Croker, Carol-Anne. (2007). Chick talk: (de)constructing chick lit and women's fiction.


Conference homepage: http://b07.cgpublisher.com/

Copyright © 2007 Carol-Anne Croker.

This is the author's version of the work. It is posted here with the permission of the publisher for your personal use. No further distribution is permitted.

Accessed from Swinburne Research Bank: http://hdl.handle.net/1959.3/53956
Chick Talk (De)-constructing ‘Chick lit.’ and ‘women’s’ fiction or the search for a transnational women’s genre fiction.

Abstract

Women authors are accepted as valued (marketable) contributors to genre fiction and they are welcome to even subvert the tropes associated with these genres, thus we have a long established practice of narratives featuring female forensic investigators and private eyes, and female warriors in sci-fi and fantasy. Yet the women writing in the genre ‘chick lit.’ are dismissed by the literary elite as ‘not real authors’ churning out contemporary versions of the ‘bodice ripper’. What I am attempting to discover in this paper is the elements that explain the popularity in the market of the ‘chick lit’ novel throughout western cultures. It is my contention in this paper that the phenomenon dubbed ‘chick lit’ is actually the mobilization of a backlash against the destruction of, and criticism directed towards the male literary hegemony. By looking at the fastest selling genres of women’s fiction I will attempt to answer this question as to if this is in fact a global phenomenon.

Keywords

literature, ‘chick lit, fiction, women’s writing, postfeminism, publishing, Australia

Background for the paper
The research for this paper form part of my exegetical work for my PhD in writing. One key focus for the Exegesis is to locate my own creative work/product within its field of knowledge. My creative work of Artefact is a novel set in the late twentieth century in Australia and looks at the lives of three women, sisters of the second-wave, if you will and how feminism has and has not impacted their life choices.

In order to locate my own writing within the contemporary Australian context, I had to position my exegetical research within the current academic debates within Australian literature in response to such research questions as:

- Has ‘the death of the Australian literary novel’ happened, as proposed by some critics?
- Have multi-national publishing giants facilitated the production of and dissemination of Australian contemporary literature globally?
- Is there actually such a thing as Australian literary novels? Who decides what they entail? Or by whom are the written? Or for whom are they written?
- What of popular fiction? Can that be deemed literary?
- Why are there so few women writers represented in the apparent canon of Australian contemporary literature?

It is from these research questions that I have begun my exegetical journey and this paper represents my early attempt to answer these questions in the first year of my PhD candidature.

It is my contention that my two PhD components (the exegesis and the artefact) are intrinsically linked by a basic personal philosophy of life and view of the culture in which I grew up, live and within which I am currently working, the epistemology which underpins my work.

Working within an academic academy and striving to produce intellectually rigorous written exegetical writing, I have read many, many policy documents and discussion papers on the parlous state of the Australian Tertiary Education sector. There is an implicit view of this sector; that it remains predominantly positivist and empiricist and the discourse remains androcentric and elitist. Thus seeking to complete a PhD in a ‘less traditional’ or classic model, the following concepts guide my methodological decisions:
Methodology

- What indeed are my guiding epistemologies?
- How does feminist methodology allow for debate between ‘positivist’ models of research and ‘holistic’ models of research?
- Why is the feminist descriptor necessary at all?
- How will my research contribute to the building and construction of new knowledge within our discipline?

‘Feminist researchers emphasize the synergy and interlinkages between epistemology, methodology, and method’ (Charmaz 2006; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006) thus this paper is framed in feminist theory. Feminist academics and researchers, such as Patti Lather (Lather 1991), Elizabeth Grosz (Grosz 2008), Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007), Sandra Harding (Harding 1987), amongst many others critique the positivist paradigm that remains privileged within the academy, especially in the Sciences but also to a lesser degree in the Social Sciences and Humanities which bring into focus the historical, material and social set of patriarchal power relations.(Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007: p7)

Thus I have framed this paper within this epistemology and present a partial, yet critical appraisal of the state of contemporary publishing in Australia.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, Australia has witnessed changes in the visual, performing arts and literary markets wrought by the demands of globalization. The Australian film industry has embraced the opportunities presented by access to overseas markets and expertise. For Australian literature however, the discourse is one of doom and gloom; rhetoric of crisis pervades the popular press and specialist broadsheet supplements. The ‘death of the Australian literary novel’ is touted as a direct result of the push towards globalization of the publishing industry and the dominance in Australia of the big international houses and lists.
Each week Australian readers can see the bleak picture for Australian writers, the ‘top ten’ lists seem to be dominated by Dan Brown, J.K. Rowling, and such international ‘name before title’ authors. Yet, our lists also feature (the big three) Australian writers; Peter Carey, Tim Winton and Bryce Courtney despite significantly lower sales figures and print runs. These facts are conveniently ignored by our journalists and literary experts who choose to focus on the prominence of mainstream popular fiction and the dearth of ‘Australian Literary Novels’ being published ‘at home’. This, despite latest literary success in Australia; a huge sprawling, 516 page work, Carpentaria by Australian author Alexis Wright. This year already her novel has achieved the Miles Franklin Literary Award and was the winner of the 2007 Australian Literature Society Gold Medal. Wright features in interviews and her book in the review pages of our prominent broadsheet papers, and in each article it is noted that this work is literary fiction in the finest tradition of the Australian saga.

Possibly the reason Carpentaria and its female author are not afforded space within the discussion is that the publishing house behind Carpentaria; Giramondo ¹, is not a mainstream commercial enterprise. It is produced from the University of Newcastle with funding from the Federal Government, two Eastern-state governments and one elite Sydney grammar school. Obviously, the literary novel is alive and well at Giramondo but not in the mainstream market of commercial publishing. Thus the most common view disseminated by our literary critics remains that Australian popular authors who are signed to multi-million dollar book deals by the International publishing houses have somehow ‘sold out’ and are responsible for the death of the ‘Australian Literary Novel’. I propose that the push to commercial slush comes from the multinational publishing houses.

*Current state of commercial publishing in Australia*
What is missing in this debate is a closer look at exactly what is being published in Australia by the large houses and the smaller independent publishers. Since 2000 Neilson BookScan provides weekly data to the industry on what books are sold by tracking barcodes from over 80% of retail outlets. This data is collated by genre, author, release date, and seller demographic. Books are being published in Australia and there is still a viable commercial industry. What has changed is the type of books being published and perhaps the style or genre of fiction demanded by the market.

Not surprisingly many of the titles and sub-categories of the ‘general fiction’ classification as tracked by BookScan (Neilson BookScan 2007), could be described as women’s fiction, i.e., written by, about and for women. Perhaps the prominence of novels written by, for and about women explains the claim that the Australian Literary Novel is in crisis. There is a long history of critics, academics and commentators ignoring the importance of women’s popular fiction in the marketplace, and women authors’ novels place within the literary canon.

By simply looking back over the list of critically acclaimed and literary prize-awarded novels, the canon can be seen to be a bastion of male writing and masculist themes (pioneers, explorers, soldiers, drovers, graziers, fishermen, even ‘swaggies’). Author names that are globally recognizable include: Henry Lawson, Norman Lindsay, Steele Rudd, Neville Shute, Xavier Herbert, Hal Porter, Alan Marshall, Patrick White, Rodney Hall, David Malouf, Albert Facey, Morris West, Arthur Upfield, Thomas Keneally, Robert Dessaix, Robert Drew, Peter Carey, Tim Winton, Frank McCourt, Matthew Reilly, and Richard Flanagan (Australian Government Culture and Recreation Portal 2007; Ipswich Library and Information Service 2007-8).

It is possible to construct a similar list of Australian women writers but very few would be known internationally for their work, despite critical acclaim and literary awards, nor do they form part of the core curriculum in
Australian literature courses; they are compartmentalized into ‘Australian women’s literature’ electives.

One would think that I am overstating the gender imbalance within the canon and have chosen to ignore the prominence of women writers in Australia since the 1960s to today, but by looking at the BookScan data on best selling books in Australia for May 2007, it seems that very little has changed. However, what is immediately noticeable is the dominance of women authors selling in the Australian marketplace and placed within this ‘catch all’ category of ‘general and literary fiction’, as well as in the ‘romance genre’ traditionally associated with female writers and readers. What is also immediately noticeable is the few best selling Australian writers (male or female) in the list. For the purpose of this paper I am focusing only on the women authors in the bestseller list. The names of Australian women writers are highlighted in boldface:

**F1.1 General & Literary Fiction**
- Cecilia Ahern (*Where Rainbows End*)
- Maggie Alderson (*Cents and Sensibility*)
- Maeve Binchy (*Nights of Rain and Stars*)
- Candace Bushnell (*Four Blondes*)
- Martina Cole (*The Take*)
- **Nikki Gemmell** (*The Bride Stripped Bare*)
- Zoe Heller (*Notes on a Scanda*)
- Lisa Jewell (*31 Dream Street*)
- Cathy Kelly (*Always and Forever*)
- Marian Keyes (*Sushi for Beginners*)
- Sophie Kinsella (*Shopaholic and Baby*)
- Marina Lewycka (*Short History of Tractors.*)
- **Monica McInerney** (*Odd One Out*)
- **Tara Moss** (*Hit*)
- Kate Mosse (*Labyrinth*)
- Jodi Picoult (*Nineteen Minutes*)
- Lionel Shriver (*We Need to Talk About Kevin*)
- Paullina Simons (*The Girl in Times Square*)
- Penny Vincenzi (*Sheer Abandon*)
- Lauren Weisberger (*The Devil Wears Prada*)

**F2.5 Romance & Sagas**
- Diana Gabaldon (*A Breath of Snow and Ashes*)
- Nora Roberts (*High Noon*)
- Stephanie Laurens (*The Truth About Love*)

Three only, if we include ex-pat Canadian Tara Moss. None would be authors whose names regularly appear in the contemporary Australian literature courses. They are categorized as ‘popular authors’ not ‘literary authors’. The most prolific women writers in Australia write within the category of fiction – ‘Romance and Sagas’ as represented by imprints by Harlequin Mills and
Boon. By ignoring these imprints and constantly referring to these titles as ‘romance genre’ they are instantly disqualified from being viewed as literary fiction. They are described as formulaic, the modern equivalent of 1920s pulp fiction. So it is misleading to say that the Australian market is closed to women writers, perhaps only certain classifications of fiction (or genres) are deemed closed to women writers; and with women writers’ dominance within the genre fiction categories, it can be seen how commentators can lament the death of the literary novel. (Marr 2001; Hibberd 2006; ABC Radio National 2007)

Would it be correct to assume that a literary novel in Australia cannot simultaneously be marketed as a genre novel and vice versa? Is it more an argument about classification and marketing than a question of literary merit as reported in the Australian Press? And does this hold true for overseas markets as well in the twenty-first century? These questions are the reason I am here today. I want to discover whether what is happening in Australia is, as I suspect a trans-global phenomenon.

In Australia, ‘chick lit.’ as a sub-genre of general fiction is yet to have a separate classification by BookScan, whereas ‘erotic fiction’ is classified separately. Are we to assume that ‘chick lit.’ sits within the catch-all classification ‘general fiction’ and erotic fiction must therefore be by definition, ‘literary’?

If so, would this classification include examples of Australian erotic fiction written in recent years? Or should this be a sub-genre of ‘chick lit’; the sub-genre I have dubbed ‘clit lit’; a form of contemporary erotic writing by women for women’). Two Australian authors’ novels I position within this sub-category, include Tobsha Lerner’s Quiver (Lerner 1998) and Linda Jaivin’s Eat Me (Jaivin 1995). But apparently, these are presumed to be literary rather than commercial. The determinant of the classification ‘literary fiction’ may be explained by the overt eroticism, demonstrating that there is another
aesthetic at play within the Industry to determine ‘literariness’; but this is beyond the scope of this paper. and worthy of further examination in the Australian context. (Radway 1983; Radway 1990; Radway 1990; Radway 1991; Radway 1994; Radway 2008; Radway Forthcoming)

**Chick lit., trans-global literature?**

Whilst conceding that ‘chick lit.’ titles appear to be pandering to the demand of their market and readership, themselves single, educated, employed young (predominantly white) women, it occurs to me that the mobilization of female desire and romantic escapism lying beneath this popularity is not seriously being addressed by literary critics or academics.

The popularity of ‘chick lit.’ as evidenced by global sales data, including within the small Australian market demonstrates that the readers of these novels inhabit a shared cultural space, irrespective of the novels’ countries of origin. When global business enterprises become involved with a particular phenomenon and see dollars to be made from it, one can no longer view it as a localized issue affecting particular writers or publishing houses.

The kindest descriptor in common usage positions these titles as the new ‘novels of manners. This discourse is mobilized to claim a shared literary heritage with earlier female authors such as Jane Austen. In fact many ‘chick lit’ titles borrow their plots from her work, e.g. Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’ Diary. (Fielding 1996) ‘chick lit.’ novels can be positioned as novels of manners in that they do recreate a social world, and allow insights into the customs, values and mores of the early twenty-first century.

How can we identify the shared cultural space inhabited by the readers of ‘chick lit’?

- Is it post fin de siècle ennui that sees cynicism and world weariness as a selling factor in popular culture?
Why are there so many protagonists quick with the one-liner and put down phrase populating the women’s fiction category at present?

Are women readers finding empowerment through vicarious identification with these less-than perfect size-zero women?

Are we witnessing a reaction against the backlash propaganda that women in the thirties are ‘at their use-by date’ biologically speaking? Or perhaps a reassurance that women with education can actually find a mate in their social milieu and not have to ‘marry down’?

Is it also reassuring for women readers that not all the men in the novels are married or gay and some eligible partners can be found for relationships?

These are the themes or messages articulated within the ‘chick lit.’ titles. What makes these novels the preferred cultural material of women in the noughties? Can it be purely escapism given the socio-economic ‘realities’ of their daily lives? Or is the it thematic commonality of the novels from the global literary–sistahood, especially within the Anglophone cultures part of a post-feminist or post-modernist paradigm shift as a result of globalization?

I contend that it is more than thematic commonality. The need to ask the earlier questions points to post-second wave reactionism. I suspect; that ‘chick lit.’ has its basis in postfeminist times; a political backlash by the masculine hegemony in Western cultures seeking to encourage women out of the workplace and back into the realm of domesticity, and conservative heterosexual relationships? I would also argue that ‘chick lit.’ is not a ‘new’ women’s fiction as is touted by some in the publishing industry, because the women writers and readers of these titles are not seeking to define in print women’s sexuality and desire within contemporary society. Or at least not in any ‘new’ approach that could be viewed as non-phallocentric nor challenges the status quo.
An interesting anomaly is that the novels written in Australia are not easily identifiable as Australian. It is as if the American, and then British structural frames devised to house this genre have been simply transplanted directly to the world of urban Australia. The only identifiers are different colloquial speech patterns, yet the popular cultural references remain the same (Jimmy Choos, Manolo Blahniks, Fendi, Ermes, Prada, Versace, Gucci, D&G, Bollinger, Moet etc). This is a major departure for the content of Australian literature, which in turn demands a closer critical analysis of what makes this genre popular with Australian readers and audiences.

Diane Negra (Negra 2004) in her article, *Quality Postfeminism* notes that one of the earliest examples of the ‘chick lit.’ genre, the television series, *Sex and the City* (and the novel on which it was based) operates as a ‘cultural paradigm through which discussions of femininity, singlehood and urban life are carried out.’ And she goes on to discuss how New York is positioned as the representative style centre in the US imagination.

- Is it simply the ongoing coca-colonisation of the Australian culture that has been increasingly obvious since the 1980s?
- Does our highly urbanized population find the pioneer and bush tropes found in our literary representations of Australia to be anachronistic?
- Is it specifically the lack of Australian iconography that makes the genre popular with Australia’s Gen X and Y?

This seems to be a remobilizing of a cultural cringe similar to that responsible for the exodus of creative talent in the 1960s. Or more likely, is it simply the US economic hegemony, servicing the political needs of patriarchal global capitalism, which is played out through the lens of popular culture?

- What defines an Australian audience and Australian literature in particular?
- How can we share a thirst for homogenized, westernised cultural artefacts with other nations? So how different are we to our US or British cousins?
- Is our popular literature a reflection on a trans-national consumer culture pandered to by the multinational consumer goods manufacturers?
I suspect that all these elements coalesce to generate new genres of literature, such as ‘chick lit.’, which foregrounds issues of consumerism, narcissism, and social alienation in urban environments, most specifically through the ‘You’ve Got (e) Mail’ digital networks. It seems only natural for Australians to want their literature to reflect their daily lives and preoccupations. I suspect also that all these elements combine to re-position Australia’s spiritual heartland in the cityscape and suburbs, where we actually live.

**The Australian context for the rise in popularity of ‘chick lit.’**

The Australian cityscape of the 21st century shares many things in common with larger metropolises around the globe. Women are now valued members of the workforce and as the gap between the pay scales of male and female workers narrows, particularly in the white-collar sectors of employment, women are viewed by big business and commerce as valued customers and consumers with substantial amounts of disposable income, particularly in the case of the young single working professional urban woman.

The TV series, *Sex and the City* and the ‘chick lit.’ novel that gave rise to it, amongst the many that came after, depict a cohort of young women forced to seek satisfaction through their consumer power and the accumulation of status symbol products until salvation can be had through the ‘catching’ of *Mr. Right* and the promise of a life redolent of happy suburban domesticity. This is a theme that is evident in most of the popular culture narratives of the noughties.

In Australia, 2004 was an election year and saw politicians playing to voter prejudices and hip pockets. Our Prime Minister and Treasurer were both photographed surrounded by women and/or babies, and made very public statements encouraging Australia women to have more children, at least three; ‘one for the mother, one for the father and one for the Nation’. (Francis 2004; Gittens 2004; Haywood 2004; Howard 2007) Australia even offers financial incentives for women to have babies under a scheme called the Baby Bonus. It was not a one-off played for the electorate but an ongoing public discourse seeking to influence a shift women’s work-life choice, away from the paid workforce.
One of the most startling examples of how this shift is being played out in the public arena occurred earlier this year in the first week of May 2007. A very prominent coalition (conservative parties) senator, Bill Heffernan, described the Deputy Opposition leader, Julia Gillard, as being unsuitable for office and out of touch with the electorate because she is 'deliberately barren'. This is pure backlash rhetoric. In the following weeks the government stepped up its ‘worker choices’ rhetoric aimed squarely at encouraging women to “choose” childrearing over career, yet the discourse seems less threatening because it is couched in terms of ‘women’s best interests’ or how they can be happier. The discourse resonated with 30-something women struggling with expensive child-care costs, the bulk of the household domestic labour, together with paid careers.

‘Chick lit’ author Susanne Danuta Walters (Walters 1991) states that the feminist movement is... ‘responsible for the sad plight of millions of unhappy and unsatisfied women who, thinking they could ‘have it all’, have clearly ‘gone too far’ and jeopardized their chances at achieving the much-valorized American Dream.’ (Or in our case, the ‘Australian Dream’ of suburban home on three-quarter-acre block, with gardens, BBQs and at home mothers; a middle-class-Desperate Housewife-existence, Australian-style).

**Postfeminism as dominant ideology**

Academic and scholar Susan Glasburg (2006) identifies several key elements that can be identified as postfeminist (meaning both that which is considered anti-feminist and issues that are positioned chronologically after feminism and as a direct consequence of the movement itself.):

- negative reaction to second wave feminism
- focus on the individual instead of a collective sisterhood
- desire for more traditional femininity through domesticity, consumerism, romance and motherhood
female identity crisis as articulated through the fear of a man shortage and the ticking biological clock

anxiety over ability to make the correct future decisions to ensure a happy life

Glasburg is not the only academic to speak of this reaction against 1970s feminism. In a more recent paper Politics of/and Backlash, Anne Braithwaite (Braithwaite 2004) looks closely at this ‘female crisis’. ‘Fictional and non-fictional media alike have powerfully shaped the way people think and talk about ‘the feminist legacy,’ and ailments it supposedly inflicts on women... it is the media that appear as that which is focused on women’s best interests and as that which really cares about women’.

At the same time in Australia, like their overseas sisters the younger female mass media audience and female book readership are flocking to the films and books of the ‘chick lit’ genre. ‘I consume therefore I am’. Maureen Dowd (Dowd 2005) questions this trend when she grapples with what has happened in the past twenty years to turn young women from archetypal feminists protesting against inequality into the boxtoxed, lipsosuctioned hyper-feminine Desperate Housewives?

And despite their protestations to the contrary, ‘chick lit.’ authors are not giving their Gen X and Y readers a ‘roadmap for life in the twenty-first century’, they are not offering alternative ways for young women to be happy apart from the tired old formula that happiness is to be found only in long-term heterosexual relationships. There is no engagement with the broader social and political agendas at play making these women unhappy with their "have-it-all" lifestyles (Glasburg 2006).


13
This ‘female identity crisis’ is fed by the mass media and popular culture claiming that:

- there is an increasing cohort of commitment-shy straight men in the community,
- that the sexual revolution has pressurized younger women to accept child-free co-habitation when they would rather marry and have children
- the fact that men are seen to not want a relationship with a strong independent woman who may challenge their sense of masculinity and/or social role

As Australian women continue to complete their secondary education in ever increasing numbers and move on to tertiary studies the discourse ‘warns’ that men ‘marry down’ whilst women wish to ‘marry up’. Thus, the more educated a woman becomes the less available men in the gene pool to choose from. Education is therefore positioned as a hindrance to achieving romantic ‘success’. Thus mobilized is a sense that it’s every woman for herself in this ‘city jungle’; this is just another example of the media mobilizing post-feminist backlash rhetoric. Women need to focus on the individual (themselves) instead of sisterhood (equality of access for all) because in the past such sisterhood (feminism) has ruined their chance for happiness and fulfillment and has ‘taken away’ many much valued and desired freedoms, including:

- a dismissal of romance and the importance of it in a woman’s life (‘the Prince Charming/Happy Ever After myth’)
- ‘Pleasure in domesticity’ (the Snow White myth).
- the right to be (and perceived denigration of) an ‘at home mother’ (the Brady Bunch myth/ or the updated Neighbours myth).

Add to these ‘concerns’, many young women (Glasburg 2006) are unhappy with:
• having to seek independent financial security through a career which means that women ‘have to’ delay child-bearing against the woman’s individual wishes.

• the perception that to identify as feminist a woman is necessarily a ‘man hater’, or is a ‘lesbian’, has no sense of humour, dresses badly (in the proverbial asexual overalls/dungarees), is often ugly and wears no make-up to camouflage that fact, refuses to shave body or leg hair, and takes little pride in her appearance.

• a woman’s right to express herself through dress, make-up, decoration (the basic right to female consumerism),

In Australia like elsewhere, the discourse plays out as a discourse of fear. In the 1990s the term ‘lipstick feminist’ which was used to describe attractive well-groomed feminist-identifying professional women and celebrities, was constructed as a derogatory term signifying a female confidence trick or kind of subterfuge to lull men into a false sense of security, to trap them into a relationship before realizing that these women are the ‘dreaded other’, the ‘ball-breaking’ feminist.

Thus in the ‘noughties’ the perceived female identity crisis finds itself played out in the pages of ‘chick lit.’ novels and seems to be the reason they hold such currency with their readership that identify strongly with the protagonists dilemmas. Most of the plots deal with young career women dealing with increased anxiety over significant life choices presented by the ‘have it all age’.

In the popular press and within the pages of ‘chick lit.’ novels, the Australian-version of this discourse follows these lines.
• If a woman chooses to pursue education and a career she cannot ‘have it all’ and assume that she can also juggle the demands of motherhood and family relationships
• If a woman chooses to marry/ co-habit and raise children she cannot expect to be taken seriously in the workforce
• As women are forced, by financial necessity (through increasing house prices and rising school fees, lifestyle choices etc) to work whilst raising children there is a perception that women are shouldering an unfair load domestically with partners not being forced to ‘pull their weight’.

Often television programmers are the first to reflect shifts in ideology, and Diane Negra (2004) argues that the rise in commercial television programming marketed directly at young women (shows like Sex and the City, the OC, Desperate Housewives and Ugly Betty) along with the rise in publication of Chick Lit titles directly results from a neo-conservative push in the US. All of these programs aired prime time on Australian free to air networks also. And whilst our ‘chick lit.’ novels are at great pains to distance themselves with any local references, the same is not said of our television dramas. It seems the demands of the ideology outranks the impetus towards globalization. TV sitcoms often feature single women who have ‘gone too far’ in their quest to ‘have it all’?

The dominant ideology in 2007 is the one espoused by the Prime Minister and his Treasurer, John Howard and Peter Costello as Australians are positioned according to their economic purchasing power; the ‘aspirational voter’ versus ‘the battlers’. The battler rhetoric is tied to those holding lower socio-economic status whereas the ‘aspirational’ voters are by and large the middle class, often with two incomes and the desire for the better things in life, very much a designer label lifestyle complete with expensive imported motor vehicles and the latest electronic and technological goods. Even the families who do not have the disposable income for these items, aspire to own them. The pressure is on both men and women in these ‘aspirational’
couples to work hard for these consumer items. Yet these ‘aspirations create a dilemma for working women. In Australia in the noughties it is downright unpatriotic if women are not staying home and having children, one for Mum and Dad and one for the nation. The falling birthrate (and hence women) are blamed for Australia’s economic woes as the population ages. Gay mothers like Beaumont do not even rank a mention in the public fiscal debates.

Is it any wonder many Australian working women choose to escape from the pressures of daily life with moments of ‘guilty pleasure’ reading the chick lit ‘easy reads’ with their discourses of ideal femininity or hyper femininity and apparent sexual equality, or the ‘beach reads’, romance and family saga novels; the female equivalent to the men’s airport novels?

Humour and cliché are the most easily identifiable elements of Chick Lit fiction. Often the ability to laugh at the protagonist, especially with her sexually dysfunctional relationships is said to be what draws women readers to these novels. It is not verisimilitude they seek from the texts but broad-brush-stroke comedy, complete with slapstick sequences (Lette 2003).

By featuring self-deprecating female protagonists and humorous misadventures ‘chick lit.’ intrinsically links the text with enjoyment, pleasure and escapism. Despite the plots recalling earlier eras in the ‘battle of the sexes’ these novels do not directly challenge the traditional sexual order. The ‘chick lit.’ heroines are still reflecting gender roles where the woman is in the subservient position, as the protagonists often date their bosses, superiors or other professionally powerful men. And through their disastrous dating blunders are revealed to be ‘out if their depth’; socially, emotionally and sexually. So perhaps the so called problem for the proponents of postfeminism with ‘chick lit.’ is that the readers read it for escapism, rather than engaging with the issues being raised (Lynch Cooke 2006). ‘Easy reads’ and ‘beach books’ are read for escape. A classic is not. An assumption exists that if one is reading serious literature, one isn’t ‘escaping’. This notion stems
from the idea that escape is tied to the text itself...Another connotation of escape is the 'easy read’, which is part of 'chick lit’s’ appeal... [these] books allow them to ‘not think’. The readers are thinking about the text and not their own lives. When chick lit readers use the term escape, usually they are referring to the act of escaping from and not escaping to.’

It is this very act of disengaging with the issues that young women are facing in the ‘real world’ that ensure ‘chick lit.’ never achieves a subversive literary position and can never be the new women’s literature of the twenty-first century. The exposing of societal double standards, or the sexual oppression and manipulation of women by the patriarchal capitalist society does not occur through reading ‘chick lit.’ The novels allow women to feel empowered to ‘make themselves feel (momentarily) happy’, ‘have a good laugh’, ‘enjoy the solitary pastime of reading’ but never engender a desire to challenge the wider status quo. Thus, the large multi-national publishing houses and film-making conglomerates are laughing all the way to the bank.
Works Cited


Francis, B. (2004) "Make Bub Bonus Better." Endeavour Forum Volume, DOI:


Hibberd, G. (2006) "Australian literature on the nose?" Online Opinion Volume, DOI:

Hogan, R. (2001) "In Praise of Pink Ladies: Interview with Meg Wolizter." Beatrice.com Volume, DOI:


Howard, J. (2004). Prime Minister of Australia: "Come on, come on, your nation needs you.”

The Australian.


Sullivan, J. (2007) "Lit goes from chicks to mother hens. Chick Lit writers have spawned and invented a new genre, Mum Lit," The Age


Endnotes:

¹ Giramondo publishes only one or two novels each year as well as one or two anthologies of poetry

² This is ‘retreatist’ ideology at work. Negra (2004) notes that in the television series, *Sex and the City* (and in the original novel of the same name) and others like it depict ‘a group of women beset by the cultural dilemmas and stigmas... as it recuperates these stigmas, in part, through the consumer power of its professional protagonists’ with ‘the final effect [being] the creation of a luxurious lifestyle blueprint poised to compete with suburban domesticity.’

Thus at a time when right-wing political activities are being increasingly mainstreamed, and the family normalized as the exclusively-recognized social unit [women] are bombarded [with the] neoconservative logic that defines their primary if not sole interest as (heterosexual) romance and marriage. More recently, this logic has targeted single professional women as selfish, emotionally stunted, and ultimately regretful about ‘forgetting’ their essential roles as wives and mothers.