

## *The Sand in the Oyster*

# The *Lit* of Chick Lit

BY PATTY CAMPBELL

As the literary butterfly known as *chick lit* flutters past, let's capture that Lepidoptera, pin it to a board, and see what the frivolous and flamboyant creature is all about. Putting metaphors aside, let's talk about how YA chick lit differs from its adult predecessors and other antecedents, define its patterns, respond to some recent press about it, and question its direction and influence.

First, let us acknowledge that the phrase itself is inherently demeaning, perhaps even sexist. *Chick* is a derogatory term for the presumably empty-headed girls or young women who are both the characters and the readers; *lit* is an ironic reference to the assumed lack of quality writing in the form. Whether any, or all, of so-called chick lit deserves this scorn will remain to be seen over time.

The adult prototype, of course, was Helen Fielding's v. British and v. amusing *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Its success, according to a recent collection of essays (*Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*, edited by Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young) and an article in the *New York Times* ("The Chick-Lit Pandemic" by Rachel Donadio), has been followed by imitators all over the world. But these stories of newly independent young women trying to cope with office jobs and the demands of urban pop culture are very different from the teen chick lit that was initiated by the YA Bridget Jones spinoff *Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging* by Louise Rennison. *Angus* and its sequels, as well as homegrown reads like Meg Cabot's *Princess Diaries* and Ann Brashares's *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*, led circuitously to three paperback series that have established the very particular American version of YA chick lit now igniting a wildfire of imitation.

Those three influential paperback series are *Gossip Girl* by Cecily von Ziegesar, *The A-List* by Zoey Dean, and *The Clique* by

Lisi Harrison. Each series has sold more than a million copies, according to Naomi Wolf in a wide-eyed and misleadingly titled *New York Times* article, "Young Adult Fiction: Wild Things." Wolf characterizes these books as having a "creepily photorealistic" writing style and "a value system in which meanness rules, parents check out, conformity is everything and stressed-out adult values are presumed to be meaningful to teenagers. . . . The rich are right and good simply by virtue of their wealth." All true enough, as far as it applies to these series. Other markers, too, are characteristic of the paperback YA chick-lit style at its worst, often approaching self-parody. Among these:

**Detailed descriptions of clothes**—which are named by designer and referred to as "outfits";

**Frequent mention of brand names**—"so prominent you wonder if there are product placement deals," says Wolf;

**Spike heels**—the higher the better;

**Eyeball-rolling**—as annoying in the literature as it is in real life;

**Covers showing body parts but not faces**—perhaps reflecting the overwhelming preoccupation with body image;

**Cell phones, computers, iPods, and other electronic toys**—usually to communicate the ongoing story to an absent best friend (and the reader);

**Exclusive private schools**—with such outré courses as "Indigenous Crafts" and a relaxed attitude toward grades and cutting classes;

**Casual sex**—often in semi-public places like the dressing rooms of fashionable stores;

**Smoking as an indication of sophistication**—an even more reprehensible model than the blow jobs, it seems to me;

**Plentiful booze, but nothing so retro as beer**—rather, stylish concoctions like chocolate martinis, which are not sipped but "swigged" or "gulped," leading to

**Lots of vomiting**—usually on one another's Prada bags or Gucci boots, and often in humiliatingly public circumstances;

**The Party**—at which there are no adults, but lots of alcohol and drugs and very loud music by named groups, and where the best scenes take place in

**The ladies' room**—as a venue for malicious gossip, persecution of nerds, and sex;

and, worst of all,

**Clunky writing**—with unbelievable situations, stereotyped characters, and awkward dialogue.

Against this repellent background moves a plot line glorifying shallow materialism as the only way to acceptance. Wolf points out an example in *The Clique*, in which the protagonist “abandons her world of innocence and integrity . . . to embrace her eventual success as one of the school’s elite.”

But if Wolf had looked more broadly at the permutations of chick lit in young adult literature in general, and not just paperback series, she would have seen that in the hands of more skilled and more responsible writers, a version of chick lit has emerged that is comparatively benign in its message, even though it may be decorated with some of the markings of the books described above.

At the center of this pattern is a girl who finds herself an outsider at her school, either because she is newly arrived from somewhere else or because of actual physical or social differences. The school is dominated by the Queen Bitch and her friends, who are the most cool, the most popular, the most desired. The QB is rich and beautiful, but mean, always ready to tease and torment those less cool than herself or her chosen few. The outsider girl yearns to be accepted by this powerful in-group, even when she becomes the target of their jibes. She subverts her own real identity in the effort to fit in with the ruling group, copies their clothes and accepts their values, but eventually (and here is where the pattern differs) becomes disillusioned with them and regains her integrity.

It is important to remember that chick-lit novels in general are dramas of social class, not love stories. Even in the books by more nuanced authors, boyfriends are primarily useful as indicators of status—at least until our girl has had her epiphany. A common subplot involves the protagonist’s initial rejection of a nice but dorky boy who is a social liability in favor of a dangerous hook-up with the QB’s boyfriend, a move that backfires with disastrous retaliation from the outraged QB.

This year some excellent YA writers, a few of them familiar names, have used this archetypal pattern with good results. National Book Award finalist Adele Griffin (*Sons of Liberty*) is not above playing with the motifs of chick lit in *My Almost Epic*

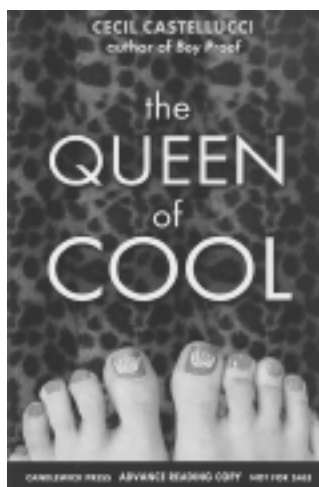


*Summer*, in which Irene's babysitting job at the lake is complicated by gorgeous, self-possessed life-guard Starla and her wicked blog, as well as both girls' interest in former geek Drew. Lauren Mechling and Laura Moser follow up on the success of their witty *Rise and Fall of a 10th Grade Social Climber* with a sequel, *All Q, No A*, set in a zany New York private school where the girls earn status points for sloppily layered clothes and unkempt hair. Laura and Tom McNeal, in *Crushed*, embed the basic chick-lit pattern in a novel that is richly embroidered with

some intriguing backstory, engaging characters, and a mystery about a scurrilous student underground tabloid.

*The Queen of Cool* by Cecil Castellucci turns the pattern inside-out with a story of a bored QB who leaves her clique behind when she finds that nerds have more fun. *Hazing Meri Sugarman* and *Meri Strikes Back*, by M. Apostolina, are almost classic in their evocation of the evil in-group headed by a college sorority president so mean that publisher Simon Pulse has started an online fan club to help freshman Cindy get even with her.

This spring has also seen some interesting genre fusion with a chick lit-like verse novel (*The Geography of Girlhood* by Kirsten Smith), a story that meshes chick lit and fantasy (*Golden* by Jennifer Lynn Barnes), and even a throwback to the old "Choose Your Own Adventure" format (*What If... Everyone Knew Your Name* by Liz Ruckdeschel and Sara James). And *Honey Blonde Chica* by Michele Serros carries chick lit across linguistic borders with a confusion over the word *playa*, meaning not *beach* (as it does in Spanish) but its street-lingo homograph, *playa*.



In all of this anatomizing, an important point has gotten lost. Even at its worst, chick lit is *fun*, a fact ignored by solemn critics like me and Naomi Wolf. Yes, the language in these paperback series and other YA books that hew closely to that model is crude—there is plentiful use of the f-word as well as the common vulgarities of everyday speech. And yes, there is sex—lots of it, and often without love or respect. And yes, there is lots of smoking, drinking, and consequent vomiting. And yes, the characters wallow in extravagant spending. But all of this is presented in such an exaggerated way that no sensible teen would take it for anything but the silly wish-fulfillment fantasy it is. And what fun for teens to offer this kick in the pants to adult values, as Roger Sutton acknowledged in a recent *Horn Book* editorial (“Leave Them Alone,” May/June 2006). And what fun for us solemn critics to watch YA lit take this vital, lively, but debased form and transform it into something good and decent, something that reinforces what kids really knew all along: the QB is wrong—nerds win in the end.



---

*Patty Campbell has been a longtime advocate of young adult literature as a librarian, critic, editor, author, and educator. Currently she edits the Scarecrow Studies in Young Adult Literature. Her latest book, Robert Cormier: Daring to Disturb the Universe, will be published by Random House this fall.*

Copyright of Horn Book Magazine is the property of Horn Book Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.

An inspiring, hilariously-fierce chick lit novella filled with relatable sexy, smart women on a glass-ceiling smashing journey. â€œBridget Jones for the new millennium.â€ 2.Â Rating: Jonathan Theodore lived an ordinary life in a common suburban street in a suburb so much like every other as to be not worth describing. Very little out of the ordinary ever happened to Jonathan until one day when a partially clad girl happened to drop in and change his life forever. 3. A Young Girl's Diary. An Anonymous Young Girl | Fiction Classics. Rating: This journal recounts the real life writings of a young girl as she learns about family, friendships, and love. 4. A Modern Cinderella and Other Stories.