

Chick Lit on Yellow Paper: Stevie Smith as Precursor

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*In this essay, I join the academic parlor game of locating serious literary antecedents for the burgeoning contemporary Chick Lit genre. However, I do so not simply for the game of it, but because I think Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* can derive a symbiotic benefit from my doing so. In short, it seems that Chick Lit is in a position to "rescue" a long-forgotten but highly influential text that may, in fact, flourish from the establishment of a relationship with the "Chick Lit machine."*

You've seen them: Their covers adorned with cartoon drawings of working women against the backdrop of a cityscape, or perhaps partial images of body parts—a pair of legs in high heels jutting onto the frame, or a disembodied hand holding a martini glass. Their bright pink, neon green, and pastel blue covers shimmering from the standup cardboard display placed conspicuously in the bookstore's center aisle . . . or perhaps they're on a noticeable endcap or front-and-center table. If you've been in a bookstore anytime in the last ten years, you've seen them. Whether you like or not, Chick Lit is here, and it appears that it's planning to stay a while. In fact, several publishers have created imprints that will exclusively publish Chick Lit titles—the most prominent of which is *Red Dress Ink*, an imprint of Romance publisher *Harlequin*. Although this burgeoning sub-genre has stopped short of commanding its own permanent sections in bookstores—not yet accorded the status of, say, Science Fiction—Chick Lit nonetheless appears to be more than just a passing fad. In fact, one testament to its potential staying power is the sheer number of "offshoot genres" it has since spawned. The list includes: "Mommy Lit," "Marriage Lit" (or "Bridezilla Books"), "Chick Lit jr.," "Sistah Lit," "Chica Lit," "Church Lit," and even "Dick Lit" (chick lit written by men). So, what exactly is Chick Lit?

For many, Chick Lit is an awful lot like what pornography is to the Supreme Court—we can't define it, but we know it when we see it. Despite the seeming slipperiness of the definition, there are some things critics know—or think they know—about Chick Lit. The very term *Chick Lit* is thought to have

first appeared in print as the title of a 1995 anthology of contemporary women's writing edited by Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell. Mazza argues that their text, *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*, included just that—serious literary fiction by women that is not “[defined] by gender, and yet at the same time [speaks to] the diversity and depth of what women *can* produce rather than what they're expected to produce” (Mazza, “What is Postfeminist” 8). In fact, in looking back on their choice of title eleven years later, Mazza asks rhetorically, “How could it backfire if it is so obviously sardonic?” (Mazza, “Who's Laughing” 18). But backfire it did. The term *Chick Lit* is no longer viewed wholly through the lens of irony. In fact some would say that the category has devolved from serious postfeminist fiction and now simply describes texts about career women, hovering around 30, looking for love. This is the primary disagreement about Chick Lit: does it represent a kind of postfeminist *vox populi* or is it the working woman's derivation of dimestore “bodice rippers”?

Despite the instability of the name itself, it is almost universally accepted that the genre (at least as it is known today) grew up around a single text that appeared roughly contemporaneously with Mazza and DeShell's coining of the term. With its love-obsessed, career-woman protagonist who is struggling to “have it all”—a fulfilling romantic relationship, a rewarding career, and enough self-esteem to negotiate competing social norms for contemporary women—Helen Fielding's 1996 novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* became a kind of “patient zero” for the genre that has grown almost virally since its publication. Based on the example of *Bridget Jones* and the offspring that immediately followed it, critics have, for better or worse, begun to identify a kind of Chick Lit formula. The formula is outlined most succinctly in two recent “how-to” texts designed to birth the next generation of Chick Lit authors. In *Will Write for Shoes*, Cathy Yardley defines the genre this way: “[P]op culture, high fashion, urban settings, and women [that readers] can relate to. Protagonists [are] single, in their twenties or thirties; dealing with shoddy relationships, career troubles, financial troubles, and biological clocks, all while maintaining a circle of friends that [are], for all intents and purposes, closer than any blood family” (Yardley 8). Similarly, in *See Jane Write*, Sarah Mlynowski and Farrin Jacobs offer this definition: “Chick [L]it is often upbeat, always funny fiction about contemporary female characters and their everyday struggles with work, home, friendship, family, or love. It's about growing up and figuring out who they are and what they need versus what they think they want” (Mlynowski 10). Essentially, then, Mlynowski and Jacobs are arguing for Chick Lit as a *bildungsroman* for thirty-something professional women—either that or some middle-aged “afterschool special.” Based on these descriptions of the genre, it is easy to see how some literary critics could disdain these books or at least label them as frivolous, unserious “fluff.” In fact, some Chick Lit authors almost seem to welcome these criticisms. In her abovementioned “how-to” book, Yardley outlines the collective purpose of Chick Lit writing in this way: “As Chick Lit authors, we'll have messages, themes, and insights, of course. But our primary job is to entertain. We're not finding the cure to cancer here. . . . If you can do that, entertain and comfort, and maybe even give some insight, then you've done your job” (5). For Yardley, it seems, insight is a mere afterthought. Frivolous and unserious indeed.

In looking at the definitions above, it becomes clear that *Bridget Jones's Diary* does fit into (and was likely the inspiration for) the genre. And these qualities of *Bridget Jones* are undoubtedly what prompted Dame Beryl Bainbridge, in a 2001 BBC radio interview, to famously proclaim about Chick Lit:

It is a froth sort of thing. ... As people spend so little time reading, it is a pity they perhaps can't read something a bit deeper, a bit more profound, something with a bit of bite to it. ... It would be better, perhaps, if [these authors] wrote books about their lives as they really saw them and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight and so on.

(“Bainbridge denounces”)

Regardless of where one falls in the debate about the relative seriousness or frivolousness of *Bridget Jones's Diary* and books of its ilk, one aspect of that text is undeniable (and, in fact, “saves” the book for some critics): its metafictional retelling of *Pride and Prejudice*. Regardless of what else it may be, *Bridget Jones's Diary* is, if nothing else, aware of its literary foremothers—all the way down to the inclusion of a prideful love object named Darcy. Given that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is a book that displays an awareness of its high literary predecessors and influences (and not just of its commercial selling power), and also given that it is almost universally accepted as the modern ur-text of the Chick Lit genre, one offshoot of *Bridget Jones's* success has been a new kind of academic parlor game: locating Chick Lit's more respected antecedents.

In fact, it has become a virtual commonplace among Chick Lit fans and scholars to identify *Pride and Prejudice* as the *real* starting place of Chick Lit as we know it. A 2005 pop-critical collection entitled *Flirting with Pride & Prejudice: Fresh Perspectives on the Original Chick-Lit Masterpiece* is one such example of this trend. In the cornerstone piece of that collection, Shanna Swendson begins the article with a summary of *Pride and Prejudice* told in snappy contemporary language, after which she comments that it “sounds like something you'd find on the ‘new in paperback’ table at the front of your neighborhood Barnes & Noble or Borders, probably with a cartoon cover with either shoes or a martini glass on it. . . . But this isn't the latest chick-lit novel. It's perhaps the first, written nearly two hundred years ago” (64). Swendson goes on to assert then that Elizabeth Bennett's strength, believability, relatability, and ability to elicit our sympathies render her the very prototype of the “Chick Lit heroine” (64). In short, it has become widely accepted in Chick Lit circles to place the genesis of the sub-genre *not* with its modern, bestselling popularizer *Bridget Jones's Diary* but with the classic text it claims to be rewriting.

So here I stand, poised to join the academic parlor game of locating serious literary antecedents for the burgeoning contemporary Chick Lit genre. Jest aside, I do so not simply for the game of it, but because I think Stevie Smith herself can derive a symbiotic benefit from my doing so. In short, it seems that Chick Lit is in a position to “rescue” a long-forgotten but highly influential text that may, in fact, flourish from the establishment of a relationship with the “Chick Lit machine.”

When Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*—which truly is just that, a novel that happens to be printed on yellow paper—was first published in 1936, it was met with mixed reviews. Some reviewers hailed its originality, uniqueness, and ability to provoke readers out of their comfort zones. *The New York Times Book Review* called it “stimulating and quite out of the ordinary, . . . a welcome change from formula novels, [and] definitely original” (Sherman 14). On the other hand, the *New Republic* declared the book Smith's “desperate attempt to empty her soul” and accused her (perhaps rightly) of “[throwing] the whole onus of understanding upon the reader . . . just to have a good time herself” (Vaughan 92). The reviews were so mixed, in fact, that the editors of *The Saturday Review of*

Books nodded toward the split opinions with this fairly noncommittal endorsement: "It is just the sort of chronicle which will bewilder and outrage the literary taste of many and pique the interest of few. Personally we like it" (Loveman 18). Given such mixed reviews and presumably mediocre sales, *Novel on Yellow Paper* would ultimately disappear from print for large stretches of time, and Stevie Smith would come to be most recognized and subsequently anthologized as a poet, not a novelist.

While it is true that scholars of British Modernism have long been aware of Smith's novel trilogy (*Novel on Yellow Paper*, *Over the Frontier*, and *The Holiday*), she gained most notoriety as a poet. Her brilliant poem "Not Waving but Drowning" is a staple of literary anthologies and college syllabi. Many readers (even including scholars not specializing in British Modernism) are unaware that Smith even produced any novels. It wasn't until New Directions Press added *Novel on Yellow Paper* to its "Revived Modern Classics" series in 1994 that the novel has even become available to contemporary readers. In addition, subsequent printings of the novel have even stopped investing in the yellow paper (which would seem to be half the point). In short, a potential masterpiece—or, at the very least, a highly influential and respectable piece—has been long forgotten. Put another way, *Novel on Yellow Paper* is not waving but drowning, and it is Chick Lit that may be best positioned to resuscitate it.

Novel on Yellow Paper, for those unfamiliar with the text, is a collection of first-person, stream-of-consciousness musings put down on yellow paper. The heroine and first-person narrator, Pompey Casmilus, is a single, young, professional woman working for a magazine publisher; therefore, yellow legal pads are what she has at her disposal when writing her novel during work hours. The narrative—and it can really only loosely be labeled as such—revolves around reflections on the working life, dating life, home life, and friendships of the chatty and wryly funny heroine. To pull a page from Swendson's playbook, if one were simply to imagine the above-described text as sandwiched between a pink cover featuring a cartoon martini glass, how could she *not* think of it as having a home on the Chick Lit display at the local bookstore chain? In truth, it really is undeniable that the most prominent elements associated with contemporary Chick Lit are prominently present in Smith's novel. The solipsistic and diaristic form of the novel can be made directly analogous to Helen Fielding's choice of a diary for narrating the experiences of her character Bridget Jones. In addition, it's almost uncanny that Smith's heroine Pompey, as a professional woman, is employed in the magazine publishing business, as this has become the stereotypical profession of contemporary Chick Lit heroines. This is largely due to the success and influence of books like Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*, and Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed*, all of which include publishing industry professionals as protagonists, and all of which are now considered to be among the first generation of contemporary Chick Lit texts. Furthermore, *Novel on Yellow Paper's* incidents—which cannot with good conscience be thought of as a plot in any traditional sense—do, in fact, include all of the Chick Lit ingredients: conflicts at work, conflicts among friends, conflicts among family, and most of all, conflicts with men. In addition, it should be noted that Pompey's primary love interest in the novel, Freddy, is a lawyer—not unlike Mark Darcy from *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

It is true that *Novel on Yellow Paper* is not as overtly romantic and relationship-driven as is requisite for contemporary Chick Lit novels; however, the novel does end with a long impassioned plea for love on the part of the heroine. She writes:

Oh there is so much about it and about. How many words how many wretched words to be said, to be unsaid, to be said again, and gone over until you can no more. I can no more. Oh my darling Freddy I can no more. ... There is for you a mass of detail and a false conclusion. For me but one significant fact that stands out, and for which I would live or die. But this fact. That is this fact. That is. That is what I cannot bring myself to write. It has been written so many times and soiled with every falseness and every base stupidity. (250)

Here Pompey stops short of uttering the exuberant "I love you" that we come to expect at the end of a romantically based coming-of-age tale, and, as she says, has been uttered (and "soiled with falseness") so many times before. Furthermore, in true Stevie Smith fashion, the two paragraphs following this mock-romantic climactic moment—and also incidentally the two paragraphs that close the book—describe *not* Pompey's reconciliation with Freddy, but rather the death of her beloved pet cat. Thus, Smith ironically denies us the standard Jane-Austen-inspired romantic ending for which she set us up. Nonetheless, despite the final textual image of the novel representing a dead cat, it is telling that the final visual image of the novel is a drawing depicting lovers embracing (drawn by Smith herself). This image is the absolute final image of the novel, as it resides directly opposite the back cover of the novel (appearing even after the list of books "Also Available from New Directions"). Therefore, even though Smith refuses us the love-match ending, she does allow a pictorial image to represent that which Pompey refuses to utter, and that image lingers in the minds of readers as they close the book. Thus it becomes possible to map onto this very unconventional novel a conventional romantic superstructure, once again making the novel a possible precursor for the Chick Lit genre as we know it today.

Perhaps the one thing that separates Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper* from contemporary Chick Lit is its formal experimentation and metafictional elements. It is true that *Bridget Jones's Diary* contains a few brief metafictional moments—such as Bridget's comment, "it struck me as ridiculous to be called Mr. Darcy and to stand on your own looking snooty at a party" (12)—as well as borrowing the overall structure from Jane Austen. However, outside of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, Chick Lit has not distinguished itself as a genre associated with challenging formal conventions. *Novel on Yellow Paper*, on the other hand, is perhaps most influential *because* of its metafictional elements that render it a kind of interstitial step on the larger modern-postmodern continuum. That is to say it is a novel that prefigures some of the moves mid-century writers would later embrace with fervor—the kind of text Brian McHale has called "limit-modernism" (13). Aside from merely using the romantic conventions out of Jane Austen—as most Chick Lit books do—Smith's character comments on her use of these conventions along the way. For instance, Pompey, at one point, makes reference to these very conventions, writing: "Now this brings us slap up against that mighty ogre Sex that is a worse ogre to the novelist than those family histories I so cleverly avoided a few pages back" (120-21). In fact, in addition to moments like these which comment on individual conventions, Smith's narrator also references her own inability to compose such a conventional novel. She writes:

People have said to me: if you must write, remember to write the sort of book the plain man in the street will read. It may not be a best seller – but it should maintain a good circulation. About this I pondered for a long time and became distraught. Because I can write only as I can write only, and Does the road wind

uphill all the way? Yes, to the very end. But brace up, chaps, there's a 60,000 word limit. (231)

These unique formal quirks and challenges to novelistic convention are certainly representative of the influence of Modernism on Smith, and are most likely what endeared her to certain kinds of critics in her time. And, in fact, I would argue that these qualities of the novel are that which make it worth additional critical attention and worth revisiting in light of contemporary retrospective viewpoints on twentieth-century fiction.

So indeed, I have participated in locating one of Chick Lit's literary antecedents. It is true that *Novel on Yellow Paper's* modernistic formal qualities render it an imperfect analog of contemporary Chick Lit, and perhaps a less apt foremother than *Pride and Prejudice*. However, I do think the striking similarities of Stevie Smith's novel to contemporary Chick Lit accounts for a symbiotic relationship between the two. Smith's highly modern and "High Art" text, if viewed as a precursor to Chick Lit can lend further credibility to the Chick Lit genre—and I, for one, do believe that to be worth doing. I tend to fall on the side of the debate that believes there to be cultural value in *good* Chick Lit (though, I also recognize that not all Chick Lit is good Chick Lit). But perhaps even more important, establishing a link between the lucrative contemporary Chick Lit machine and Smith's oft-forgotten novel can also serve to bring revived attention to a worthy and influential twentieth-century text of which few of us have heard or know much about. For these reasons, then, I posit that we plot an additional point on the continuum leading from *Pride and Prejudice*—the apparent "first Chick Lit masterpiece"—to *Bridget Jones's Diary*—the text that defines the genre—and that point is Stevie Smith's *Novel on Yellow Paper*. Or perhaps better put: "Chick Lit on Yellow Paper."

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