

## A New Novel of Manners

### Chick Lit and Postfeminism

By Stephanie Harzewski.

University of Virginia Press, 2011. xii + 247 pages.  
6 B/W illustrations. Paperback. \$19.50 at Amazon.

Review by Christine Mitchell.

Stephanie Harzewski writes a scholarly but highly readable text that reviews the phenomenon of “chick lit,” as contemporary novels directed primarily at women have come to be called. In her examination, she traces the development of the “chick” novel from its advent, not, as many might assume, the mid-1990s with the publication of Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the City* and Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Instead, Harzewski makes a credible argument that chick lit has its ostensible beginnings at the dawn of the novel in the eighteenth century.

Throughout her analysis, Harzewski returns to her thesis that “the chick lit genre presents a new novel of manners” in both homage to and parody of the original form. She references the range of such novels, starting with Defoe’s *Moll Flanders* (1722) and Eliza Haywood’s *The City Jilt* (1726), and culminating in publications contemporaneous with *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, such as *The Husband Habit* (Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez, 2009), *All Roads Lead Me Back to You* (Kennedy Foster, 2009), and various “paranormal chick lit” novels like Stephenie Meyer’s *Twilight* saga (2004–2008).

In her introduction, Harzewski maintains that the traditional novel of manners and current chick lit novels both focus on “society and culture, frequently satirically, with narrators and characters often reader-participants of class hierarchies, their maintenance, and their penetration,” citing Jane Austen’s characters as prime examples from early works. In addition to discussing the novels’ development, Harzewski includes numerous critiques of chick lit—both positive and negative—from

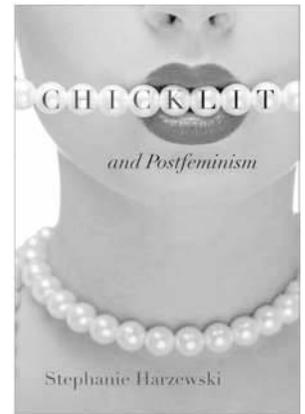
modern academics and critics (e.g., Jameson; Tasker and Negra; Mazza and DeShell) that help to position her thesis that chick lit is simply the postfeminist adaptation of the traditional novel form.

Harzewski lays out her method in the introduction, describing the various approaches she takes in analyzing chick lit: “as a realistic parody of Harlequin romance, as a female bildungsroman,” as a postmodern novel of manners, and as a counterpoint to feminism. In developing her theories about chick lit, Harzewski outlines similarities between old and new narratives, with a principal difference being one of kind, not degree. For example, while one parallel between old and new is an emphasis on relationships with men, in early novels heroines were rather obsessed with finding the right man to marry—one who would provide not only economic security but also status. In contrast, characters in newer novels express an interest in men mainly in terms of gratification, whether sexual or economic, and not necessarily within the confines of marriage. Unlike Austen’s heroines, modern-day women have replaced men with shoes, marriage with shopping, and romance with sex.

In the course of her review of the literature, Harzewski diligently examines the “Austen-philia and Darcymania of the last decade” and the commercialization of the Austen brand. Related to the marketing of Jane Austen is the media frenzy over chick lit merchandise ranging from the novels themselves to television shows and movies, to stationery, board games, clothing, and, of course, shoes. Harzewski moves beyond close readings of the two novels central to the proliferation of chick lit in the 1990s, *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, to a discussion of the cultural, political, and economic environments accompanying changes in the sexual atmosphere. These changes, in turn, not only permitted but promoted the creation and publication of chick lit as women began to live on their own, support themselves, and seek self-affirmation. Women who no longer needed men to provide for their financial

security— or who claimed they did not—also claimed that they no longer needed men to provide for their day-to-day companionship, social status, or sexual satisfaction. Other women, consumer products, and self-gratification delivered all they needed, and these new bonds formed the basis for contemporary chick lit in a postfeminist era.

The final chapter of Harzewski’s book provides an analysis of the state of postfeminism. Here she looks at the competing strands of feminism as it currently exists, acknowledging that many of the novels exhibit a presupposed acceptance of feminism, what she calls a “vexed feminism,” even as they steer clear of any specific reference to the women’s movement or its effects on culture or politics. Postfeminist chick lit published since 2001 has served to provide humor in an otherwise humorless decade of unemployment, the events of 9/11, and a downturn in the economy, according to Harzewski. In this light, recent chick lit has tended to be somewhat repetitious and in danger itself of falling prey to caricature, much as the predecessors it initially parodied. Yet, as Harzewski reminds readers, chick lit is responsible for transforming the genre of the novel, thus reinvigorating a form of literature that has “come full circle” in the nearly three centuries since its invention.



Christine M. Mitchell is an Associate Professor of English at Southeastern Louisiana University in Hammond, LA. She teaches an array of classes, including American literature, literary analysis, and rhetoric, with a special interest in gender issues and rhetorical styles.