by the end of the book?
Bridget Jones's Diary	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
Confessions of a Shopaholic	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y
The Devil Wears Prada	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y
Dumping Billy	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Getting Over It	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing	Y	Y	Y				Y	Y
Girls' Poker Night	Y	Y	Y			Y	Y	Y
Good In Bed	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y
Jemima J	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y
Sushi for Beginners	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y

Appendix 2

Postfeminist Characteristics	Sources
Overall negative reaction to feminism:	
~Refusing to identify as a feminist	Beck (2001), Walters (1995); Hall & Rodriguez (2003), Wolf (1993)
~Resent feminism	Braithwaite (2004), Faludi (1991)
~Feminism is outdated/obsolete	Faludi (1991), Kim (2001), McRobbie (2004), Ouellette (2002)
Focus on individual's needs instead of being part of a social movement	Bellefante (1998), Faludi (1991), Hall & Rodriguez (2002), McRobbie (2004), Walters (1995), Wolf (1993)
Attempts to reclaim what feminism took away: includes a return to consumerism, motherhood, a focus on romance, and attempts at domesticity	Braithwaite (2004), Brunsdon (2006), Faludi (1991), Hollows (2006), McRobbie (2004), Smith (2005), Walters (1995)
Female Identity Crisis	Faludi (1991), Smith (2005), Walters (1995), Whelehan (2000)
Overwhelmed by future choices	Dickerson (2004), Faludi (1991), McRobbie, (2004)

Appendix 3

Book Summaries

Bank, M. (1999). *The girls' guide to hunting and fishing*. New York: Viking.

It seems like throughout Jane Rosenthal's life, she's been trying to get relationships right and always falling short. As a teenager, she would watch her brother with his girlfriends, searching for clues into the elusive world of dating. By the time she nears the end of her twenties, she is still searching. Almost ruining her chances for a great relationship by listening to a retro self-help book akin to *The Rules*, she learns that being her candid, sarcastic, witty self is more than enough to snag Mr. Right. This storyline is dotted with trials in her career, too. The text read like a collection of short stories, with the author providing vignettes of moments in Jane's life that illustrate her struggle into maturity.

Davis, J. (2002). *Girls' poker night: A novel of high stakes*. New York: Ballantine Books.

Narrator Ruby Capote is tired of her life in Boston. Her move to New York City lands her a job as a humor columnist, a weekly poker night with her friends, and an infatuation with her unavailable boss, Michael. When he and his wife divorce, things really start to heat up between them, and Ruby thinks she's falling in love. Issues of abandonment from her past come back to haunt her; her father committed suicide after her mother asked for a divorce. Ruby isn't sure she's able to open up to or feel hopeful about this new relationship. Her slow, but sure growth to emotional maturity is mirrored in her column, and it is here that she finally finds her voice. Scattered throughout the novel are humorous interludes with her friends at poker night, mainly discussing their relationships and sexuality and making fun of each other.

Fielding, H. (2001). *Bridget jones's diary*. New York: Penguin Books.

Singleton Bridget Jones decides to begin a diary for the New Year in the hopes of documenting what really goes on in her life. Each entry begins with a guilt-ridden or excuse-laden synopsis of calorie intake, cigarettes smoked, cocktails drunk, and weight. Through sarcasm and humor, sometimes self-deprecating (although relatable), the reader gets a romp through Bridget's career and relationship fops: her foray with her boss that leaves her alone and dressed in a trampish bunny outfit and her switch from publishing to TV (she was fired for shagging her boss). Although she is demonstrably against male "fuckwittage" she still longs for a boyfriend. She and her female friends spend much of their time drunkenly discussing the positive sides to single living and defending themselves in the face of scare tactics from "smug marrieds" such as the ticking

biological clock and impending man shortage for women over thirty. Bridget ends her tumultuous year by beginning a new relationship with a man she least expected.

Goldsmith, O. (2004). *Dumping billy*. New York: Warner Books.

Kate Jameson has long outgrown the Brooklyn posse she ran around with in her school days; she now lives in a great New York City neighborhood, has her PhD and works at a very prominent Manhattan elementary school. It isn't until Bina's boyfriend doesn't pop the very anticipated question that her Manhattan life and Brooklyn past collide. Although she thinks her gay city friend and his boyfriend would find her Brooklyn gang appalling and uncouth, they are very helpful with Bina and even come up with a plan to get Bina married. They have mathematically figured out that Bina must date the very gorgeous Billy Nolan, get dumped by him, and a proposal is sure to follow. In a series of humorous mishaps and snags in the plan, Kate is able to actualize her feelings for Billy and Bina get the proposal she wanted, only from an unexpected suitor, and Kate's two worlds are reconciled once and for all.

Green, J. (1999). *Jemima j*. New York; Broadway.

Jemima Jones is a beautiful, talented, and overweight British columnist for a local rag with a huge crush on her co-worker and man of her dreams, Ben Williams. She is obsessed with her weight and convinced that it is the reason she has been continuously overlooked professionally and in the dating scene. When she discovers Internet dating and finds hope in a successful California beach bum turned gym owner, Brad, she is propelled to lose the weight for her visit to the US in order to meet his expectations. The reader discovers that, while losing the weight, JJ has also lost her sense of self, which is the real lesson. In an ironic twist, she comes to find out that the beach bum is really into chubby women, but her ex-coworker has always seen her inner beauty. She ends up with the man of her dreams and a more confident idea of who she is, fat or skinny.

Keyes, M. (2003). *Sushi for beginners*. New York: Perennial.

The unfolding of three young, modern women's lives, this story allows the perspectives of Ashling Kennedy, the very green and slightly bumbling twenty-something assistant for a new women's magazine, Lisa Edwards, her cut-throat London editor that has something to prove, and Clodagh, Ashling's upscale suburbanite housewife and mother. None are happy with their current position, but plod through each day trying to justify the life they've created. *Colleen* magazine may seem like a dream come true for Ashling, but Lisa was expecting a promotion to a sophisticated New York-based journal and is less than thrilled with her reassignment to Ireland and orders to make *Colleen* work. Clodagh is absolutely bored with her life as mother and wife and longs for Ashling's singleness. In a rash of intertwining events, Jack Devine, the head of *Colleen*, bypasses Lisa's advances and falls for Ashling, Ashling is betrayed by her boyfriend and Clodagh, and Lisa realizes that her single-minded career obsession is making her very unhappy. By the end, the three women have come to understand more about themselves and their life desires.

Kinsella, S. (2001). *Confessions of a shopaholic*. New York: Dell.

Rebecca Bloomwood loves to shop. It's not just about wanting things, it is a source of comfort and one of the only things she feels at which she's good. Ironically, she is a journalist for a financial magazine in which she fakes her articles by copying press releases. When letters from the bank start rolling in, informing her of overdraft amounts and account freezes, she knows she is in trouble, but she has no idea about what to do. Her best friend, a trust-fund baby, lets her slide on rent and she fantasizes about getting a better job or winning the lottery. When both of those do not pan out, she tries her hand at dating for money, but her conscience gets the better of her. The only man on the relationship horizon is smart, sexy Luke Brandon of Brandon Communications, but Rebecca is consistently making a fool of herself during their encounters. Only when she really puts her journalistic talents to work and takes Brandon Communications to task for defrauding investors do things start falling into place: she publishes a lambasting article in the *Daily World*, which sets off a chain of profitable events, including a bi-weekly spot on a morning talk show as a financial advisor, which allows her to pay off her overspending debts, and the respect and romantic advances of Luke.

Maxted, A. (2000). *Getting over it*. New York: Regan Books.

Helen Bradshaw is not only trying to deal with being a twenty-something Londoner with respect to dating and her career as an editorial assistant for a woman's magazine, her father's recent and sudden death throws her into the role of caretaker of her grieving mother. Obstacles are her exboyfriend Jasper, her woman-crazy, player landlord Marcus, and her cast of female friends with their own hang-ups. Her healing process and ultimate road to maturity is found through repairing her relationship with her mother, finding the meaning of true friendship in her friends Lizzy, Luke, and Tina, and discovering real love in Tom, the sexy and wonderful veterinarian. Although this novel deals with the serious issues of death, grieving, and domestic abuse, it does so in a humorous and bouncy tone.

Weiner, J. (2001). *Good in bed*. New York: Washington Square Press.

Cannie Shapiro is in her late twenties and recently broken up with longtime boyfriend, Bruce, when she discovers he has written a male perspective column for a guy magazine entitled "Loving a Larger Woman," namely her. Finding it hard to get on with her life as a proclaimed larger woman, feeling the void that Bruce and her estranged father have left, she has one last romp with him that leaves her pregnant. After some debate, she decides to have the baby and embarks on a new journey, impending motherhood. Her overbearing Jewish mother and her therapy-loving partner, a famous actress friend, her trial weight loss medication doctor, and a dear friend all play huge parts in helping her to overcome the loss of Bruce and the near loss of her daughter, Joy. Cannie ends up staying strong, selling her screenplay, and gaining the maturity needed to ask for help. She ends up finding love in her relationship with Dr. K., but this is just the icing on the cake; this character has found her place in the world all on her own.

Weisberger, L. (2003). *The devil wears prada*. New York: Anchor Books.

Andrea Sachs is fresh out of college and eager to build up her resume in order to land her dream job at the *New Yorker*, even if it means working for the ruthless editor-in-chief, Miranda Priestly, at the fashion magazine *Runway*. Although everyone keeps telling her that a “million girls would kill” for this position, Andrea soon realizes that working for Miranda will be one of the hardest jobs she’ll ever had. Bringing her warm lattes, delivering her dry cleaning, scoring a copy of the latest Harry Potter before it hits the bookstore shelves, and having a skirt flown to Paris the same night are only a few of the tasks Andrea must accomplish as a rookie in the field. The book’s continual romp through the frivolity of the fashion industry provides the reader with countless humorous and absurd incidences that eventually help Andrea to see what is really important: the boyfriend, friends, and family that she has blindly neglected in the spirit of getting ahead in her career. Although Andrea doesn’t end up back with her boyfriend at the end, she has learned valuable lessons in her personal and professional life.