

ARTS & BOOKS

Chick Lit goes global

By Maud TOURNIER-ALLAND

Chick-lit is a mostly female genre, written and essentially read by women, but this tremendously successful literature is progressively invading screens. Even men are getting in the mood.

The general assumption is that chick-lit readers resemble the main characters of their favourite novels: often between 20 and 30 years old, with a keen interest in love, marriage, relationships and shopping. Often dismissed, chick-lit is a recent literary genre, born in the British Isles and increasingly successful worldwide. Since the success of *Bridget Jones's Diary* in 1996 the genre has boomed. Critics describe it as commercial literature, more often than not superficial, "a genre in which the break-up of a love affair leads inexorably to the purchase of new shoes."^{*}

Despite criticism, chick-lit has become a global phenomenon with authors like Marian Keyes, Isabel Wolf, Sophie Kinsella, Sinéad Moriarty, Plum Sykes and, of course, Helen Fielding in the British Isles alone. In the United States there are plenty of popular chick-lit authors like Laura Zigman, Janet Evanovich, Jennyfer Weiner and Cecily von Ziegesar.

But this new wave has also triggered the emergence of new authors in India, Hungary, Poland and Scandinavia.^{**} *Piece of Cake* written by Swati Kaushal has sold 4,800 copies and was described by *India Today* as "a desi *Bridget Jones' Diary*"^{****}. (*desi* generally refers to people of South Asian origin)

According to Mallory Young, co-editor of *Chick Lit*, a collection of academic essays on the genre, in countries "where feminism hasn't fully taken root, chick lit might be offering the feminist joys of freedom and the post-feminist joys of consumerism simultaneously."^{**} The genre encompasses a large range of different tones: from comic to more serious or even tragic. In Poland for example chick-lit novels broach subjects like kidnapping, suicide, anorexia, rape or murder,^{**} while British chick-lit often has a more humorous tone. ^{***}

Several of these novels have been adapted for the screen. In 2001 Sharon Maguire directed the adaptation of *Bridget Jones's Diary* with actors Renée Zellweger, Hugh Grant and Colin Firth. In 2005 Curtis Hanson (*L.A Confidential; 8 miles*) directed the adaptation of Jennifer Weiner's novel *In Her Shoes* with actresses Cameron Diaz and Toni Colette. *The Devil wears Prada* written by Lauren Weisberger, has just been adapted by David Frankel (*Miami Rhapsody* 1995 and episodes of *Sex and the City*) starring Meryl Streep and Anne Hathaway.

Naturally readers/viewers are not solely young women. Men have been also drawn in. Lad-lit (nicknamed "dick lit"), written by male authors like Nick Hornby and Tony Parsons, presents men keen on dating, relationships, work, family issues and so on. This genre has also been described as "what books would be if Bridget Jones was a guy"^{****}. Although the genre is not hyper successful with male readers so far,^{*****} Nick Hornby's novels have also been widely adapted for the cinema. In 2000 *High Fidelity* was adapted by Stephen Frears, and in 2001 Paul and Chris Weitz directed the adaptation of *About a Boy* with Hugh Grant and Toni Collette. *The Perfect Catch* was adapted in 2005 by directors Bobby and Peter Farrelly with actors Drew Barrymore and Jimmy Fallon. The chick-lit pandemic is definitely spreading.

Sources: * "Chick lit that mixes Voltaire with Vogue," *The New York Times* 19 June 2006; ** "The chick-lit Pandemic," *The New York Times* 19 March 2006; *** <http://chicklitbooks.com/whatis.php> "chick lit books"; **** <http://www.swatikaushal.com> Indian author Swati Kaushal's official website; ***** "The last Word; Oh Lad, Poor Lad," *The New York Times* 23 May 2004.