

‘The Pretty and the Political Didn’t Seem to Blend Well’: Anita Heiss’s Chick Lit and the Destabilisation of a Genre

IMOGEN MATHEW
Australian National University

Since the runaway success of Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in 1996 (and arguably before then),¹ chick lit has become a ubiquitous—if not always celebrated—feature of the contemporary literary, social and cultural landscape. Some typecast the genre as a series of clichés, castigating readers and authors alike for their embrace of pastel-pink covers, cursive font and plots designed to ‘lull you into a hypnotic state with their simple life lessons’ (Dowd, ‘Heels over Hemmingway’; see also Dowd, ‘Liberties’; ‘Bainbridge Denounces Chick-Lit’). These assessments ignore not only the diversity of the chick lit genre, but the many different types of political engagement at work within it. A growing body of academic and mainstream criticism (Butler and Desai; Chen; Donadio; Ommundsen; Sellei) documents the increasingly global appeal of chick lit. Collectively, these theorists argue that the chick lit genre affords non-Western authors (those authors who occupy ‘positions within, but marginal to, the global cosmopolis’ (Ommundsen, ‘Sex and the Global City’ 110)) a means of appropriating—and undercutting—Western narratives of romance in late capitalist consumer culture.

In Australia, Anita Heiss is one of the genre’s preeminent and prolific practitioners. Since 2007, she has written five chick lit novels, the most recent, *Tiddas*, published in March 2014. A Wiradjuri woman from Central NSW, Heiss is a veritable one-woman industry, writing poetry, memoir, academic monographs and young adult fiction. She maintains an ever-expanding social media presence and speaks regularly at local, national and international literary events. Moreover, she is unique in her position as an Aboriginal Australian author writing commercial women’s fiction for a mainstream, middleclass audience. Heiss is fond of quipping that her decision to write chick lit was prompted as much by the need to ‘purg[e] [her]self of 15 years of bad dates as it was about writing urban Aboriginal women into mainstream Australian fiction’ (Heiss, ‘Why Chick Lit?’; see also Heiss ‘From “Chick Lit” to “Choc Lit”’; Meyer). Cleansing properties aside, the chick lit genre easily lends itself to the depiction of young, urban Aboriginal women living lives as glamorous as Carrie Bradshaw, and as humorous as Bridget Jones.

By foregrounding a non-Western, non-white subjectivity, Heiss joins a growing number of authors worldwide who appropriate the genre for their own use (Ommundsen ‘Sex and the Global City’ 110). In these reworkings, the protagonist is still young, female, and wedded to her consumer lifestyle, but she is no longer white (Ommundsen; Chen; Butler and Desai; Sellei). She is just as likely to be South Asian (as in Kavita Daswani’s chick lit), Latina (Alisa Valdez-Rodriguez’s chick lit), Chinese (Annie Wang), Saudi Arabian (Rajaa Alsanea), Eastern European (Zsuzsanna Rác), African-American (Sister Souljah), or, as Heiss demonstrates, Aboriginal Australian. The ease with which the chick lit formula can be modified to accommodate non-Western subjectivities suggests a plasticity that transcends, or at the very least, counterbalances, both the genre’s inherent conservatism and the conventions that govern its narrative and structure. In its traditional articulations, the chick lit genre is heteronormative, white, and middleclass; traditional gender binaries are taken seriously and living the big city, consumer culture dream shapes the narrative arc.

- . 'Why Chick Lit?.' *ABC Radio National: The Book Show Blog*. 31 Mar 2011. Accessed 30 Jan 2015. <http://blogs.radionational.net.au/bookshow/?p-1321#more-1321>
- Hurley, Angelina. 'What's So Funny about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Humour?' *The Conversation*. 12 Mar 2015. Accessed 29 May 2015. <http://theconversation.com/whats-so-funny-about-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-humour-38484>.
- McRobbie, Angela. 'Post-Feminism and Popular Culture.' *Feminist Media Studies* 4.3 (2004): 255–64.
- Meyer, Angela. 'Typecasting and Narrative Voice at the 2011 Emerging Writers' Festival.' *LiteraryMinded*. 30 May 2011. Accessed Feb 2015. <http://literaryminded.com.au/2011/05/30/typecasting-and-narrative-voice-at-the-2011-emerging-writers-festival/>.
- Moreton-Robinson, Aileen. 'Whiteness, Epistemology and Indigenous Representation.' *Whitening Race: Essays in Social and Cultural Criticism*. Ed. Aileen Moreton-Robinson. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies P, 2004. 75–88.
- Ommundsen, Wenche. 'Sex and the Global City: Chick Lit with a Difference.' *Contemporary Women's Writing* 5.2 (2011): 107–24.
- . 'From China with Love: Chick Lit and the New Crossover Fiction.' *China Fictions/English Language: Essays in Diaspora, Memory, Story*. Ed. A. Robert Lee. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008. 327–45.
- Rácz, Zsuzsanna. *Állítsátok Meg Terézanyut!* Budapest: Bestline, 2002.
- Sellei, Nora. 'Bridget Jones and Hungarian Chick Lit.' *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*. Eds. Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young. New York: Routledge, 2006. 173–188.
- Souljah, Sister. *The Coldest Winter Ever: A Novel*. New York: Pocket Books, 1999.
- The Guardian*. 'Bainbridge Denounces Chick-Lit as "Froth."' 23 Aug 2001. Accessed 1 Feb 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/aug/23/bookerprize2001.bookerprize>.
- Valdez-Rodriguez, Alisa. *The Dirty Girls Social Club*. New York: St. Martin's Paperbacks, 2003.
- Wang, Annie. *The People's Republic of Desire*. New York: Harper Collins, 2006.