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Can't Afford the Manolos? Buy the Book!: Chick Lit & Contemporary Consumerism

At the airport, across from the magazines at Wal-Mart, and probably somewhere near the front of local bookstores — chick lit is everywhere. One would probably recognize it from a distance as a sea of shiny pink¹, the small glossy paperbacks cheerfully beckoning from their carefully constructed display. Chick lit has exploded into the western² market over the last decade, captivating millions of readers with their tales of young, urban professional women navigating the worlds of careers, relationships, and of course, shopping. By the end of the novel, each of these components is generally resolved in somewhat formulaic fashion. In terms of career, the female protagonist has either realized that she is no longer interested in her job and moves on to a more fabulous one, or, she realizes that she is actually much more competent at her job than she realized and has a sense of newfound fulfillment. In cultivating or furthering a relationship, the protagonist either kisses, marries, or finds some level of commitment between these with

¹ Lyn Mikel Brown and Sharon Lamb, in their work Packaging Girlhood, discuss the semiotics of pink for young girls: “For little girls it’s an emporium of pink and pretty. Old messages about being soft, sweet, and lovely in pink have all but taken over consumer girl world. The sheer volume and uniformity of the pink-and-pretty message ensures that little girls are especially invited into this world” (4). The proliferation of pink adorning the covers of chick lit novels suggests that this phenomenon has been carried over into the world of adult women, still being used to invite them into this same arena of consumerism.

² Chick lit is especially popular in Britain, Canada, and the United States; many of the protagonists settle in Manhattan or London to begin their careers.

a desirable man — not necessarily the one she coveted all along, but sometimes with one who is obviously better suited to her. As far as the shopping goes, there is not a significant amount of resolution to come out of what is usually a steady trajectory of consuming; it merely keeps occurring. What is notable, however, is the way in which the protagonists' other arenas of their life (the job, the man) become codified as simply another way to consume. She *has* the great job; she *acquires* the man who is perfectly suited to her. In this fashion, contemporary have arguably found an outlet through which to live vicariously. They are able to participate in an increasingly consumerist society, whether or not they are able to purchase the expensive commodities over which the main characters in these novels fawn. The \$6.99 required to purchase the book, however, is rarely out of reach.

To be realistic, \$6.99 paperbacks usually fall into the category of pulp fiction, and chick lit is no exception — at least in the opinion of the greater public, literary and otherwise. Curtis Sittenfeld (who, despite a slightly deceptive first name, is female), author of the novels Prep and The Man of My Dreams, revealed the underlying spite that sometimes accompanies the designation of a work as chick lit, in a book review for *The New York Times* in 2005: “To suggest that another woman's ostensibly literary novel is chick lit feels catty, not unlike calling another woman a slut -- doesn't the term basically bring down all of us?” It is notable that a young, successful woman (much like the ones depicted in chick lit, come to think of it — although I must confess to knowing little about Sittenfeld's shopping habits) such as Sittenfeld would take offense to the term. I would not wager that Sittenfeld is alone, either. She goes on in her review, however, to

classify fellow author Melissa Bank's new work, The Wonder Spot, as chick lit, qualifying it all the way:

A chronicle of the search for personal equilibrium and Mr. Right, Melissa Bank's novel is highly readable, sometimes funny and entirely unchallenging; you're not one iota smarter after finishing it. I'm as resistant as anyone else to the assumption that because a book's author is female and because that book's protagonist is a woman who actually cares about her own romantic future, the book must fall into the chick-lit genre. So it's not that I find Bank's topic lightweight; it's that Bank writes about it in a lightweight way.

With this, we move into a new definition of chick lit: as "lightweight." I do not believe that many would argue that upon first glance, these novels are, in fact, not laden with heavy dilemmas. To imply, however, that chick lit's women readers are incapable of "reading" into them with more depth is somewhat insulting. As Char Toews points out in her article, "Pop Culture Revisited," if one takes these novels out of the category of pulp fiction or simply trashy reading, it is then that one can begin to analyze the way in which women interact with them "not as passive consumers but as active agents." And to many women, the topics addressed in chick lit are important ones. It is possible that some women readers have not done the work for themselves to understand where their desire to shop comes from, or why they feel guilty about eating that extra brownie, or why they feel unfulfilled without a partner — and perhaps this is where the danger comes in. For instance, if women are in fact using these novels vicariously, at what point do her options begin to feel limited?

With these questions in mind, I will examine the following novels: Lauren Weisberger's The Devil Wears Prada; Sophie Kinsella's Confessions of a Shopaholic; Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary; Jennifer Weiner's In Her Shoes; Melissa Bank's The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing; and Emma McLaughlin's and Nicola Kraus's The Nanny Diaries. Having just grouped all six of these novels together, I would now also like to add a disclaimer: I do not consider all chick lit to be considered equal. Like all works of writing, some might be considered more literary than others, some feel more real (and relatable) than others, and some are just plain better than the others. That said, for the purpose of this work, I consider these six novels on a relatively equal basis. My method of choosing was determined in this way: all six of these novels have either already been made into a film, are currently in the process of being made into a film, or have had the rights to the novel optioned to be made into a film at some point. In choosing to work with novels that have this in common, I reasoned that to some extent, the books must have been widely circulated enough for someone to think that a film adaptation would be profitable. Upon further examination, however, there just seems to be something about chick lit that makes these novels ideal for adaptation. Part of this, I would assert, is the highly aesthetic nature of the works, which originates largely from the amount of material goods to which the reader is exposed over the course of the novel. Indeed, one of the most charged scenes in the film version of The Devil Wears Prada is the montage in which Anne Hathaway, the actress who plays the role of Andrea Sachs, is slowly transformed, outfit by Chanel outfit and to the tune of Madonna's "Vogue," into someone who looks as if she belongs at *Runway* magazine. Women readers devour these books — as an avid shopper myself, I identify — for the brand references and the

outrageous shopping trips. The question then becomes: Is it potentially as dangerous to perpetuate this stereotype of women on wild spending sprees in the same way in which it is dangerous to constantly send the message that there is one acceptable romantic ending?

Before we sound the alarm, however, it is imperative to look at the way in which other genres of what is considered women's fiction have been vilified over time. To begin, in order to understand both this and the rise in popularity of the chick lit novel, I will discuss several different works of feminist criticism that address the chick lit novel's predecessor: the romance novel. Teresa Ebert, Jan Cohn, Leslie Rabine, Tania Modleski, Janice Radway, and Carol Thurston all examine the ways in which careers, sex, and relationships affect both the romance novels and the women who read them, and throughout my discussion I will make note of the similarities (and dissimilarities) as they apply to chick lit. From there I will focus on the degree to which many chick lit novels are largely career-centric, examining The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing, The Devil Wears Prada, and The Nanny Diaries in depth. These novels feature an assistant editor, an editorial assistant, and a domestic service worker, all jobs that are of great import to the genre and which lend themselves to interesting analysis. The next section considers the relationships of the novels, looking mainly at In Her Shoes. I have chosen deliberately to spend more time on careers than relationships, which at first may seem counterintuitive, but I made this choice due to the fact that I contend that these women's careers are of greater import to each protagonist than the relationship, which often comes across as a sort of backdrop to the rest of the story; I would contend that this is a positive literary progression. And of course, the connective thread of shopping continues to run throughout.

Returning to the consideration of the ways in which women's fiction has been vilified previously, the most poignant example of this is the reaction to the rise in popularity of Harlequin and romance novels in the 1970s and 1980s. Much feminist scholarship has been dedicated to the study of this fiction: of its effects on women, of the way in which women engage with the work, of its role as a tool for escapism. There was much debate over whether or not these novels were "good" or "bad" for women, and, fortunately, this question was complicated over time — much, I would argue, as now must be done for chick lit. We are beyond the historical moment where to simply say "no" is acceptable or even feasible — whether it be to consumerism in general, or, on this smaller scale, to chick lit. It is always helpful, however, to consider what came before, and thus, what informs current elements of women's fiction.

In 1988, Teresa Ebert argued in her work, "The Romance of Patriarchy: Ideology, Subjectivity, and Postmodern Feminist Cultural Theory," that romance novels reify the societal standard that women are not fully realized until they are paired (sexually or through marriage) with men. She laments the perpetuation and naturalization of phallic imagery in Harlequin Romances, claiming that

These images, which are sites for the circulation of desire and the imaginary in romances, reify the penis and thus mystify male power, sensuality, and sexual difference as physical and natural, while concealing the production of the phallus as signifier as well as the construction of male prowess and privilege in signification behind the naturalized penis.

(34)

To be fair, there is not a lot of sexual imagery, phallic or otherwise, employed in contemporary chick lit novels, although there is, I would argue, something to be said for a lack of complete self-realization before union with a man. We will return to this issue soon.

Jan Cohn, another feminist critic writing in 1988, is not an endorser of romance novels, either. In her work Romance and the Erotics of Property: Mass-Market Fiction for Women, she argues that romance novels' trajectory of a single woman falling in love with a man and marrying him is merely a way for the women to gain economic status and power. Cohn writes

In the marriage of hero and heroine, romance fiction reaffirms its loyalty to convention and, at the same time, to the real, in the form of existing social conditions. This realistic view of women's roles, sugarcoated though it may be, is itself an echo of collective wisdom, a way of saying to the readers, "Let's not kid ourselves; this is how it is for women." (9)

Admittedly, this depressing sentiment could be applied to a cynical reading of chick lit—by the end, it appears, women must be with men to be happy. This echoes the ending of the popular HBO television show *Sex and the City* (which originated from a work of chick lit, Candace Bushnell's book by the same title), in which six well-loved seasons of four women navigating the single life is concluded with all of them happily paired with men. Cohn's observation continues with her noting the way in which the formulaic novels undergo a reinvention as times pass and social mores evolve, acquiring a kind of "up-to-dateness": "In some recent romances the heroine enjoys more professional and sexual freedom, reflecting current social changes in women's roles" (11). Cohn seems to

be worried that by couching distinctly antifeminist sentiments amid watered down elements of female liberation, readers of romance novels will somehow be tricked. Chick lit is certainly implicated in this same inclusion of newfound career freedom and cultural capital (whether it be sexual or monetary), but I would argue that that is part of its draw — it is what makes it either easy to identify with, or, an outlet through which to live vicariously. Beyond that, even, I would contend that chick lit is concerned with each young, female protagonist finding her way in a collective sense — the melding of successes in her professional, romantic, and consumerist life as the ultimate goal. Because of this new, slightly more well-rounded model of a protagonist who truly cares about her career (and does not [always] abandon it to retreat into the arms of a man), we may observe Ebert's and Cohn's arguments to be perhaps persuasive in their time, but at this point somewhat outdated.

Leslie Rabine aims to examine the complexity that surrounded the emergence of women with careers into the genre of romance novels in the 1980s, in her work "Romance in the Age of Electronics: Harlequin Enterprises." Rabine argues that these female characters are not equipped to balance their work lives with their romantic lives, ending up stripped of their power. She writes, "Although the hero of these romances is not always the heroine's boss, he most often either is the boss or holds a position of economic or professional power over the heroine" (42). While this does crop up in chick lit from time to time — perhaps most notably in the classic (in terms of chick lit) Bridget Jones's Diary, when Bridget engages in an affair with Daniel, her boss — it is usually followed either by a scene in which the reader may cheer the protagonist's defiant rejection of said man; or, he is simply not the man with whom she ends up in the end. In

certain ways, the protagonists of chick lit have evolved from the days of romance novels. I would not necessarily make the same claim of the readers of the genres, although that is not to be taken negatively; I would instead argue that much of the feminist criticism of romance novels did not give women enough credit for their power to read with a critical eye.

Tania Modleski, in her article “The Disappearing Act: A Study of Harlequin Romances,” complicates the idea of women readers of romance novels as ignorant sponges and delves further into *why* these women read these novels. She argues that they serve as a form of escapism from the chains of acute self-awareness, quoting a description of John Berger’s that is reminiscent of Iris Marion Young³:

‘A woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself. Whilst she is walking across a room or whilst she is weeping at the death of her father, she can scarcely avoid envisaging herself walking or weeping. From earliest childhood she has been taught and persuaded to survey herself continually.’ (435)

Modleski then praises, or at least acknowledges the legitimacy of, the desire to escape this hyper-self-awareness, stating that, “According to popular romances, it is possible *really* to be taken care of and to achieve that state of self-transcendence and self-forgetfulness promised by the ideology of love” (436). I like this claim because it does

³ In Iris Marion Young’s essay, “Throwing Like a Girl,” she explores the way in which women experience their body in reference to the world around it, writing, “...the modalities of feminine bodily existence have their root in the fact that feminine existence experiences the body as a mere thing — a fragile thing, which must be picked up and coaxed into movement, a thing that exists as *looked at and acted upon*” (39). This notion of experiencing oneself as objectified and from an exterior point of view relates to the same disconnect that Berger describes.

not simply reject a dominant ideology that is arguably harmful, but recognizes its pervasiveness and complicated nature. It also acknowledges the ways in which real-life relationships lack and thus cause women to gravitate toward these novels. Like dominant ideologies of love, the extent to which the western hemisphere is a dominantly consumerist society is not something that will disappear anytime soon. Perhaps in this same vein, readers of chick lit have found a way to satisfy and indulge their expectations of what it means to be a consumer. Much like women readers of romance novels might not have a man who fulfills the stereotypes of romantic love, readers of chick lit may not have the appropriate capital to purchase the items that the media insists they must in order to be happy. By being participatory in chick lit, they find a way to accomplish this within their means.

Janice Radway, in her work “Women Read the Romance: The Interaction of Text and Context,” furthers the work toward romance being viewed as more than dangerous pulp fiction. She agrees that romance novels may be interpreted as escapist, but interjects also that women readers look to the men in romance novels as a positive alternative to what they may have. Within the focus group of women that Radway studied, she found that those women “feel refreshed and strengthened by their vicarious participation in a fantasy relationship where the heroine is frequently treated as they themselves would most like to be loved” (60). Perhaps readers of chick lit are also indulging in this kind of fantasy relationship...with a pair of shoes, or a new bag. But of all the feminist critics, Radway perhaps most concisely relates the necessity of reading these genres with a critical, but not patronizing, eye:

If we are serious about feminist politics and committed to reformulating not only our own lives but those of others, we would do well not to condescend to romance readers as hopeless traditionalists who are recalcitrant in their refusal to acknowledge the emotional costs of patriarchy. We must begin to recognize that romance reading is fueled by dissatisfaction and disaffection, not by perfect contentment with woman's lot. (68)

Readers of chick lit may very well be aware of the problematic nature of consumerism, as well, but that doesn't eliminate their desire to participate. Women don't read Confessions of a Shopaholic and think, "Gosh, I wish I could spend that much and get into debt," but they might think, "I would look pretty fabulous in that Denny and George scarf, too." And, to be honest, is there really anything so horrific about that? Iris Marion Young, in her essay, "Women Recovering Our Clothes," praises this element of fantasy that often accompanies women's relationship to clothing. She writes,

Women often actively indulge in such theatrical imagining, which is largely closed to the everyday lives of men or which they live vicariously through the clothes of women. Such female imagination has liberating possibilities because it subverts, unsettles the order of respectable, functional rationality in a world where that rationality supports domination. (74)

Clearly, Young argues that this fascination with clothing as a mode of fantasy is not deleterious at all; in fact, it is a way for women to reclaim some power.

In my study of feminist criticism of romance novels, the final author that I examined was Carol Thurston, author of The Romance Revolution: Erotic Novels for Women and the Quest for a New Sexual Identity, thinking that her interpretation of the role of sexuality in romance novels would be helpful in my consideration of the sexual content of chick lit. Upon reading the six chick lit novels, however, I noted a startling lack of sexual detail. In the conclusion of Confessions of a Shopaholic, when protagonist Becky Bloomwood finally sleeps with the man whom we have been teased with throughout the entire novel, all we get is a quick mention of a kiss, and hands at the hem of a skirt, and then:

Stretching my arms above my head, then collapsing contentedly onto an enormous mound of pillows. Oh, I feel good. I feel... sated. Last night was absolutely...

Well, let's just say it was...

Oh, come on. You don't need to know *that*. Anyway, can't you use your imagination? Of course you can. (343)

Thurston, in her work, reprints quotes from readers who are fans of romance/erotic novels, such as, "Certain books can be a real turn-on. My husband can always tell when I've read a good one!" (141). Clearly, in cases such as these, women are reading these novels at least in part for their erotic nature. Thurston notes

Readers can pretty much pick and choose what interests them most in terms of (hetero)sexual fantasy, whether it be only occasionally and somewhat vaguely mentioned or almost continuously and exuberantly described. (142)

In chick lit, the sexual content certainly leans toward the former. The most graphic scene of sexuality I saw throughout these six novels came, actually, in the first several pages of Jennifer Weiner's In Her Shoes. Maggie, one of two protagonists, is in the midst of a one-night stand at her high school reunion, with a man in whom she is quite disinterested. She is drunk during the scene, and throws up directly before the conclusion, examining the contents:

She'd had pasta—when? Last night? She was trying to remember her last meal when he grabbed her hips and swung her around roughly so that she was facing the front of the stall, banging her hip against the toiler-paper dispenser in the process. 'AGHH!' Ted announced, and came all over her back.

Maggie whirled to face him, moving as quickly as she could through the sloshing vodka/noodle mess on the floor. 'Not the dress!' she said. And Ted stood there, blinking, his pants puddle around his knees, his hand still on his dick. He grinned foolishly at her. 'That was great!' he said, and squinted at her face. 'What was your name again?' (6).

While a questionably foul scene with which to begin a novel (if one is trying to incline the reader to read further) we at least see that this is clearly not meant to be erotic — just graphic. Indeed, the voyeuristic factor for readers of chick lit is often more inclined to focus on the protagonist not while she is in bed (or in a bathroom stall) next to a man, but rather, when she's in the mall next to a cashier. This begs the question: In predominantly female fiction, is shopping the new sex? In chick lit, at least, I would argue that the answer is yes.

Filling the dearth of sexual escapades in the six novels I read is (besides shopping) a preoccupation with one's career. In every novel, there is a major conflict surrounding the protagonist's work, whether it is a realization that she has no interest in what she is doing, a realization that she is in fact good at what she does after previously thinking otherwise, or a questioning of the value of a specific job. They might like to shop, but the women of these novels are, for all intents and purposes, working girls.

Many of the jobs that the protagonists hold are similar to one another. Often they work in communications or in publishing, as a PR person or as an editorial assistant; it has become a recognizable signifier of chick lit. This may have something to do with the stereotypes of women as good communicators, or as not mathematically minded, but the accompanying struggle with identity that these women face suggests that perhaps the way in which these careers often have to do with personal expression is significant.

Jane Rosenal, the protagonist in the short story cycle The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing, by Melissa Bank, works as an assistant editor for much of the book, although she seriously doubts her ability and drive to do so. We see her first as a child, already disenchanted with the field: "I told Julia that novels for my age group always seemed to be about what your life was supposed to be like, instead of what it was. Same with magazines" (23). A few short stories later, we learn that she has interjected herself into that very world, when Bank writes, "He asks me questions about my job in publishing. I tell him I'm an editorial assistant, really just a secretary, but I get to read unsolicited manuscripts" (55). Further down the line, her job as an assistant editor is further complicated by her romantic relationship, with a much older man named Archie, who is also an editor. Jane's growing insecurities about her abilities as an editor after she

gets a new boss who essentially demotes her, delegating responsibilities more fit for an editorial assistant than for an assistant editor, are confounded by her desire to please her boyfriend. A successful editor himself, he wields his experience over her, subverting what is an earnest inquiry on Jane's part into an unkind, sexual joke:

I said, "I need to know if you think I will ever be really good at this."

He seemed to be considering.

I said, "I need to know if you think I can ever be a fucking great editor."

"Yes," he said. "I think you are fucking a great editor." (169)

Jane's indecision about her profession continues, as we see in this exchange between her and her father:

When he asked me how my job was, I said, "Okay."

"Really?" he said.

"No," I said. I told him that I wasn't sure I belonged in publishing. "I'm getting worse instead of better."

"You keep talking about whether you're good at this or not," he said. "The real question is, do you enjoy it?"

"I might hate it," I said. (173)

Finally, Jane does decide to quit this job, and we are glad for two reasons: the first being that it is clear that it is not where she wants to be, and the second being that she heeded the advice of someone who clearly has her best interests in mind — her father — and not those of a man she simply wished to please — Archie. Any lingering indecision soon

disappears: “On the subway home, I got a little scared. I remembered the phrase *career suicide*. But then I thought, *Goodbye, cruel job*,” (197). Archie is not entirely supportive of this career choice, however, and eventually they break up. Jane’s identity, favorably, is no longer dependent on a job that she doesn’t like, or a man that, ultimately, she does not need.

Jane Rosenal is not the only chick lit protagonist that experiences a moment in which she realizes something pivotal about her career. It is notable, however, that Jane’s decision to quit her job was self-facilitated. Rose, one of the two protagonists in Jennifer Weiner’s *In Her Shoes*, does not have quite the same experience. After she catches her younger sister in bed with her pseudo-boyfriend (who also happens to be her superior at the law firm at which she is employed), she takes a leave of absence and starts a dog-walking business. Rebecca Bloomwood of Sophie Kinsella’s *Confessions of a Shopaholic* experiences a great lack of confidence in her abilities as a financial journalist, only to discover when put on the spot that she “know[s] so much more than [she] ever realized!” (316). In Becky’s case, it is her own series of shenanigans that land her on the television talk show during which she has her realization, which somehow, I would argue, is more laudable than a realization that is expedited by a man in her life. Becky’s realization, however, arguably strikes readers as distressing and a bit pathetic: she was so distracted by the other worries of her life — namely, the debt she incurs as a result of her shopping addiction — as to be unaware of her real talents. This is a possible downfall of consumerism as a representative tool for both readers and writers. Caroline Knapp, in her work *Appetites*, suggests that preoccupation with appearance and the body (and thus, shopping) is a form of distraction from the more important arenas of life. She writes,

“You can’t worry about Appetite (joy, passion, lust, hunger) when you’re worrying about appetite (frosting, fat grams). Arguably, Becky Bloomwood is so caught up in what she is adorning her body with that she fails to see what it (and her mind) is capable of.

In Lauren Weisberger’s The Devil Wears Prada, the job is the thing. When Andy Sachs lands a job as assistant to Miranda Priestly, editor-in-chief of *Runway* magazine (based on the author’s real-life personal experience as assistant to *Vogue*’s Anna Wintour), she is told over and over again that she is lucky to have it. Even when she is clearly miserable, everyone around her reiterates this, including her best friend, Lily:

“So she sounds difficult to please and a little crazy. Who isn’t? You still get free shoes and makeovers and haircuts and clothes. The clothes! Who on earth gets free designer clothes just for showing up at work each day? Andy, you work at *Runway*; don’t you understand? A million girls would kill for your job.” (108)

In the beginning, Andy believes this herself, that she is incredibly lucky and that a year under Miranda Priestly will land her any job she desires — the latter of which is claimed to be accurate. The tricky part, clearly, is making it through the year. We see Andy become jaded: ““But let me tell you, those were a really, really worthwhile forty-five minutes! I mean, think of how much I learned shopping for that basil, how better prepared I am for my future in magazines! I’m on the fast track to becoming an editor now!”” (192). *Runway* for Andy, however, comes to represent a myriad of things that Andy never saw herself becoming involved in, and, certainly, never aspiring to as a career. The *Runway* staff is obsessively preoccupied with their weight, and Andy finds her identity threatened at first by mere association, and later, by assimilation:

Not worth it, I thought. Skipping a single meal won't kill you, I told myself. In fact, according to every single one of your sane and stable coworkers, it'll just make you stronger. And besides, \$2,000 pants don't look so hot on girls who gorge themselves, I rationalized. I slumped down in my chair and thought of how well I had just represented Runway magazine. (212)

In the end, of course, Andy decides that the version of herself that she has become is not what she ever wanted, and writes her story in a piece that she submits to *Seventeen* magazine, couched as “a teenage girl who gets so caught up on getting into college that she ignores her friends and family” (425). Andy also feels that she has learned some sort of lesson from her job, a common attribute of chick lit when the heroine finds that the job she currently holds is unfulfilling:

I hung up the phone that first night back and cried, not just for Alex but for everything that had changed and shifted during the past year. I'd strolled into Elias-Clark a clueless, poorly dressed little girl, and I'd staggered out a slightly weathered, poorly dressed semigrown-up (albeit one who now realized just now poorly dressed she was). But in the interim, I'd experienced enough to fill a hundred just-out-of-college jobs. 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 (well, OK, four Louis Vuitton suitcases) full of fabulous designer clothes — maybe it had been worth it? (423)

We are happy, as readers, that Andy has gotten out, and the contentment is sealed with the obligatory nod to fashion and consumerism — that *really* caps it off for us. Everyone can appreciate the value of four Louis Vuitton suitcases filled with designer clothes (everyone inclined to read chick lit in the first place, anyway), and that just heightens the sweetness of Andy's victory and newfound identity. It would be an almost perfect ending if it weren't for another traditional chick lit maneuver: the pitting of woman against woman. The editor at *Seventeen* who loves Andy's piece also praises her for bitching out Miranda, as it were. She tells Andy, "'Someone needed to tell that woman to go fuck herself, and if it was you, well, then hats off! That woman made my life a living hell for the year I worked there, and I never even had to exchange a single word with her,'" (426). After this exchange, Weisberger tells us that Andy spends her time "working on some stuff to show the Miranda-loathing Loretta" (427). We can only like this new woman because she is the anti-Miranda, not simply because she has shown an interest in Andy's work.

The next question to ask, then, is how these numerous crises of career-centric identity affect the readers of chick lit? Presumably, the demographic that the genre reaches are women who are either going through a similar crisis, or have been there — uncertainty regarding one's career is by no means rare. In this fashion, it is a way for readers to empathize with the protagonists. Further than that, it can be read as soothing: in a contemporary moment wherein women are grappling with the freedom that is presumed of a young, career woman, it is realistic and comforting to know that other women are still struggling with their identities in many ways. While from a sociological and feminist standpoint this could be disheartening, it is nonetheless realistic, and very

likely a draw for readers who are willing to read about other women having similar first experiences — if slightly heightened for dramatic effect. And, if simple empathy isn't enough, the jobs — which are nearly all, arguably, first jobs to be envied — provide a fantastical outlet for readers, a getaway from their own stressful jobs. As mirror or escape, women readers make a connection when it comes to protagonists' careers.

Shopping remains a universal connector in chick lit, with the women's careers presented, in a way, as simply another thing to try on and acquire. Perhaps Andy's job at *Runway* is the best example of a protagonist *having* her job like she *has* things. Andy's job is a source of cultural capital for her, earning societal status all throughout New York City and even taking her to Paris for the spring ready to wear shows. When she finally quits, she is not only quitting her duties, but she is abandoning the benefits that she has also amassed (though clearly, they did not outweigh the psychological trauma caused by Miranda Priestly).

Finally, in the realm of the chick lit work force, we must examine one final novel: Emma McLaughlin's and Nicola Kraus's *The Nanny Diaries*. The novel focuses on a traditional sector of female employment, and does not skirt around issues of class that necessarily arise. This novel, in fact, unlike the other five, is based completely on the life and duties of a nanny. She has the same struggles with identity that these other career women have, but she is constantly trying to prove herself to women of supposedly higher status. McLaughlin and Kraus write, "Not to be outdone, I hear myself talking — trying to establish my status as a person of the world; I name-drop, brand-drop, place-drop" (11). For a nanny, it is not simply about having the cultural consumer knowledge of what to buy; it is about where to buy and from whom to buy it. Once hired, the job is about

not passing visible judgment on one's employer; the fact that many of the mothers who hire nannies do not have jobs themselves is highlighted and criticized. Nanny (who does not have a name other than this, interestingly), says to her parents

“You know what my problem is? I go out of my way to make it seem natural that I'm raising her son while she's at the manicurist. All the little stories I tell and the ‘Sure, I'd be happy to’ make her feel like I live there. And then she forgets that I'm doing a job — she's totally convinced herself she's letting me come over for a play date!” (123-124)

Nanny, unsurprisingly, wishes to leave the job and stop nannying. As a college student about to graduate, this possibility actually looms on the horizon. We are presented a glance into a life wherein nannying is the only possibility, in the form of a nanny from San Salvador, whose husband and two sons remain there while she works in New York. Nanny has a reflective moment wherein she seems to understand the fortunate nature of her own class position: “Thus I while away the afternoon with a woman who has a higher degree than I will ever receive, in a subject I can't get a passing grade in, and who has been home less than one month in the last twenty-four” (173). This speaks to the way in which chick lit novels tend to portray white, upper middle class women, and rarely examine life outside of this sphere⁴. This widespread refusal to depict more diverse protagonists is both a result of the formulaic nature of chick lit novels and of societal dominant ideologies of race and class. While this is seriously unfortunate, the proclivity

⁴ More recently there have been novels that feature women protagonists of color; Lisa A. Guerrero discusses the rise of “sistah lit” in her essay, “Sistahs are Doin' It for Themselves: Chick Lit in Black and White,” found in Ferriss' and Young's Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction (87-101). Latina “chica lit” has also become popular; authors of novels in this genre include Mary Castillo and Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, among others.

for depicting protagonists of upper- to middle-class backgrounds generally provides a certain purchasing power that may be both be envied and aspired to by the reader, and to an extent, makes chick lit what it is — a consumer-centric phenomenon.

Nanny's precise class position enables her to do yet another kind of shopping in The Nanny Diaries: she is shopping for a new job, one that will provide more cultural capital than nannying, once she graduates. Mrs. X, her boss, constantly tries to bring her down in this regard, reinforcing her own superiority at every possible opportunity. She tells Nanny of her boyfriend (known as H.H., for Harvard Hottie), "...he must be quite a catch for you," (284). H.H. lives in the Xes' building; this is how he and Nanny meet. Mrs. X compares Nanny to H.H.'s former girlfriend, saying to Nanny, "Anyway, she just went to Europe on a Fulbright. I don't suppose you'd ever consider applying for a program like that? Though I doubt NYU students are eligible for awards of that caliber," (284). Clearly, Mrs. X places H.H., H.H.'s ex-girlfriend, and herself on a level above Nanny, and much of the novel becomes a battle over possession of cultural capital, a different form of consumerism. This consumerism is more complex than simply walking into a store and buying an outfit that might fulfill a fantasy; it is the ability to be able to purchase a certain status, a placement in society. Mrs. X's desire to degrade Nanny's NYU education is a prime example of the way in which she places certain items or titles above anything else. This is a way for her to conceal her insecurities and to control what image of herself is portrayed to the outside world; for example, if her son Grayer gets into the right school and can proudly wear the sweatshirt emblazoned with the school's name every day for all to see, what does it matter if he's miserable because his parents ignore his emotional needs all the time? Indeed, Nanny elucidates this point

in the final pages of the book, asking: “Even now, even as it’s gotten this out of hand, I’m distracted from my thoughts of the Xes by the trappings of the Xes. And really, it strikes me, isn’t that the point?” (301).

Nanny also finds time, however, for shopping as one thinks of it in the typical sense. In fact, moments of consumerism are provided as a bit of an antidote to the constant stress of nannying, as in this example, when Nanny accompanies the Xes (the family for whom she nannies) on a trip to Nantucket: “After a tense twenty-minute drive we pull into the parking lot/gift shop of the famous restaurant whose annual signature T-shirt, featuring a rabbit in silhouette, is a bizarre, nationwide status symbol. Of course I want one” (263). During the same trip, Nanny laments spending the money she earned on shopping: “But I’ve got to get moving money together. Ugh! When I think of all those times after work I marched straight to Barneys and blew half my paycheck just to cheer myself up, I could shoot myself!” (274). The reader sees the way in which Nanny spends money therapeutically to distract herself from the misery of her job, a phenomenon with which the reader is probably familiar. While the ability to soothe oneself with retail therapy is a classed privilege, the occurrence of it in chick lit is yet another way for a reader to either sympathize with the protagonist because they do the same, or to fantasize that one day, they will be able to ease their pain with designer items, as well.

Finally, employment as a nanny provides yet another important consideration of consumerism: that of the nanny as a possession of the woman who hires her to own and control. Here, class is slightly less of a determining factor; once one signs up for a position of what is essentially servitude, she is at the beck and call of Mrs. X (who is

represented as a kind of everywoman, at least of this class status and demeanor). We see this in the case of Connie, the Xes' housekeeper, who tells Nanny when she arrives one day: "I was here all weekend. Mr. X didn't show, and she don't want to be alone with Grayer. She made me come all the way back from the Bronx at eleven Friday night. I had to take my kids over to my sister's. Wouldn't even pay for a taxi" (165). Connie is of a working class background, differentiating her from Nanny. Later, however, Mrs. X attempts to control Nanny's behavior as well, though not quite in the same fashion as with Connie. After a dinner party on Nantucket, at which a friend of the Xes asked Nanny questions about her college experience, Mrs. X chastises her, saying "I'm not sure if it's appropriate for you to monopolize the dinner conversation. Just something I'd like you to be a little more aware of from now on," (261). The different ways in which Mrs. X manipulates Connie and Nanny is crucial, as it does signify class distinction. It is safe to assume that Connie only followed Mrs. X's demands to come back to their apartment because she did not wish to be fired, not because she was hoping the extra cash would cover a little something more at Barney's. Nanny, then, poses more of a threat to Mrs. X because she is of a closer social status to that of the Xes. Throughout the novel, we obviously have far more of Nanny's perspective than we do Connie's, keeping with the traditional chick lit model of middle- to upper-middle class protagonists. Arguably, the proliferation of this point of view speaks to the escapist or fantasy model of the desire to read these books, either for women looking to see their own troubles echoed (although it would not be difficult to find white, upper-middle class struggles elsewhere in literature), or for women who are looking to dream about moving up in the world. In any regard, it is somewhat admirable that McLaughlin and Kraus choose to address the issues

of domestic servitude. Chick lit novels are not required by definition to possess a certain weightlessness, and some of them, in at least small ways, make it their task to illuminate issues that plague many women. Elizabeth Hale further elucidates this point in her essay “Long-Suffering Professional Female: The Case of Nanny Lit:”

The grim details of The Nanny Diaries carry on the work of Agnes Grey in exposing and commenting on workplace abuse. Its failure to depict the *reform* of the workplace should not be taken as novelistic failure, or even as the failure of girl power. Rather, it offers a broader, darker, and even more realistic set of boundaries for chick lit to operate within; boundaries, perhaps, that those involved with the packaging, marketing, and even the reading of chick lit need to take account of. If they do, perhaps these novels will not have been written in vain. (Ferriss and Young 117)

I have already discussed much of the shopping that goes on in these novels, but the import of its symbolism cannot really be overstated. Thus far, we have looked at the ways in which careers and consumerism intersect in these six novels. Next, we must move on to the way that chick lit perhaps most reflects the romance novel, its predecessor: relationships. One would be hard-pressed to find a chick lit novel that does not conclude with the protagonist in at least some semblance of a relationship, which begs the question: Is this what readers really want, even if maybe they “know better?” Sales would indicate that, yes, it is. The next logical question, then, to ask, is: Is this a damaging message to be constantly purveying? That answer, I would contend, is not so simple. There is the danger, however, that if women are reading these novels vicariously, that they are going to begin to feel as if they are running out of alternative endings. It is

possible, however, that women are reading these formulaic endings in subversive ways; it is my belief that this may be done.

Jennifer Weiner's In Her Shoes has an interesting, somewhat complex ending. Like any traditional comedy, it concludes with a wedding — Rose's, who is one of the two sisters that are the protagonists of the story. Maggie, Rose's younger sister, is a troubled character, having grown up with learning disabilities that made her feel stupid, especially in comparison to brilliant Rose, a lawyer (until she quits, as previously discussed). Jennifer Weiner, author of the novel, is vehemently opposed to the negative connotations of chick lit, stating in an interview in *Publishers Weekly* that it is "more profound than [...] just boys and shopping [...] It's more, how do I fit in the world? It's big questions that mean a lot to a lot of people" (Hill 29). Indeed, In Her Shoes is much more focused on the women in the story's relationships to each other. Maggie and Rose's bipolar mother died when they were young, in an apparent suicidal car accident. Their father isolated them from their maternal grandmother out of anger and grief, and the story follows Rose and Maggie — both lost, in some way — through their reunion with their grandmother, Ella, at her retirement community in Florida. As stated before, Rose does get married in the end, and Maggie is seeing somebody, but this seems merely a backdrop for the real story. Maggie has overcome her feelings of inadequacy and stupidity and, along with her grandmother, makes Rose a beautiful wedding dress. Along with the dress come shoes, which are a symbolic tool throughout the story, as well as the consumerist tie-in. All three women wear the same size shoes:

"Oh, I've got shoes already..." Rose peeked inside and saw the most perfect pair of shoes — ivory satin, with low heels, and embroidered

in the same thread as her dress. “Oh, my God. They’re so pretty. Where did you find them?” She stared at Ella and took a guess. “Were they my mom’s?”

Maggie looked at Ella and held her breath.

“No,” said Ella. “They were mine.”

In this way, the title of the novel reflects the theme of material objects as a metaphor for important human relationships. And even though all three women end up paired with men by the end, this fact feels inconsequential. The female connection, and especially Maggie’s figuring out how she “fit[s] in the world,” is the overriding triumph.

Overall, this issue of relationships being tied into a little bow is a constant occurrence, which bears consideration in itself. It is also, however, constantly juxtaposed in relation to some sort of realization of the protagonist that is self-achieved, usually career-related. Rarely, if ever, did I reach the end of one of these books and think that the woman had done no real work for herself, and this is where I think that chick lit is underestimated. Often, these are smart women, making decisions and coming to realizations about themselves that every young woman experiences at one time or another. I will not argue that it is not disappointing that we are unable to break away from the model that in order for the entire package to be codified as okay and finished, that there must be a concrete relationship with a man, but I am willing to go in the direction that says we can get there, and that some of these women are on the right track.

To return to a solidified shopping discussion one last time, I would like to revisit The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing. This is perhaps the least consumer-driven novel of the six I read, and somewhat more likely to escape being designated as chick lit.

This, I think, is due to the weightiness of the issues, to borrow Curtis Sittenfeld's qualifications for the genre: Bank, for example, handles a father's death and cancer with the appropriate heft. The Girls' Guide also, however, has its moments that echo more "traditional" chick lit novels. For instance, Jane calls herself

an expert shopper, discerning fabric content by touch, identifying couture at a glance. Here at Loehmann's, on Broadway and 237th Street, I'm in my element — Margaret Mead observing the coming of age in Samoa, Aretha Franklin demanding R-E-S-P-E-C-T in Motor City. (228)

These references, slightly silly on the surface, actually do justice to the act of shopping, legitimizing it as a talent, something that requires a breadth of knowledge, raising it above the frivolous status to which it has been relegated⁵. It is actually, in a way, an admirable moment. And then, there is a more traditional move, a reference to the way in which clothes help the wearer form an identity à la Becky Bloomwood: Jane, after finding a perfect black sheath dress at Loehmann's, says, "in a put-on silky voice," "I am a woman who wears Armani," (229). Her friend, though, perhaps uncharacteristically for the genre, replies: "Clothes are armor," (229). Overall, The Girl's Guide to Hunting and Fishing is a refreshing break from some of the monotony of other chick lit, and a reminder that the breadth of the genre is wide, a range of fiction for women, written by

⁵ This again echoes the writing of Iris Marion Young in her essay, "Women Recovering Our Clothes," mentioned previously. The description of Jane's ability to "[discern] fabric content by touch" (228), and the evocative (of fabric and clothes) phrasing of Jane's tone in speaking about the clothes ("in a put-on silky voice" [229]) relate to Young's focus on the importance of touch, akin to the importance of fantasy (as well as bonding, which she also discusses in the piece): "Some of the pleasure of clothes is the pleasure of fabric and the way the fabric hangs and falls around the body [...] ...feminine experience also affords many of us a tactile imagination, the simple pleasure of losing ourselves in cloth" (70). In this way, the texture of clothes and the knowledge of such is a pleasurable, escapist skill in itself.

women. Perhaps instead of saying that Bank's work is less like chick lit than others works, we should insist that those other novels live up to the designation of chick lit — a reappropriation of sorts.

In closing, let us look again to Tania Modleski in her claim that “although [romance novels] actually contribute to women's problems, a study of them shows cause for optimism. It is no mean feat for a grown woman to make herself disappear” (448). In its application to chick lit, this claim is no less poignant: In a world of relentless consumerism and tenacious marketers whose sole goal it is to make one feel excluded and anxious so that one will make more purchases, it is no small feat to find a (cheaper) way to accomplish this. Chick lit is not, of course, without its female stereotypes and happy endings. But at this point in time, when we have been saying no for so long, is it wrong to critically extract what is good from these books, and, in the end, appreciate what one woman has written (presumably) for another? Although women are sometimes pitted against each other in these novels, we must rise above the media-sanctioned urge to behave that way ourselves and recognize the legitimacy of a genre that for the most part is one written by women for women — a somewhat rare occurrence.

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