

**Poptimist Feminism:  
Contemporary Women Reading *Bridget Jones' Diary***

by

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*For Maggie and Madeleine.*



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## Abstract

Helen Fielding's 1996 novel *Bridget Jones' Diary* is often credited with founding the popular genre "chick lit," a category of books that has become both beloved and notorious in the ensuing decades and whose presumed readers have become figures as controversial as Bridget herself.

The introduction contains a description of the method I adopt for my project, which consists of creating a conversation between lay readers and professional critics of *Bridget Jones' Diary*. I select this method in order to compare readers' and critics' interpretations of the text and its value, which displays how criticism often falls short of understanding how women readers are actually engaging with this text and instead relies on speculation.

Chapter one reframes the concept of reader identification by theorizing it as a process, rather than an immediate or necessary experience of self-recognition. This restructuring opposes critical viewpoints that assume that if a reader identifies with Bridget Jones, she is likely to replicate Bridget's behavior. I also discuss the importance of acknowledging the ironic tone of the novel, which affects readers' experience of identification by discouraging them from taking Bridget's thoughts or actions literally.

Chapter two analyzes feminist readings of *Bridget Jones' Diary*, contrasting critical claims that the novel represents a regression for the women's movement with reader statements that praise its honesty and satirical qualities. I explore the myriad ways in which one might read as a feminist.

Chapter three explores the guiding philosophy of "poptimism" that my interviewees adopt as they reject characterizations of *Bridget Jones' Diary* as a "guilty pleasure" or a "beach read." Poptimism is the practice of treating "popular" works of media with the same critical respect as works that are considered to be a higher form of art. Rather than qualifying their enjoyment of the novel by characterizing it as escapism, readers chose instead to emphasize the novel's value as a cultural contribution. Some also stress the value of escapist reading as a whole, as a valid and active way of engaging with literature. Finally, this chapter explores how historical perspectives on women readers still subtly inform reading behaviors in that women feel pressure to defend their reading choices from others.

It is necessary to include the voices of readers in a conversation that includes critical perspectives on chick lit as well as my own analysis as a way of crediting women for the agency they exercise over their own reading choices. Triangulating these three perspectives also helps to embody the woman reader, who for so long has been the topic of debate and target of hostility in literary criticism.

**Keywords:** chick lit, feminism, women readers, identification, fiction



## CONTENTS

Short Titles.....	i
Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1: Complicating Identification: I WILL NOT Behave Like Bridget Jones.....	8
Chapter 2: How To Read Like A Feminist .....	22
Chapter 3: Not Guilty: Contemporary Readers' Verdict on Chick Lit.....	37
Conclusion .....	47
Appendix A: Study Advertisement.....	52
Appendix B: Guide for Interview Questions .....	53
Works Consulted.....	55



## Short Titles

*BJD*: Fielding, Helen. *Bridget Jones' Diary*. New York, NY: Penguin, 1996. Print.

*Chick Lit and Postfeminism*: Harzewski, Stephanie. *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia, 2011. Print.

*Did 'Bridget Jones' Really Liberate Us*: Whelehan, Imelda. "Did *Bridget Jones* Really Liberate Us?" *Horizons* 26.4 (Summer 2002): 26-29. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 217. Detroit: Gale, 2006. *Literature Resource Center*. Web. 20 Sept. 2016.

*Singled Out*: Genz, Stephanie. "Singled Out: Postfeminism's 'New Woman' and the Dilemma of Having it All." *The Journal of Popular Culture* 43.1(2010): 97-119. *Wiley*. Web. 25 May 2016.



## Introduction

In a 1998 book review of the novel *Bridget Jones' Diary* by Helen Fielding, CNN senior editor Lisa Habib wrote that the character of Bridget was undoubtedly “today’s everywoman.” “Some idealists might see such a woman as a troubling role model,” Habib wrote, “but who are they kidding? I mean, we really do act like that” (Habib). Habib was not alone in her assessment. Contemporary media coverage of the book’s release asserted that readers, particularly young women, reacted so positively to the book and its protagonist that the phenomenon was referred to in some publications as “Bridgetmania.” A *Newsweek* article by Sarah Van Boven quoted Helen Fielding as claiming: “I have girls coming up to me at parties saying, ‘I am Bridget Jones. I am her’” (Van Boven). Nearly twenty years later, as I was just beginning to draft this thesis, my friends and I went to see the latest installment in the Bridget Jones canon, the 2016 film *Bridget Jones' Baby*. As we drove to the theater, a friend remarked excitedly: “I love Bridget Jones so much. She is, like, my spirit guru.” The popularity of Bridget Jones clearly endures, even amongst women who were small children when the book was first published.

Shades of Bridget can be seen in many novels, movies, and television shows from the past two decades, most of which have been dubbed “chick lit.” In fact, *Bridget Jones' Diary* is often credited with—or perhaps accused of—founding “chick lit.” In *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Stephanie Harzewski traces the genre’s relationship to the social and demographic shifts of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century as well as its roots in popular romance fiction and even 18<sup>th</sup> century novels of manners. Harzewski writes that despite the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of chick lit as “literature by, for, or about women; *esp.* a type of fiction, typically focusing on the social lives and relationships of young professional women, and often aimed at readers with similar experiences,” the genre’s value has been the topic of debate since its beginning; it has been

accused of undermining more “serious” works by female authors and even of threatening the women’s movement altogether (Harzewski 5). Despite Fielding and Habib’s characterization of the widespread reaction to the novel and its subsequent film adaptations, *Bridget Jones* has since faced a litany of criticism, particularly from feminists, both for its portrayal of the “modern woman” in ineffectual Bridget and for its apparently lamentably wide sphere of influence. The term “chick lit,” although reclaimed by blogs and specialty websites with names like “Hello Chick Lit” and “Chick Lit Central,” has not quite shed its original pejorative connotations. When used by anyone outside these niche communities of readers, the term is unshakably dismissive. I choose to use it to characterize the genre to which Bridget Jones belongs not only to remain consistent with previous scholarship of the genre, but because the controversy embedded in the term is crucial for understanding how readers engage with these novels.

While Harzewski details the social, cultural, and economic conditions that produced chick lit, as well as the curious alignment of sexism and feminism that lead to its dismissal in works of literary criticism, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* tends to exclude the figure of the chick lit reader from its consideration. Indeed, while many scholars of the genre agree that chick lit is both under-analyzed and underrated for its ability to provide commentary on gender politics and femininity, their defense of the authors does not extend to a defense of the reader beyond justifying high sales. Though Harzewski states that “the genre allows us to revisit debates surrounding the origin of the novel and the function of the prose romance, which has always involved debate about the moral and financial status of the woman writer as well as the educational and entertainment benefits of romance, especially with regard to women readers,” she does not go into detail about the way that the woman reader is constructed in these debates.

While reviews of chick lit recognize the importance of reader identification to the genre, my project critiques the reductive assumptions that reviewers make about how the hypothetical woman reader experiences a book like *Bridget Jones's Diary*. In each chapter of my thesis, I place the voices of readers of *BJD*, garnered through qualitative interviews, into conversation both with my own analysis and with scholarship about the novel in order to examine how lay readers' and critics' interpretations differ and sometimes challenge one another. In interviewing actual women readers at length about their reading habits and their understanding of *BJD*, I offer a feminist reading of the novel, and "chick lit" as a whole, that recognizes the cultural value of a broad range of varied and complicated reading experiences.

I conducted qualitative interviews with a small sample of six chick lit readers. In discussing these interviews, I do not attempt to draw broad conclusions about the demographics of chick lit consumers; rather, I draw on individual readers' responses to certain texts to capture some nuances of readers' experiences that have been ignored or glossed over in prior criticism. I introduce readers' perspectives as crucial for understanding the value of the chick lit genre, with the hope that future chick lit scholarship will follow suit, potentially with explorations of readers on a much larger scale.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I theorize identification as a shifting, contingent process, rather than an immediate on/off sensation that either does or doesn't occur as a reader experiences a text. I distinguish between the terms "identification" and "self-recognition" in order to frame self-recognition as a sensation that may inform a reader's sense of identification but is not a necessary aspect of identification. I use the controversial issue of Bridget's body image as an example of a key battleground, where a critical conception of reader identification fails to match up with how readers are actually responding to textual cues. Focusing on Imelda

Whelehan's claim that some women "find echoes of their own struggles with femininity" in *BJD*, which "legitimizes the measuring of one's own inadequacies through the body," I argue that previous criticism has offered a reductive vision of readers' identification with Bridget Jones.

The second chapter explores how critics and readers have answered the question of what it means to read in a feminist way. Chick lit has often been criticized by self-identified feminist writers for its emphasis on thematic elements like a single woman's obsession with finding a husband or its light treatment of enforced beauty standards. Drawing on my interviews with readers, I offer an alternative explanation for how these books could be read in a way that does not contradict feminist beliefs – for example, they may be read as satirical or celebrated for the way that they foreground a woman's experience.

The third chapter investigates the concept of chick lit as a "guilty pleasure" genre in order to better understand how chick lit readers are judged—or perceive judgment from others—based on their reading habits. I use the term "poptimism," used by an interviewee named Adele, to analyze my interviewees' philosophy of escapist reading, which emphasizes their desire for critics to treat popular genres more seriously. Poptimism, which is borrowed from music criticism, emphasizes the importance of allowing "popular" genres to carry the same critical weight as others. Just as poptimism in music calls for pop music to be valued for its ability to uplift its listeners, poptimism in literature demands that popular genres such as chick lit not be dismissed as escapism, but rather valued for their escapist qualities. I also complicate the terms "guilty pleasure," and "chick lit" and analyze how these terms are gendered in such a way that recalls the history of anxieties about women readers, particularly women readers of fiction.

## Methods

Although I had initially planned to interview active participants in online “chick lit” communities such as blogs or specialty websites, I received no feedback from the moderators of these sites when I contacted them for interviews, perhaps due to their busy schedules as mothers and as full-time employees in the literary field. I then decided to shift my focus to women on campus, recalling the enthusiasm my friends had shown during our trip to see *Bridget Jones’ Baby*. I recruited interview participants through email advertisements to various groups on the University of Michigan campus, focusing on groups whose members I thought would be familiar with talking about books, such as literary magazines and the English department (Appendix A).

Table 1 represents each study participant’s demographic information. I include this information in order to highlight the range of readers I interviewed, not to make generalizations or inferences about the relationship between this information and the interviewees’ answers. The names provided in Table 1 are pseudonyms. I elected to use pseudonyms rather than the interviewees’ real names because reading choices as well as sources of identification with fictional characters can often be very personal, and I wanted readers to feel as comfortable as possible in sharing these details.

<b>Name</b>	Alyssa	Elizabeth	Jane	Rose	Adele	Jackie
<b>Age</b>	20	22	34	22	21	18
<b>Race/ethnicity (self-identified)</b>	Indian-American/Asian-American	Indian	Caucasian	White	White	White
<b>Occupation</b>	College student	Research technician in a lab	Ph.D. student	College student	College student	College student

**Table 1:** Respondents’ demographic profiles.

When asking for my interviewees' demographic information, I did not include any questions about gender identity or sexual orientation, assuming that readers would mention these aspects of their identity if they considered them to be relevant to our conversation. Two readers, Adele and Jackie, identified as queer and saw their sexual orientation affecting the way that they chose and experienced books. Adele also asked specifically that I identify her in my work as a trans woman, because she believes that her gender identity necessarily informed the answers she gave in our discussion.

It is important to note that while not all of my interview participants identified as white, many of the kinds of arguments about feminism that I address in this project are skewed toward white women. Indeed, I did not feel equipped to fully develop the how the category of race affects reader response for two reasons: first, many chick lit scholars and professional critics tend to assume that chick lit books, which primarily feature white women protagonists, also have an audience comprised mostly of white women; second, my small sample size meant that any arguments I could make about the role that race plays in this context would be based on the input of one or two women. Neither Alyssa nor Elizabeth, both of whom self-identified as women of color, spoke extensively about the way that race affected the way that they read, although Alyssa did mention that she was beginning to actively seek out works by Indian authors. However, perhaps due to the nature of my questions during the interviews, racial identity took a backseat to issues of gender during our discussions.

Each interview took on the feeling of an informal, face-to-face conversation. The interview consisted of two parts: a series of general questions about reading habits, followed by more specific questions about *BJD* (Appendix B). Although I used the same series of questions as a baseline for each interview, I intended them to work more as an informal conversation, so

the content of each interview was in many ways controlled by the interviewee. Throughout these interviews, I found that readers often switched back and forth between talking about the 2001 *Bridget Jones' Diary* movie and the 1996 novel, so their answers tended to reflect a more general understanding of the plotline rather than analysis of the book's structural features. Participants were compensated with a \$20 Visa gift card for one interview, which lasted between 45 minutes to an hour.

The direction of my research was very much shaped by the responses that readers gave in these interviews. While initially intended as a method to enrich my analysis of concepts such as identificatory reading, feminist reading, and escapist reading as they apply to *Bridget Jones' Diary*, my interviews with these six women encouraged me to trouble the concepts themselves. Furthermore, in prioritizing the voices of readers as a necessary counterpart to critical voices in my project, I was challenged to navigate my own role as both reader and critic. As readers spoke about how their intersecting identities influenced their reading behaviors, I was compelled to examine my own reading experience through the lens of my own identities. This self-reflection became a necessary mediation between two largely dissimilar viewpoints: those of chick lit scholars and those of readers. Including the voices of readers in scholarship of popular genres is crucial to avoiding the pitfalls of overgeneralization of women readers, such as the problematic notion that women read books like *Bridget Jones' Diary* simplistically or uncritically.

## Chapter 1

### Complicating Identification: I WILL NOT Behave Like Bridget Jones

The popularity of *Bridget Jones's Diary* has been spoken about in pathological terms such as “Bridgetmania” and “the Bridget Jones Effect,” as if the book inspires victims, rather than fans. In her essay “Did *Bridget Jones* Really Liberate Us?” Imelda Whelehan writes that “*Bridget Jones* and its ilk paint a bleak picture of the contemporary singles scene, with women seeking control through the dutiful accounting of the day’s ‘sins’ –calorie intake, cigarettes, alcohol. What is most depressing about the Bridget Jones effect is because people find echoes of their own struggle with femininity in it, it somehow legitimates the measuring of one’s own inadequacies through the body” (Whelehan). By arguing that the novel promotes or “legitimates” certain behaviors, Whelehan fails to give readers credit for their ability to distinguish between themselves and Bridget. The mischaracterization comes from an understanding of identificatory reading as an experience of total self-recognition instead of as a fluid relationship between reader and character. In other words, Whelehan seems to assume that a reader experiences a text thinking “I am Bridget” rather than “I understand Bridget.”

Scholarship that explores identificatory reading does not describe a reader’s total immersion in a character, but rather the reader’s varied uses of characters as tools for self-recognition and self-reflection. In this chapter, I theorize identification as a process, and using one of the book’s themes that has been most contentious for critics—Bridget’s body image—I examine the various ways that failure to consider identification as a process has contributed to readings of *BJD* that imply readers have been “duped” by the text. I argue that the process of identification contains temporal lapses that can result in projective or retrospective identification,

which challenges Whelehan's notion of identification as a conflation of character and reader. Projective identification, for example, might entail the sensation that the reader Elizabeth describes – she identifies with Bridget Jones not because Bridget reflects who she is now, but “who I want to be” in the future (Elizabeth). Retrospective identification, on the other hand, could involve the reverse: identification with a character upon reflection after the fact, or identifying with a character who represents a past version of oneself. Stephanie Moody's work with romance readers can also be applied to the chick lit genre, which is in many ways descended from the romance novel. In “Identification, Affect, Escape: Theorizing Popular Romance Reading,” Moody emphasizes the identificatory reading experience of a reader named Beth, who discusses the importance of a heroine's insecurities to her reading process. Moody writes that Beth's “desire to feel connected to a heroine encompasses a longing to recognize herself within the text and to have her experiences with insecurities acknowledged” (Moody). Beth's desire to feel connected to a character before she reads a book affects the way she experiences a book, influencing her to seek out similarities between herself and the character; it does not mean that Beth only seeks out books that feature heroines who are superficially similar to her. The same can be said for readers of *BJD*, including myself. Identification is a process that begins before the book is ever opened. To say that one identifies with Bridget Jones is not a matter of representing oneself as insecure, a chain smoker, a heavy drinker, or even a single woman in her mid-thirties; rather, it is Bridget's underlying emotional properties, or, as one reader put it, her “essence” that elicits an identificatory response. As Moody notes with the romance readers she interviews, “identifying as the heroine does not indicate a loss of self-awareness” (Moody). If anything, identification heightens self-awareness as readers immediately search for aspects of themselves within the character whose story they have just entered.

Similarly, because readers suggest that identification is heavily influenced by context, I argue that modern scholarship traps Bridget Jones in the chick lit canon of the 1990s in a way that leads to incomplete or inaccurate analysis of *BJD*'s popularity. In talking to readers, I learned that they tend to place Bridget Jones in a more contemporary category of fiction heroines who are more ironic and self-deprecating than, for example, Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex and the City*, to whom Bridget is often compared. Indeed, my interviewees tend to foreground the irony of the novel and the zany nature of Bridget herself in their analysis of the book, despite Whelehan and other critics' inclination to dismiss this irony as ineffective or to omit it from their consideration altogether. This disconnect between what critics find objectionable and what readers seem to take away from the novel is most evident in discussions of Bridget's body image, which is a major source of irony in the novel.

Bridget's body image is a major focus for critics who, like Whelehan, consider the book in some way damaging to readers because those who identify with Bridget's dieting behavior might feel licensed to replicate it. Yet, Bridget's dieting is an important site of disconnect between critics and readers. Certainly, readers could take Bridget's statements about dieting seriously, or as a validation of their own potential insecurity. However, other possible effects of the text are to give readers permission to see the messages of diet culture as ridiculous, and to leave them inclined to look more critically at their own dieting behavior with the hope that they are not like Bridget. As someone who did see "echoes of [my] own struggle with femininity" in Bridget's, I interpreted these passages as an acknowledgement of the futility of conforming to certain beauty or body ideals, although such ideals cannot be easily shed. Though Bridget occasionally comes across as an earnest participant in a culture of body-monitoring, the zeal with which she both attempts and fails to regulate her consumption is a darkly humorous thread in the

novel that even Whelehan acknowledges to be a “send-up of the means by which we internalize style and trend doctrines.” Whelehan qualifies this statement by contrasting identification with an understanding of irony, and by figuring identification as “an act of self-indulgence” rather than a process that occurs in tandem with or is even triggered by an understanding of the novel’s critique of diet culture. In addition, Whelehan’s fixation on the theme of Bridget’s body image clashes with the responses of my interviewees, who considered Bridget’s body insecurities of little importance to the overall narrative, at worst “not a major takeaway,” and at best, an empowering sign of Bridget’s burgeoning self-control.

One of my interviewees, Alyssa, invoked a quote from the actress Mindy Kaling when asked to describe her perception of Bridget’s body image:

[Mindy Kaling] said, like, “I’m one of those people who is always trying to lose weight but doesn’t want to be skinny,” and I think that that’s—at least to me—that’s how Bridget kind of sees her own weight and body, too. So she’s definitely in control of her own sexuality but doesn’t necessarily adhere to, like, a universal standard of beauty that, like, rewards thinness...it seems like she doesn’t view her body or her weight as holding her back, but still, like, buys into the notion of, like, wanting to lose weight, if that makes sense.

Here, Alyssa seems almost unaware of an interpretation of *BJD* that deems Bridget’s dieting behaviors as extreme, or as indicative of a severely diminished self-worth. Although Bridget “buys into” a culture that has convinced her that she must lose weight in order to achieve happiness, in Alyssa’s reading, this conformity is merely superficial. Although Alyssa seems to contradict herself by asserting that Bridget doesn’t “adhere to a standard of beauty that rewards thinness” yet still desires to lose weight, this comment expresses the complicated interplay of culturally enforced beauty standards and individual self-confidence.

Alyssa's reference to Mindy Kaling is also significant because it shows the way that contemporary readers have placed Bridget into a new category of fictional women, characterizing her as a precursor to new permutations of the chick lit protagonist. One way that readers can interpret Bridget's habits is to read them as an intentional reaction to a culture that attempts to regulate and attach value to the eating behavior of women. It is this interpretation that has contributed to the popularity of the characters created by female comedians such as Kaling, Amy Schumer, and Tina Fey. April Davidauskis analyzes the depictions of women's hunger and eating habits in her article "How Beautiful Women Eat': Feminine Hunger in American Popular Culture," referencing female characters like Fey's Liz Lemon on the television show *30 Rock*. Though Davidauskis's essay focuses on American media from the year 2000 onward, one could easily apply to Bridget Jones her assertion that "these hungry women are challenging conventions of the regulated feminine body by indulgently eating, resisting the tie between restriction and women's eating habits by enacting a woman empowered through food" (Davidauskis). By exploring depictions of "overeating beautiful women" on television, Davidauskis analyzes the ways in which depictions of women's appetites "solidify their own resistance to feminine convention" (Davidauskis). According to Davidauskis, the popularity of these characters with women viewers, particularly evidenced by fan made videos and media outlets such as BuzzFeed, is related to an appreciation for the subversive nature of portraying women who are unhindered by dieting or restrictive eating.

Although the characters of Liz Lemon and Bridget Jones have many notable differences, Davidauskis's description of young women's new "investment in an appetite-based feminism that showily indulges in desires that move away from the conventional representations of women and food in order to emphasize empowerment and self-gratification" seems to ring true for

Bridget Jones, who appeared more than a decade before *30 Rock* premiered (Davidauskis). Unlike Bridget, Liz openly rejects dieting, but it is critical to note that for all her calorie counting, Bridget does not diet, either. If the popularity of Liz Lemon among women is partially a result of her relationship with food, it does not seem too far-fetched to assume that Bridget's popularity is not necessarily due to the way she intends to eat, but the way she actually eats. On the one hand, the connection that readers have drawn between *BJD* and works such as *30 Rock* or *Trainwreck* represents a major contextual shift that has led to entirely different perspectives on Bridget's "relatable" properties. Rather than focusing on Bridget's intentions to diet, contemporary readers familiar with the overeating, often self-identified feminist characters tend to react to Bridget's eating. On the other hand, Davidauskis raises a valid criticism of this mode of "appetite-based feminism," in that its key exemplifiers are typically thin, white, conventionally attractive women. The idea that these women "exist alongside, but are kept distinct from the populations that are usually associated with overeating: this context situates these women as even more exceptional because their eating does not lead to obesity or signify poverty" applies to Bridget Jones, whose ability to engage in obsessive fad dieting and binge eating is rooted in food security, which speaks to her class and race privilege (Davidauskis). Bridget's weight never exceeds 135 pounds, despite the fact that the national average weight of women in Great Britain is currently 154 pounds (ONS). Bridget's agony over her below-average weight has been subject to scrutiny from both feminist critics and readers alike, and it is perhaps the single most alienating factor for readers considering Bridget's body image. While her calorie, alcohol, and cigarette consumption encourage identification from the reader even in their exaggeration and may even be considered rebellious, the inclusion of Bridget's weight

distinguishes her body from the reader's and characterizes her as one of Davidauskis's "overeating beautiful women."

Despite the specification of Bridget's weight, readers (myself included) seem to identify with the emotional components of Bridget's eating, not the physical characteristics that are given alongside each entry. One interviewee, Rose, experienced empathy for Bridget's self-monitoring of her food consumption to the point of discomfort, stating that it was "the area where [she] related to Bridget most" and that it was "hard to read, like, ugh, because I was like, maybe I wasted my entire week as well, just like that" (Rose). Rose's reference to "wasting" time directly refers to eating in ways she considers "wrong" or "bad," adding that part of her frustration with the novel was how accurate she felt this plotline to be, noting that this actually affected how she absorbed the irony of it: "Because of my own experiences...I actually found it less funny...this is supposed to be Bridget being obsessive for no reason, but I would definitely know exactly—I would definitely keep track of some of the things she tracks" (Rose). For Rose, knowing Bridget's weight did not lessen the intensity of this identification. Although she had picked up on the fact that Bridget weighs less than she does, joking that "I assume I'm much taller than Bridget," Rose did not seem to internalize this detail as much as she did the more tangible emotions driving it. The experience of solidarity that Rose describes is almost painful and is certainly distinct from the feeling of "legitimization" that Whelehan fears from readers.

Another reader, Jane, saw the inclusion of the "numbers" (Bridget's weight, calorie count, cigarettes smoked, etc.) as the novel's canny way of showing Bridget's transcendence of these statistics over the course of the novel. For Jane, these numbers are necessary to the novel because "these are the numbers that society uses to tell you, like, you are not enough, you are a failure, you are inadequate" (Jane). In Jane's reading, that Bridget can easily reduce herself to

these numbers is what allows readers to track Bridget's discovery of her own self-worth over the course of the novel. As with Liz Lemon, it is Bridget's honesty to which readers seem to respond, not necessarily the content of her confessions.

This new categorization of Bridget Jones, which places her with Liz Lemon and Mindy Kaling's character in *The Mindy Project*, along with readers' ambivalence regarding her dieting behavior, shows readers' understanding of *BJD* as a work of satire, whether or not they actually find it funny. As Jane indicates, fans of the novel have understood Bridget's idiosyncrasy of listing her weight and calories consumed at the beginning of each entry as a humorous exaggeration of the pressure to conform to Western beauty standards. Yet previous criticism of the novel has overlooked this irony, or failed to give readers credit for their ability to pick it up. Bridget's body image is the site where feminist critics such as Andi Zeisler and Imelda Whelehan zero in on the novel's "antifeminist" properties. Zeisler and Whelehan have lamented Bridget's constant dieting and self-deprecation as, at best, an ineffectual critique of the diet industry, and, at worst, a tacit encouragement of superficiality and body dissatisfaction. However, the irony that Fielding presents in *BJD* is effective for me as a reader because it illustrates a kind of reality. I interpret Bridget's negative view of her own body as reflective of the pervasive culture of dieting that persists today and continues to affect women. Even if the novel does not contain implicit critiques of Bridget's dieting behavior, the fact that readers identify this aspect of the novel as reflecting their own struggles with womanhood is valuable because their identification can lead to more critical attitudes of the diet industry and to greater self-acceptance from those who love Bridget.

The discrepancy between Bridget's intentions and her actions is a particular point of irony that has been overlooked in the common interpretation of *BJD* in feminist criticism, which

highlights Bridget's calorie-counting and self-improvement goals as a depressing portrait of vanity, or worse still an attempt to normalize or make light of disordered eating behaviors. As she demonstrates in the I WILL and I WILL NOT lists in the first diary entry of the book, Bridget *intends* to "reduce circumference of thighs by 3 inches (i.e. 1 ½ inches each), using anticellulite diet" and "go to gym three times a week not merely to buy sandwich," both goals related to the improvement of her body (Fielding 3). But the first chapter is titled "January: An Exceptionally Bad Start," which prepares the reader for Bridget's failure to meet these goals from the beginning. Bridget's I WILL and I WILL NOT lists introduce Bridget's goals primarily in order to construct her character – by knowing what she most wants to improve about herself, we are given a picture of how Bridget is at present. The reader should not and does not expect that Bridget will immediately be successful in her pursuit of these goals; they're merely New Year's resolutions. Her first entry, dated January 1<sup>st</sup>, already contains excuses and justifications for her current weight and eating behaviors, such as "*129 lbs. (but post-Christmas), alcohol units 14 (but effectively covers 2 days as 4 hours of party was on New Year's Day)*" (Fielding 7). These goals function as a way of establishing Bridget's character in all her impulsivity, rather than setting up a cohesive self-improvement plan that the reader should feel compelled to follow.

Readers involved in my study understand Bridget to be a parody but do not tend to interpret women to be the butt of the joke. At the time of *BJD*'s publication in 1996, concerns about weight and dieting were frequent—so much so that to exclude them from Bridget's confessional narrative would have detracted from her ability to be seen as an "everywoman"; furthermore, I argue that the continued existence of a culture that encourages body dissatisfaction in women is unfortunately a factor in Bridget's enduring popularity. Sarah Grogan's *Body Image: Understanding Body Dissatisfaction in Men, Women, and Children* was written in 1999

and provides a comprehensive look at Western cultural ideals of the body, as well as how these ideals are enforced. Grogan references several body image studies performed in the United States, Australia, and Britain during the first half of the 1990s to claim that body dissatisfaction is extremely common in women of all ages due to the pressures placed on women to conform to a specific body type. In her introduction to chapter 3, “Women and body dissatisfaction,” Grogan writes:

Slimness is seen as a desirable attribute for women in prosperous Western cultures, and is associated with self-control, elegance, social attractiveness, and youth (Orbach, 1993). The ideal female shape is epitomized in the slim but full-breasted figures of models Elle MacPherson, Helena Christensen, and Claudia Schiffer... In Western society in the 1990s, we have replaced [practices of corsetry and foot-binding] with strict diets (which weaken and debilitate) and plastic surgery (where women undergo painful procedures to try to attain culturally-defined attractive body shapes). (Grogan 25)

According to Grogan and the studies she analyzes, Bridget is far from the only woman who considers herself “traumatized by supermodels,” although it is worth noting that these are beauty standards that are primarily typified by white women. Grogan cites a 1986 interview study performed by researchers Nickie Charles and Marion Kerr, who interviewed 200 British women of varying ages, with 177 of the 200 expressing concern or dissatisfaction with their weight, and 153 out of those 177 having dieted in the past (Grogan 32). During the interviews, these women described wanting their thighs to be smaller, or feeling that “their life would change for the better in some way if they lost weight, usually identified as an increase in self-confidence” (Grogan 34). Charles and Kerr conclude that “what emerges from these comments is a strong dissatisfaction with their bodies, a dissatisfaction that was not confined to women who were dieting or trying to diet but was shared by almost all the women we spoke to” (Charles and Kerr 541). Grogan observes that the women interviewed in this study had a “mental yardstick” for

how they would like to look, an ever-present image of the ideal body. This is also true of Bridget, whose ideal weight is 119 pounds (Fielding 90).

Bridget's view of her own body is typical of Western women both in the 1990s and in the 2010s, and it remains timely. A 2008 study titled "The Role of the Media in Body Image Concerns Among Women" from the University of Wisconsin reports that "50% of girls and undergraduate women report being dissatisfied with their bodies" and that "in many ways, body dissatisfaction has emerged as a core aspect of women's physical and mental health" (Grabe et. al.). Even more recently, a 2015 survey of 9,667 Western women performed by psychologists from the University of Westminster and the University of Vienna found that 89% of Western women report weight-based body dissatisfaction, with 84% of those women reporting the desire to be thinner (Swami et. al.). The study also found that 91% of women saw a discrepancy between an ideal body and their current body.

Perhaps because negative body image remains common among women, it might seem natural for it to be referenced by any novel seeking to accurately render or effectively satirize societal pressures place upon women. Whelehan writes that *BJD* and other chick lit texts portray "women seeking control" through dieting and self-monitoring; however, Whelehan does not acknowledge that *BJD*'s portrait of dieting could be intentionally "depressing" to readers, as it was for Rose. By accessing Bridget's exaggerated narrative of weight fluctuation and bizarre eating habits, the reader is encouraged to identify these behaviors as unhealthy, as well as to be critical of any attitudes she shares with Bridget. For example, when Bridget's friend Tom asks her for advice on dieting after he loses a beauty pageant, she tells him that one is supposed to eat only a thousand calories per day if one is on a diet. Tom responds with alarm:

“A thousand?” said Tom, incredulously. “But I thought you needed two thousand just to survive.” I looked at him nonplussed. I realized that I have spent so many years being on a diet that the idea that you might actually need calories to survive has been completely wiped out of my consciousness. Have reached point where believe nutritional ideal is to eat nothing at all and that the only reason people eat is because they are so greedy they cannot stop themselves from breaking out and ruining their diets. (Fielding 225)

This is the first point in the novel where Bridget’s unhealthy attitudes about food are spelled out explicitly, and it displays the fact that Bridget’s attitudes about food are extreme and not at all advisable. The humor of *BJD* resides in this exaggeration, but the potential subversiveness of the novel comes from the strange truth underneath it. In Bridget’s world, as in the real world, dieting is so normalized that the act of eating can seem controversial. But Bridget stating that her “nutritional ideal” is starvation does not, as Whelehan suggests, “legitimate” it, mostly because Bridget herself does not subscribe to this ideal. Bridget completely fails to stick to any diet whatsoever, and instead, picks and chooses aspects of different fad diets in order to justify her eating decisions (Fielding 65). At the end of the novel, Bridget notes that over the course of the year, she has gained 74 pounds but “lost 72 (excellent).” Her celebration of this supposed “weight loss” is perhaps the clearest indication of the irony of the novel. Bridget uses humor in the face of a culture that aims to dictate the way she eats, the way she drinks, and the way she looks, and readers referred to this aspect of her character as one of their favorite things about her.

Examining how readers process the irony of the text, as well as how they understand what it means to identify with Bridget, is crucial in order to make assertions about the effect of *BJD* on its readers. For example, engaging in conversations with readers has helped me to determine whether Whelehan’s concern that readers may be compelled to replicate Bridget’s behavior is valid. In the very last diary entry of the novel, Bridget and her love interest Mark

Darcy are at long last together. She informs the reader that she has “finally discovered the secret of happiness with men,” and that it is with deep regret that she admits this “secret” is: “Don’t say what, say pardon, darling, and do what your mother tells you” (Fielding). This last piece of advice, directed at readers, is taken up by critics as proof of the novel’s “conservative,” marriage plot ending (Harzewski). While it is true that Bridget’s eventual happiness and self-acceptance are not the result of personal growth, necessarily, but are rather connected to the validation she receives from her relationship with Mark, the neat conclusion of the love story, in my reading, is somewhat perfunctory. Another way of reading this ending is to understand that Bridget is going to go on being Bridget, relapsing into old vices, making mistakes and not learning from them. Suggesting that the novel is resisting the “conservative” happily-ever-after conclusion, Bridget’s year in summation, which follows immediately after the “do what your mother tells you” line, shows that she has not lost weight, quit smoking or drinking, or completed the majority of the tasks she set herself at the beginning of the year. Bridget can’t, or won’t, change. We can interpret this stagnation as the 2001 movie adaptation of the novel did, as sentimental proof that Bridget can find love “just as she is,” but if so, this idea is hardly depressingly conservative. There’s no makeover scene, no revelation of a hidden talent: Bridget resists personal growth of any kind and ends the book just as flawed as she begins it.

I asked my interviewees how they interpreted the final line “don’t say what, say pardon, darling, and do what your mother tells you.” Jane, the 34-year-old Ph.D. student, said that she read this line as “pure snark”: “Bridget hasn’t needed to change who she is to be with Mark. The idea that women get men by conforming to arbitrary social expectations has flown out the window.” Jane went on to add, “the final line is perhaps the most sarcastic part of the whole book” (Jane). For Jane, and in my own reading as well, there is no moral of the story, no “secret”

to happiness as Bridget suggests: it is actually the opposite of a neat, happy ending. The discrepancies between the way that readers are assumed to interpret *BJD* in criticism like Whelehan's and the way that they report understanding the text show the need for readers' voices to be included alongside the critics' in discussions of reader identification. Readers report complex and far-reaching processes of identification that extend beyond simple self-recognition.

## Chapter 2

### How To Read Like A Feminist

“It's a shift from real-time -- historical-political time -- back into that dependent, dreamy, timeless state of Women's Time. In Women's Time, your fate is not in your own hands as an agent of historical change. Rather -- Hey, are you a Pisces? Why bother running down your Manolo Blahniks to do something as mousy as voting? Your fate is in your cleavage, and in the stars.”

– Naomi Wolf, “The Future Is Ours To Lose”

“There is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism,” Bridget remarks early in the novel, as her friend Sharon rails against the “shifting balance of power” as women move from their twenties to their thirties (Fielding 20). According to Sharon, as women age, they become less powerful and carry less social capital due to their more imminent need to settle down. Critics of the chick lit genre have made much of this observation; indeed, in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Stephanie Harzewski calls this line “chick lit’s most famous reference to feminism” (Harzewski 74). Because *Bridget Jones’ Diary* is considered to be the ur-text of the chick lit genre (or, as Harzewski writes, the text “best exemplifying” the genre), this line carries a great deal of significance, whether fairly or unfairly. Feminist critics have characterized it as a kind of guiding philosophy for chick lit as a genre, and theorists of postfeminism, like Harzewski, have used it to sketch out postfeminism’s key tenet: that the time for organized, action-based feminism is past. The supposed culture of postfeminism in the 1990s is what Naomi Wolf urges young women to resist in the epigraph of this chapter. Wolf’s inclusion of the shoe brand “Manolo Blahniks” is a deliberate reference to *Sex and the City*, an oft-invoked “postfeminist” television show whose protagonists are frequently depicted mooning over Manolo heels. Wolf’s fear seems to be that the ultra feminine, individualistic heroines of *Sex and the City*

are emblematic of the next generation of women: women whose self-reliance – and self-absorption – prevents them from participating in collective organizing around political issues.

Wolf wrote “The Future is Ours to Lose” in 1999, a year after *BJD*’s US publication and an outpouring of single-woman fiction that Andi Zeisler referred to as “The Year of the Woman, Unmarried, in Her 30s.” Indeed, the tone of feminist criticism of this period reflects greater anxieties about the state of the women’s movement, and how media like *BJD* might encourage apathy from women readers. Yet Wolf and Zeisler place curious limitations on the capacity of women to be both feminine and feminist, to read their own horoscopes as well as the rest of the newspaper. Contemporary readers, myself included, chafe against the implication that there is a correct way to be a feminist. Their feminist identities did not sacrifice or suppress their complexity.

Similarly, *BJD* itself does not readily submit to stringent definitions of “feminist” or “antifeminist,” instead rendering female characters that are rich in contradiction. Critics such as Zeisler see *BJD* as problematic for its representation of a highly individualistic and interior notion of female empowerment. However, today’s readers see the empowerment they gain from identifying with Bridget as a stepping-stone to feminism, a key dimension of their reading experience that has the potential to extend to political activism. In this chapter, I argue that the contemporary readers I interviewed, all of whom self-identify as feminists, use their identification process as a means of taking up *BJD* in feminist ways, indicating that the act of “feminist reading” is less about *what* one reads and more about *how*.

Although Harzewski could be considered a proponent of the chick lit genre, her analysis of *BJD* and criticism of Helen Fielding dismisses the power and perceived feminism of identificatory reading for readers of the novel. Concerned with more individualistic notions of

empowerment and self-acceptance, Fielding suggests that there is something inherently feminist in providing an intimate portrayal of one woman's inner life, with flaws and contradictions not only visible, but celebrated. My interviewees overwhelmingly reinforced this sentiment. Yet, Harzewski argues that although Helen Fielding has said repeatedly in interviews that the "strident feminism" line, like the novel itself, was intended to be ironic, "the conservative ending of the text raises an eyebrow to this claim" (Harzewski 75). Harzewski seems to be suggesting that Fielding's classification of her novel as satire is something of an afterthought to what could otherwise be read as a marriage plot that subscribes to traditional gender roles. Quoting Fielding, Harzewski defines *BJD*'s relationship to notions of empowerment and feminism in these terms:

Fielding glossed this line by asking readers to look critically at feminism's capacity to integrate humor: 'If we can't have a comic female character, if we can't laugh at ourselves without having a panic attack about what it says about women, we haven't gotten very far with our equality' ("Helen Fielding: The Making of Bridget Jones"). Fielding poses laughter as the new feminist frontier, an agenda not ignoble at that. However, Fielding's defense of Bridget's antifeminist declaration is ultimately apolitical in that it implies women readers need to take a wholly uncritical perspective on what is being laughed at. (Harzewski 75)

In this passage, Harzewski takes several strong stances on what is "feminist" and what is "antifeminist" as she quotes Fielding's comments about the "strident feminism" line. Harzewski accuses Fielding both of asking her readers to "look critically" at a kind of austere feminism and of classifying *BJD* as a small-scale feminist endeavor, a rendering of individual womanhood in all its complexity without designs to make a broader social commentary. For Harzewski, it seems that Fielding's emphasis on the individuality of one "comic female character" is irresponsible: for example, though Bridget's failure at maintaining a diet encourages laughter from the reader,

that laughter is not sufficient to incite critique of the diet industry. Yet the compulsion to depict a female character that can be called unequivocally feminist could be what Fielding is attempting to subvert. Harzewski's conclusion that "Fielding's defense of Bridget's antifeminist declaration is ultimately apolitical" does not seem to fit exactly what Fielding is saying. Though Fielding appears to be placing both her readers and herself in one category by using the pronoun "we," she seems simultaneously to dismiss any notion that Bridget can, or should, represent all women, or have worrying implications for "women" as a group. Bridget is one woman, one "comic female character." Any value she may have comes from her ability to represent the truth of some women.

Three readers, who all consider themselves to be feminists, emphasized their use of *BJD* as a supplement to their feminist activism, not as a substitute. Furthermore, they expressed doubts that a work of fiction could be definitively feminist or antifeminist. When asked if *BJD* was a feminist text, one reader, Alyssa, responded:

I don't really know. I mean, I guess there's this push to portray women protagonists as always strong and always perfect in an effort to kind of like, subvert any notion of, like, women being inferior. But that kind of like strips away any sort of, like, humanness from them. By having these characters like – what was Amy Schumer's most recent movie – *Trainwreck*, yeah. So by having the character in *Trainwreck*, or *Bridget Jones*, it's like, um, I would say feminist because it's showing like real, like more real women. But then there's the fact that it kind of is centered on a relationship and maybe doesn't pass the Bechdel test<sup>1</sup> and things like that, so I don't know. (Alyssa)

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<sup>1</sup> In order to pass the "Bechdel test," an evaluation designed to rate works of fiction based on the sexism inherent in their depictions of women, a movie must meet the following conditions: it must feature at least two women, these women must talk to each other, and their conversation must be about something other than a man.

Although Alyssa is ambivalent about calling *BJD* a “feminist” text, she refers to Bridget’s “humanness” as feminist, which is significant because it recalls Fielding’s definition of equality. Alyssa, too, resists an overly glossy portrayal of women protagonists that shows them as “always strong” and “always perfect” in the name of feminism, gravitating instead toward works of media that showcase the “real,” such as *BJD* and the 2015 movie *Trainwreck*.<sup>2</sup> For Alyssa as well as for Fielding, the cost of “real” is, in some ways, the accusation of antifeminism. Embedded in this binary between “perfect” and “real” is the problematic notion that all “real” women are as neurotic or laughable as Bridget. Yet for Alyssa, this notion is preferable to a more poised character with whom she cannot identify.

Though Fielding characterizes “equality” as the notion that men and women should be equally fair game in parody, she does not acknowledge that much of what *BJD* lampoons is the predicament of modern single women, rather than the women themselves, which would perhaps strengthen her defense. For the readers I spoke to, it was Bridget’s ability to “laugh at herself” at all that they find liberating, and this laughter does not come at the expense of their feminist values. Certainly, this conception of “liberation” falls short of rebutting critiques that feminism has become too individualistic. Yet readers’ willingness to read Bridget’s flaws as empowering shows that ideas of what it means to read in a feminist way are expanding.

The idea that *BJD* is “uncritical” (to use Harzewski’s word) of the cult of beauty and self-improvement that Bridget struggles to navigate is common in feminist criticism of the novel, as is the accusation that Bridget is a parody of a single woman without the necessary accompanying

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<sup>2</sup> *Trainwreck* is a 2015 romantic comedy written by and starring the comedian Amy Schumer. Like Bridget, the protagonist of *Trainwreck* drinks to excess, engages in casual sex, and is professionally stagnant. The readers I interviewed drew many comparisons between *BJD* and the comedy of not only Schumer but also many other contemporary female comedians such as Chelsea Handler, Tina Fey, and Mindy Kaling. I discuss these comparisons in detail in Chapter 1.

social commentary or “message,” such as the message that it is acceptable to be single in one’s thirties. Yet feminist critics tend to abandon the search for this “message” beyond the confines of the book itself, and this ignores the sophisticated feminist interpretation being performed by readers. For instance, in a 1998 review of *Bridget Jones’ Diary* for *Bitch* magazine, Andi Zeisler reacts against the mainstream acclaim of the novel, expressing her extreme fatigue with the amount of “kissy-face accolades along the lines of ‘90s heroine’ and ‘how did the author get into my diary?’” that *BJD* received upon its release in the United States (Zeisler). Zeisler’s takedown of the novel is rooted in the assertion that Bridget (and Ally, and other chick lit heroines) is in no way representative of the modern woman, but is merely marketed as such. However, this claim assumes that readers can be convinced to identify with a character simply by clever advertising or reviewer hype, which seems unlikely; indeed, my interviews revealed a tendency to identify with Bridget in spite of her branding, not because of it.

Too stringent a focus on the “strident feminism” line results in an oversimplification of the role of feminist attitudes in readers’ engagement with *BJD*, and this oversimplification encourages dismissal of the readers themselves. Both Andi Zeisler, a critic of chick lit, and Harzewski, who acknowledges chick lit’s usefulness, assume that women readers take lines such as “there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism” at face value, and in doing so, they overlook other aspects of the novel more worthy of interrogation. Writing for *Bitch* magazine, Zeisler implicates Bridget in a more pervasive problem of the way single women are presented in pop culture, though her critique of this marketing unfortunately gives way to a dismissal of the vast amount of women engaging with these portrayals. Harzewski, who ultimately designates chick lit a valuable source for analyzing sociocultural trends, nevertheless under-recognizes the import of humor for readers. My interviews revealed that readers’ positions

diverged from both Zeisler's and Harzewski's postulation. All six interviewees self-identified as feminists, but this did not mean that they sacrificed their feminism to read *BJD*, as Zeisler suggests. Nor did they set aside their appreciation for the novel's humor, or their identification with Bridget, in order to read in a defensive or academic way, an idea that Harzewski occasionally skirts in her defense of the chick lit genre.

Zeisler compares the novel to another popular work of postfeminist fiction, the American television show *Ally McBeal*, in order to claim that while the marketing of these women characters refers to them as "everywomen," these characters have little in common with the average single woman and instead serve as degrading "caricatures." "Why anyone would want to identify with BJ is mystifying," Zeisler remarks (Zeisler). Rather than seeing accessibility in their flaws, Zeisler writes that Bridget Jones and Ally McBeal are merely adaptations of the same cartoonish, fictional woman who, while entertaining, ultimately serves to damage public opinion about single women and, in the most extreme case, represents a backslide for feminism. Unlike Harzewski, Zeisler is not concerned with the apoliticism of the novel (to lament this would be "a waste of time"); instead, she entreats the readers of *Bitch* to be offended by *BJD* on a personal level and to see it as an unflattering portrait of womanhood. Zeisler roots her criticism in distaste for Bridget's personality, and, it is implied, for the personality of those who relate to her.

That the women pouting in court, tripping over their feet in business meetings, and constantly fretting over their ring-free fingers are the ones heralded as embodying the female mindset – by female writers, no less – is upsetting, but worse is their creators' defending them by praising their honesty...to rail against *Bridget Jones' Diary* as a failure of feminism is probably just a waste of time, but to praise its ultimately mean-spirited portrait of the modern single woman as more 'honest' than most just amounts to giving up. (Zeisler)

Zeisler's condemnation of chick lit's female writers for proclaiming that it "embodies the female mindset" is similarly problematic, because it makes them complicit in this trickery of readers. Are women writers not also women? Who is qualified to make the judgment about a text's accuracy or "honesty" in this case? Finally, Zeisler ends her review by calling *BJD* "mean-spirited," thus alienating women readers who do see elements of their own lives in Bridget's, particularly those who have found comfort or humor in this self-recognition despite its more antifeminist moments.

The desire to characterize *BJD* as wholly feminist or wholly antifeminist inhibits more nuanced readings of the text, which should take into account the political context of *BJD*—the climate that Naomi Wolf describes in the epigraph of this chapter. Like many women, both fictional and real, Bridget struggles with the role of feminism in her life. In "Singled Out: Postfeminism's 'New Woman' and the Dilemma of Having It All," Stephanie Genz constructs the "postfeminist woman," the person whom, she asserts, comprises both the protagonist and the intended reader in a chick lit text. This argument is compelling when applied to postfeminism in general, but it does not hold the same weight when applied directly to *Bridget Jones' Diary*, a novel that represents women who are undoubtedly more "bewildered" than "confident." Although Bridget's struggle is not feminist in itself, as Genz suggests, it reflects readers' own struggles, and this is what interviewees characterize as feminist. Though Genz refers specifically to the postfeminist woman with a focus on character, I submit that her argument can be used to examine the value of the postfeminist narrative as a genre. Time and time again, my interviewees expressed that the feminist values they hold dear affect their analysis of what they read, not necessarily the choices they make about what to read. The postfeminist woman "navigates conflict between her feminist values and her feminine body, between individual and

collective achievement, between professional career and personal relationship” (Genz). Genz characterizes this experience as “conflict,” or at least an ongoing negotiation. Rather than lambasting postfeminist figures as reactionary to feminism or emblematic of depoliticized “Girlie feminism,” Genz argues that the postfeminist woman “problematizes and depolarizes the above standpoints in her open-ended negotiation of her femaleness, femininity, and feminism” (Genz). In other words, the postfeminist woman should be considered a new phenomenon altogether, a hybrid character who is characterized not by her inability to decide, but rather by her refusal to compromise. While Genz focuses on the chick lit heroine, I argue that the chick lit text itself refuses to compromise or readily submit to any one political position, because this ambiguity is crucial to encouraging identification from readers of varying backgrounds and ideologies.

I read Bridget’s line “there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism” not as an “antifeminist declaration,” but rather as a failure to understand the relevance of feminism in her life and in her efforts to achieve her goals. Not only do my interviewees indicate that Bridget’s explicit dismissal of feminism does not prevent the novel from being taken up in feminist ways, but analysis of the actions of Bridget and her friends throughout the novel also shows that her position cannot readily be distilled to her contempt for “strident feminism.” I do not share Genz’s readiness to portray Bridget Jones as an unlikely feminist role model who is driven not by insecurity but by “unwillingness to sacrifice either her feminist or feminine, public or private aspirations” (Genz). But this “unwillingness,” or indecisiveness, also makes Bridget a more realistic, and more human, character. Bridget’s failure to recognize the importance of feminism in her own life does not mean that Bridget is totally willing to relinquish her own preferences and desires in the name of procuring a boyfriend; nor does her lack of understanding

prevent readers from understanding the novel's themes through a feminist lens. Her dubious understanding of feminism seems to be another one of her flaws that makes her so appealing to readers, perhaps because they illuminate and encourage readers to address their own political shortcomings

*BJD* has been called "postfeminist" because of the way the characters treat feminism as outdated or, in many ways, optional, yet simultaneously take issues of gender equality for granted. However, Fielding seems to be parodying the hypocrisy of postfeminism as her characters blithely dismiss "strident feminism" – lampooning the same culture that Wolf does in "The Future Is Ours to Lose." She does so particularly through a send-up of best-selling self-help texts of the 1980s and 1990s, many of which use language designed to appeal to "empowered" women. Feminist critics such as Imelda Whelehan have zeroed in on the fact that the novel's few references to feminism occur in relation to questions of sex and dating. The dating arena is where Bridget's struggle with feminism becomes most apparent, as she hopelessly navigates a culture that encourages her to be both confident and submissive, to exude both self-possession and sexual availability. As I discussed in Chapter 1, for example, in the first diary entry of the book, Bridget Jones provides the readers with two definitive lists, one titled I WILL and the other titled I WILL NOT. The last item on the I WILL NOT list presents Bridget's current strategy for finding love over the course of the ensuing year. "I WILL NOT," she writes, "sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete *without* boyfriend, as best method of obtaining boyfriend" (Fielding 2). Not only is this a clearly ironic statement, but the notion of "inner poise" becomes, throughout the novel, a euphemism for a kind of feminist attitude of self-possession. This pseudo-feminism—Bridget's vision of feminism as a means to obtain a boyfriend—is one of

several competing views of the relationship between feminism and the world of dating. These conflicts are not limited to Bridget, but present in nearly every female character in the novel. Bridget and her friends celebrate the values associated with feminism or feminists only when convenient or necessary. They seem to view feminism as a kind of consolation to be accessed only when the conservative goal of happy, heterosexual romance seems impossible, but when this goal is in reach, feminism is put aside or even derided. This treatment of feminism can be observed in the two most prominent unsuccessful relationships in the novel, that of Bridget's friend Jude and her occasional boyfriend Vile Richard, and that of Bridget herself and her boss, Daniel Cleaver.

The character of Jude perhaps most clearly represents the postfeminist condition as it is imagined by feminist critics: she is a successful career woman who, in the reader's first introduction to her, has excused herself from a board meeting to cry over a breakup. This episode prompts an "emergency summit" where Bridget, Jude, and Sharon gather to discuss how Jude should approach her relationship with the man whom Bridget calls "'Vile Richard" from that point onward. Sharon, the most openly feminist character, aims to comfort Jude by contributing the phrase "emotional fuckwittage" to the conversation, which describes a supposed epidemic in men over thirty (Fielding 17). Bridget describes Sharon's argument, saying that as women age, "even the most outrageous minxes lose their nerve, wrestling with the first twinges of existential angst...Stereotypical notions of shelves, spinning wheels and sexual scrapheaps conspire to make you feel stupid," which leads to an increased vulnerability and subsequent willingness to acquiesce to the desires of men who are unfaithful and indifferent – e.g., "emotional fuckwits" (Fielding 18). At this point, Bridget notes that she begins to urge Sharon to lower her voice, and she utters the line: "there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism" (Fielding 18).

Although the layered meaning of this line is up for debate, Bridget characterizes feminism as “unattractive” but does not contest the validity of what Sharon is saying. In Bridget’s view, Sharon’s observation that societal stereotypes of single women over thirty are harming their self-esteem and therefore their relationships is too political to be discussed in public, but she acknowledges the truth behind it, which shows a reluctance to reject this form of feminism.

It is the way Sharon conducts herself, rather than the content of her speech, to which Bridget objects during this scene: Sharon doesn’t merely talk about “emotional fuckwittage,” she “fumes,” “yells,” and “bellows” (Fielding 18). Bridget also seems to take issue with the practicality of what Sharon is saying, and so, it seems, does Sharon herself. There is a conflict between their unjust circumstances and the fear of ending up alone, but more generally, a conflict between wanting their lives to change and their unwillingness to change themselves. This lack of compromise is displayed at the end of the summit, when Sharon puts aside her disgust for emotional fuckwittage in order to help Jude strategize how to win Vile Richard back. The three friends conclude that Jude “must stop beating herself over the head with *Women Who Love Too Much* and instead think more toward *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* so that she can stop accusing herself of “co-dependency” (Fielding 19). *Women Who Love Too Much* encourages women to engage in self-examination when evaluating relationship problems, and it pathologizes women in relationships with “destructive” and “emotionally unavailable” men by characterizing their attraction as “addiction” (Norwood). This approach effectively places the burden of a successful match on the woman alone, while *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* emphasizes the so-called “fundamental psychological differences” between men and women in relationships (Gray). Ironically, the fact that *Men are From Mars* pushes these gender roles allows Jude to retrieve some autonomy—it at least allows her to feel that her

problems with Richard are natural and not a kind of illness—and encourages her to be confident in her femininity once again. Here, the novel assumes the reader's familiarity with these popular self-help texts, but even without knowing the exact contents of these books, the reader also takes away a sense of Bridget and her friends' ambivalent reliance on them. This reliance has been read by critics such as Imelda Whelehan as confirmation that Bridget, Sharon, and Jude do not feel in control of their own narratives and rely on outside sources for direction; however, their ability to jettison one text in favor of another indicates a degree of control. Indeed, it seems that in many cases when these texts are referenced, a decision has already been made—it is just a matter of turning to the right text in order to seek confirmation.

To portray Bridget or her friends as representative of either feminism or antifeminism would not only compromise their potential for identification (because real people are complicated) but it would also overlook Bridget's own struggle with feminism that extends beyond one flippant comment about "strident feminism." The reference to *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* also recalls Bridget's first conversation with Mark Darcy, wherein she lies about reading *Men Are From Mars*, which she has borrowed from Jude, and instead tells him she is reading *Backlash* by Susan Faludi, a book that Sharon had given her (Fielding 13). By telling him she is reading *Backlash*, Bridget simultaneously attempts to halt conversation with Mark, whom she dislikes, and to impress him with her intellectualism. It seems that Bridget thinks of this "feminist treatise" as both impressive and repellent, something that makes her look intelligent without increasing her attractiveness, once again underscoring the notion that feminism and sex appeal are at odds. She also brings up *Backlash* because she cannot reveal that she is reading a self-help text like *Men Are From Mars*, which would characterize her as desperate or challenged romantically. As a postfeminist woman, Bridget's ideal is to inhabit a

space between *Men Are From Mars* and *Backlash*, between the hopeless “singleton” she believes she is, and a stereotypical “strident feminist.”

Context, however, is also crucial when examining the feminist implications of any text, but particularly chick lit, which has been accused both of creating a new feminism for the contemporary age and of representing an insurgent antifeminism that aims to drag women back to the past. The current era is one of popularized, accessible feminism, where personal narratives are privileged over manifestos, allowing readers to seize upon perceived feminist themes in texts such as *BJD*. Both Alyssa and Elizabeth praised *BJD* for the way it presented a woman protagonist with obvious flaws, as well as some kind of plan for herself and her future. Jane and Rose both talked about the way that Bridget’s relationships with other women in the novel, such as her friends and her mother, seemed to take priority over the romantic plotline. All the readers I spoke to described actively seeking books with female protagonists and female authors, and they framed these efforts as feminist acts. For example, Rose explained that working in the male-dominated field of cyber security had inspired her to “support women artists across disciplines” (Rose). Each of the women readers I spoke to was in the midst of or had already undergone a process of reexamining how she read and of making more conscious choices to read women-centered books. The idea that these choices can be viewed as both intentional and feminist clashes with a historical view of women readers, which holds that women read genres like chick lit, romance, or even fiction as a category out of obligation, superficiality, or a lack of awareness about a higher caliber of literature. Women who read chick lit do not do so because they are helplessly drawn to pink cover art (although this reason, in my opinion, is as valid as any for choosing a book) but because they are choosing to engage with a product created by a woman, and a story that prioritizes the experience of a woman. The reasons for this choice range from the

desire to show solidarity, as Rose expresses, to Jane's interest in seeing one woman's vices and weaknesses portrayed such that the ultimate takeaway from the novel is the message that "you are enough."

### Chapter 3

#### Not Guilty: Contemporary Readers' Verdict on Chick Lit

“This habit of incessant reading of light books has grown to dangerous proportions, and is doing no end of mischief. A light book once a month may do no harm...but reading twenty or thirty a month is a good deal like taking opium.”

– *The Christian Advocate*, 1883

Concerns about the harm that “light reading” could potentially inflict upon women readers extend as far back as the novel itself. As evident in *The Christian Advocate* published in 1883, critics of novels have placed particular emphasis on the novel’s effect on the female brain. Over a hundred years later, the supposedly stupefying effect that certain novels have on women readers still casts a shadow over discussions of chick lit novels. Whether consciously or unconsciously, the writer Lynn Crosbie seems to place herself within this broader context, writing about Sophie Kinsella’s 2001 novel *Confessions of a Shopaholic* in *The Toronto Star*: “Reading this book in public would be, for me, something like wearing a rhinestone-applied ‘Slut Princess’ tee and butterfly barrettes: the female version of the comb-over” (Crosbie). Crosbie’s main concern about reading *Confessions of a Shopaholic* is that its cover art, an illustration of a purse against a pink background, is age-inappropriate and embarrassing, and no doubt somehow indicative of the novel’s lowbrow content. She goes on to declare that the “aesthetics” of the novel are contrary to her own, even calling the book a “shiny piece of junk.” In doing so, however, Crosby reinforces a problem with the way that chick lit books, and romance novels before them, have been analyzed in both newspapers and academic work: the trappings of the text–cover art as well as other marketing devices—often obscure more meaningful readings. Furthermore, these “aesthetics” seem to cast a shadow over the entire reading experience in a way that deserves interrogation. Crosbie, for all her dislike of

*Shopaholic*, assigns the novel the power to somehow make her look ridiculous and infantile. Though she dismisses the book as a form of mere escapism, she herself fails to extend her analysis far beyond the looks of the book, and what reading the book might say about her intelligence and maturity. Given the genre's marketing as escapist, ultra-feminine, and a kind of antidote to anything serious or political, both casual and critical readings of texts like *Bridget Jones' Diary* often betray a hint of defensiveness. Yet in talking to readers, I heard not only a defense of the genre's ability to transcend the limits of pure escapism, but also readers' impulse to defend escapist reading behaviors.

Although Crosbie implies that those who enjoy reading chick lit books are immune from this heightened self-consciousness, the readers that I interviewed for this project had not only experienced it, but also examined their own self-consciousness. My interviewees described their complicated relationships with terms like "guilty pleasure," and "beach read," both of which critics have applied widely to chick lit books and specifically to *Bridget Jones' Diary*. The small sampling of readers I spoke to viewed these terms negatively, emphasizing the value of more popular literature as a supplement to what they called "the classics," "high art," and "capital-L literature." One reader, Adele, who had a background in music writing, used the word "poptimist"<sup>3</sup> to characterize this attitude:

I don't really like the term guilty pleasure... I'm very poptimist I guess, that would be the music critic word for it... I think a good book can be a good book whatever its sort of terms are, and I would almost say it's probably necessary to mix up what you're reading, like it would probably be bad to read only "beach reads," but it would also probably be exhausting and tiresome if you were only reading classics. (Adele)

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<sup>3</sup> "Poptimism" is a mode of discourse that emphasizes that pop music should receive the same critical consideration and respect as rock music. It is a perspective that became foregrounded in music criticism beginning with Kelefa Sanneh's 2004 article "The Rap Against Rockism" for the *New York Times* (Loss).

Adele's "poptimism" was typical of the readers I interviewed. Adele used "poptimism" as a way of describing her belief that "popular" books or works of genre fiction were as culturally important as more critically acclaimed novels, though they serve different purposes. This belief was echoed by nearly all of my interviewees. Adele's "poptimist" stance allowed her to appreciate the merit of chick lit books without, as she put it, "comparing them to the canon of great literature."

My interviewees' understanding of the source of their reading habits clashes directly with a critical outlook that designates chick lit readers as self-absorbed for seeking out protagonists with whom they identify, or else as mindless consumers duped by publishers into reading anything with a pink cover. My interviewees gave diverse definitions of what escapism through "chick lit" books meant for them: Elizabeth cited her job as a lab technician as a reason for engaging in escapist reading, to relieve pressure at the end of the day; similarly, Alyssa used chick lit books to balance the heavier reading she was assigned by her professors. One reader, Jackie, said that escapist reading for her meant a temporary respite from anxiety. For my interviewees, "escapism" was hardly synonymous with idleness or superficiality; in many cases, it was framed as therapeutic. Jackie remarked that to some degree, for her, all reading was escapism in what it offered:

For me, reading is escapism in that I don't really have to think while I do it. I can just kind of be in one place and not feel anxious or distracted...especially in high school, when I was feeling bad; reading really helped me get my mind off things. (Jackie)

If reading is sometimes used as a method of coping with "bad feelings" either fleeting or chronic, it follows, then, that the readers I spoke to largely rejected the concept of a "guilty pleasure" because they did not believe they should feel guilty about reading books that brought them

pleasure. Several reported having felt guilty at some point in the past for reading in a manner they described as escapist, or for dedicating time to books that they believed others (their male friends, family members, book reviewers, etc.) might disparage, and they now consider the elimination of that guilt to be empowering. One reader, Jane, a 34-year-old student in an English Ph.D. program, saw this process as a form of maturation: “There was a time in my life, maybe late teens, early twenties, where I really would have cared what people thought about what I was reading and how that reflected on me. I would say now, I know who I am, and I read what I want to read” (Jane). Jane, the oldest woman that I interviewed, did seem more at ease with her reading choices than some of the younger readers. For example, Alyssa, at 20, described keeping her chick lit novels on a separate bookshelf, away from books that had, for example, been recommended to her by her professors. 18-year-old Jackie felt that she had to hide some of her favorite books from her mother, who worked in publishing. The idea that “I know who I am” and “I read what I want to read” are directly connected in Jane’s statement emphasizes the role of confidence in staving off reading guilt: Jane doesn’t question her reading preferences because she doesn’t give them the power to reflect on her identity, yet at stages of life when identity is a little less stable, the image that these books project seems more important to readers. The notion that one can outgrow guilt while reading is significant, because it characterizes guilt as dependent on the reader and the reader’s context, rather than a feeling that is in some way intrinsic to the book itself.

Readers also offered alternative definitions for what could be considered “guilty pleasures,” in an effort, it seemed, to further disentangle guilt from the escapist reading behaviors that they defended. For example, Adele said that she would consider the R&B artist R. Kelly a guilty pleasure, because to enjoy his music is to “support a terrible person.” This

characterization refers to the fact that R. Kelly has faced legal trouble for numerous allegations of sex crimes involving underage girls (DeRogatis). The experience of pleasure while listening to R. Kelly's work, to Adele, is a "guilty" pleasure, because to buy or stream his music is to "support," and perhaps in some way excuse, his extracurricular behavior. Adele's desire to redefine what media should be guilt-inducing contains an implicit defense of popular literature and a characterization of chick lit as harmless in a way that R. Kelly's music is not. The idea of "harm" is a salient one when it comes to common criticism of chick lit, mostly due to the long-standing idea that the reading of fiction has a negative impact upon women readers.

Also contrary to conceptions of chick lit readers put forth by critics like Lynn Crosbie is the fact that all six women I interviewed readily identified as feminists. Perhaps because of this fact, they were all also conscious of a gender difference when it came to judgments of "guilty pleasures," invoking male authors like Ian Fleming, the author of the James Bond novels, and Harlan Coben, another prolific and popular author of thrillers, to make the claim that unlike chick lit, escapist media marketed towards men is neither dismissed as fluff nor taken as an omen of the declining state of literature. Indeed, readers tended to take a feminist stance when defending their enjoyment (or others' enjoyment) of *Bridget Jones' Diary* even if they did not interpret the text or Bridget as feminist, simply because they do not sense a similar critical attitude leveled at media they perceived to be more masculine. Although these readers were occasionally in agreement with critical judgments of *BJD*, they called for equal scrutiny to be applied to the spy thriller as to chick lit.

It is not that readers have the sense that spy thrillers tend to be regarded as better-written than chick lit novels, but rather that the guilt and embarrassment associated with reading them does not seem to be as present. Adele spoke about this discrepancy as a problem of "power":

John F. Kennedy famously read James Bond, which I think is like a prototype of like, the spy thrillers, but I highly doubt that you could find any U.S. president who has read *Bridget Jones' Diary*. So I guess just the way the power structure is, white men disproportionately have the power, so whatever they're interested in, even if it is like kind of frivolous, or as frivolous, or more so than whatever "women's interests" would be, it's sort of seen as having more importance because it appeals to people in power. (Adele)

I am not as ready as Adele to say that the James Bond novels are considered "important" literature because of John F. Kennedy's enjoyment of them, but this example raises questions about how a gendered audience affects how books are judged, and how these judgments in turn affect reading behavior. Critics of *BJD* like Crosbie and Zeisler dislike the genre of chick lit partially because they believe it reflects badly upon women and employs marketing schemes designed to infantilize and condescend to women readers. Yet, this concern does not seem to apply to the assumed-male audience of the James Bond novels. Presumed-feminine books seem to reflect more upon their audience than presumed-masculine books. If chick lit is insubstantial, then chick lit readers must also be, but if John F. Kennedy reads James Bond, there must be more to it than meets the eye.

Adele's assertion that the James Bond novels are "as frivolous or more so" than *BJD* requires some theorizing of the word "frivolous" and the aspects of chick lit that incur such characterization. Gendered attitudes toward escapist and identificatory reading play a central role in determining the "frivolity" of a text, but it is also worth noting that Adele does not maintain her "poptimist" attitude when she calls for the spy thriller to be dismissed as "frivolous" just as the chick lit novel has been. I believe that the popularity of chick lit is a more complicated phenomenon due its status as a genre in which the entertainment resides in the daily lives and experiences of women, rather than the more fantastical plot elements of the spy thriller. As I

have said, books that fit the most specific definition of “chick lit” tend to hinge on the everyday experiences of women, with these experiences heightened or exaggerated for comedic effect. So, a chick lit text could be considered more frivolous than a spy thriller because it might be seen as requiring less imagination to read since it is presumed to be close to the reader’s own experiences. However, this version of “frivolity” assumes that women read and identify with texts in overly simplistic ways.

The ambivalence that readers expressed about the term “guilty pleasure” and its application to more masculine works was almost always followed by an expression of dislike for the term “chick lit,” which readers perceived as a pejorative description of a meaningless category. Although one reader, Rose, said that she had no issues with the term itself, she was highly critical of its proliferation:

Chick lit to me is almost like a meaningless category or designation because in my mind it categorizes so many types of books, and it’s really often I think just used for female centered books which obviously could have a very high literary value. (Rose)

For Rose, and for many readers, chick lit is a nebulous category made up of a diverse range of books that are connected only by their containing a woman protagonist and, most often, written by a woman author. They view the term “chick lit” as meaningless because the books to which it refers can vary in terms of their “literary value.” This position represents a point of disconnect between how “chick lit” is understood in an academic sense and how readers see it applied in bookstores or on book-interest websites like Goodreads (whose “chick lit” forums contain discussions of works by Jane Austen, Charlotte Bronte, and Ian McEwan in addition to *Bridget Jones’ Diary*). Although scholars of chick lit have endeavored to create a definition of the category made up of authors like Helen Fielding, Sophie Kinsella, and Jennifer Weiner, such definitions seem to shift. These definitions either seem vague, as Rose suggests, in using phrases

such as “heroine-focused,” or too limiting, in placing chick lit strictly within the temporal parameters of the late 1990s and early 2000s although it continues to be a popular genre today.

Rose’s concern is that “chick lit” is an arbitrary category because the only thing that seems to unite these books is their being “female-centered,” but perhaps the greater uniting factor is the presumed audience of these books: women. The idea that “chick lit” may refer to the audience of the books, rather than the books themselves, renders the label even more problematic and arbitrary. If a “chick lit” book is simply a book marketed to the blanket category “women,” calling a book “chick lit” reveals nothing about its content or worth given that the target demographic is so vast and diverse. It follows, then, that readers want chick lit novels to be given the same critical respect as other works of literature, because the line between, say, *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’ Diary* is blurred.

While readers stressed the importance of taking a both/and approach when it comes to reading: the idea that more popular genres are a valuable supplement to “higher” literature, I want to challenge the idea that chick lit has value *only* as a supplement to a more intellectual reading diet. Furthermore, I want to challenge the critical impulse to illustrate chick lit’s sophistication by comparing certain titles to works by Jane Austen or Edith Wharton, as Harzewski does in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*. What does it mean, for example, if a woman reader reads *only* chick lit? Furthermore, what if she reads it without paying any attention to the rhetorical or thematic similarities between *Bridget Jones’ Diary* and *Pride and Prejudice*? The apparent discomfort around these questions seems to indicate that concerns about the “harm” of “light reading” clearly still persist, even as contemporary readers attempt to keep them at bay.

Alyssa, the English major who kept a separate bookshelf for her chick lit books, remarked as she talked about “guilty pleasures” that when asked about her favorite book or

movie, “there’s one that I tell people, and then there’s the real thing” (Alyssa). Alyssa explained that the “favorite” she might talk about with others would be a book or movie that had garnered critical acclaim that she “liked sometimes.” She placed these works in opposition to her “real favorites” that she was “obsessed with,” that she tended only to talk about with her best friend or her sister. I recalled this statement from Alyssa when reflecting upon the fact that not a single reader I interviewed named a chick lit book as one of her ultimate favorites, not even the most avid chick lit defenders. This fact defies critical assumptions about the audience of *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, an audience that, as Crosbie writes, “is determined to be made up of acquisitive, marriage-crazed girls who...will only read what is true and genuine to their life experience,” because it shows that generalizations should not be made about what chick lit readers will “only read” (Crosbie). However, readers’ impulse to defend the breadth of their reading once again recalls the question of a gendered notion of “frivolousness.” While it seems safe to assume that the majority of chick lit readers do not read “only” chick lit, or even only popular genre fiction, it seems equally likely that some do, for any of the reasons that my interviewees gave above, or more. It is possible that my interviewees were downplaying their own interest in chick lit, or enjoyment of *BJD*, in order to shield themselves from criticism or comparisons to the more avid chick lit reader. Why is the urge to police what women read, as well as to make assumptions about women based on how they read, so powerful – to the point where women readers may feel compelled to police themselves? Any defense of chick lit readers that emphasizes readers’ capacity to read more “sophisticated” works of literature should be conscious of the way that this line of reasoning in some ways condescends to women readers in much the same way as criticisms that deem any reader of this genre unsophisticated. Similarly, defending the value of *Bridget Jones’ Diary*, for example, by underscoring its connection to its source text of Austen’s

*Pride and Prejudice* is ultimately counterproductive in that it sends the message that readers pick up *BJD* for the same reasons as *Pride and Prejudice*. Books that are read for the purpose of escapism should be treated in criticism as distinct, rather than deviant. Furthermore, readers engage with chick lit for a wide variety of reasons that they categorize as “escapism,” but for which the term “escapism” seems inadequate. As with any other genre, the reasons that readers give for engaging with chick lit are as varied and diverse as the women themselves.

## Conclusion

“While there are countless novels by male authors with male protagonists whose neuroses are considered an exploration of the complexity of the human condition, more often the troubles of female protagonists by female authors are relegated to the sphere of the ‘merely’ personal. The latter is not considered a philosophical category of experience, but the stuff of thinly veiled memoir, confessionalism, narcissism.”

–Zoe Pilger, *Icon*

In this thesis, I argue that *BJD* is one of the most misunderstood books in literary criticism, both inside and outside the academic sphere. In an effort to complicate previous critical conceptions of chick lit readers, I argue that *BJD* should be read as a work of social critique, rife with cutting observations about dating, femininity, feminism, diet culture, aging, and marriage (to name a few)—even if its effectiveness is open to debate. I challenge critical tendencies to take for granted that Bridget is meant to represent the average woman, or that Fielding is intending to reach an audience of her peers by engaging in “confessionalism.” As Pilger points out, seldom are women characters allowed to embody “the human condition,” yet Bridget Jones is often credit with—or accused of—attempts to embody “the woman’s condition.” Women readers are constantly asked to find aspects of a male character with which to identify, but they are scrutinized for finding any echo of their own experience in a character like Bridget Jones. I attempt to debunk the notion that fans of chick lit or of *BJD* necessarily resemble or desire to emulate the protagonists of the books.

It is not just that *BJD* is unfairly reduced to the “ur-text of chick lit.” We must also take seriously women readers of genre fiction and give them credit for their ability to read in complex ways, in order to better understand what makes a book popular and which qualities earn books the designation of “merely” popular. Throughout this project, I maintain that for a book to be “popular” in the sense that it has attracted millions of readers and fans, there must be something

about that book that attracts readers. I do not believe, in other words, that a book can be engineered to be popular. While genre fiction books may follow a kind of formula, adherence to a formula is not the only element to writing a popular book. *Bridget Jones' Diary* is perceived by readers to have filled a vacancy in fiction, and to have predated today's market of women-centered comedy that celebrates women's flaws and foregrounds their perspectives on their relationships and careers.

I am conscious, however, that my defense of the readers of chick lit may be read as too lenient a perspective on the more problematic aspects of the genre and of *Bridget Jones' Diary*. I am far from arguing that *BJD* or the books it influenced in the years since its publication comprise the new feminist manifestos. Similarly, I do not wish to give the impression that the critiques presented in feminist criticism, particularly those questioning mainstream chick lit's reliance on thin, white, upper-middle class, heterosexual, and cisgender heroines, are not valid or warranted. In fact, several of these concerns were raised by my interviewees, particularly Adele, who identified as both queer and transgender and therefore mentioned feeling uninterested, or excluded by, media that seemed obsessed by the mechanisms of heterosexual dating rituals. Furthermore, it is undeniable that many of Bridget Jones's personality traits, even the neuroses for which she is so beloved, bear the mark of privilege.

The central limitation of this project is that it provides only a minimal view of the diversity of experiences and interpretations that readers bring to *Bridget Jones' Diary*. If I had had more time, I would have loved to speak with more than six interviewees, in order to better understand trends in readers' thinking. By increasing the sample size, I could have spoken to a group of women that was more diverse in age, race, and political ideology. I could have also spoken to women readers who were actively involved with the online communities that have

been constructed around chick lit reading, as a way of exploring how the consumption of these books builds relationships between women readers.

Nonetheless, the interviews with readers that I center in this thesis have opened up unexpected and vital insights. When asked if she felt that the books she read said something about who she was as a person, the reader Elizabeth said that these books reflected “more...who I want to be.” This response sparked my interest in troubling simplistic views of identification in the first chapter. Elizabeth identifies with Bridget not because she sees her own life reflected in her story, but because she sees a situation more like one she imagines for herself, despite cultural and professional differences. Most of the readers I spoke to reported finding Bridget “relatable” or otherwise characterizing their reading experience as one of identification, but when asked what “identification” meant to them, all had different responses. Furthermore, when Rose mentioned seeing her own struggles with food reflected in Bridget’s calorie-counting, the experience of identification was not necessarily positive, which challenges the notion that the process of recognizing oneself in a fictional character always results in a kind of narcissistic pleasure.

Pilger’s reference to “narcissism” in the epigraph shows how a book that encourages identification from women readers is often placed at odds with books that contain a message for society as a whole. *BJD* is seen as too specialized to work as effective social critique because, it is implied, the women who read it will be too distracted by their own identification to recognize the more political themes. Self-identified feminist critics have claimed that prioritizing books that reflect one’s own experience encourages an individualistic empowerment that prevents women from seeing the relevance of a broader, more collective women’s movement. However, I argued that the distinction between individual and collective empowerment no longer feels

relevant to contemporary readers. These women readers understood their own self-acceptance to be inherently political in a society that encourages women to engage in rigorous, daily address of their flaws. It would be unwise to dismiss *BJD* as merely encouraging individual empowerment, because individual empowerment informs and enhances feminist activism.

My interviewees also embrace escapism as a reason for reading certain books, but they were critical of the idea of a “guilty pleasure,” which they viewed as a gendered concept. Rose, Adele, and Elizabeth all invoked popular spy thriller authors like Ian Fleming and Harlan Coben to make the point that they didn’t sense a similar attitude concern about men reading “guilty pleasure” books. These repeated references to spy thrillers prompted me to compare the spy thriller genre to chick lit in an effort to understand how certain escapist reading practices are viewed as more “frivolous” than others. Because women currently drive sales in every fiction category, including spy thrillers, I conclude that books that are considered more “feminine,” especially books whose plot focuses exclusively on the everyday life of one woman as *BJD* does, are far more subject to concern from critics. Adele used the word “poptimism” to describe her relationship to more popular genres, emphasizing her opinion that books like *BJD* were just as deserving of critical consideration as “high literature” (Adele). Rose put it more bluntly: “I feel bad for people with discerning taste – they’re missing out” (Rose). These women are voracious readers of a wide variety of genres and authors, and all of them stressed the importance of this variety.

In *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Stephanie Harzewski writes that examining chick lit allows us to “revisit debates surrounding the origin of the novel and the function of the prose romance, which has always involved debate about the moral and financial status of the woman writer as well as the educational and entertainment benefits of romance, especially with regard to

women readers” (Harzewski). These debates about the woman writer and the woman reader have raged for centuries, yet all fiction, not just that which is marketed as exclusively feminine, is still primarily associated with women. As I previously mentioned, according to reports in 2002, 2010, and 2015, women have driven sales in every fiction genre for decades (Bowker). Women readers are the majority. In my view, the question of what—and why—men read is just as interesting as what and why women do.

My project opens up an exploration of the myths and realities of how gender informs reading practices. As Pilger suggests, the books that are largely considered to speak to one human experience are often male authored as well as gendered male, with the presumption of their universal relevance. Yet, if a woman author writes a book, features a woman protagonist, and has a presumed majority-female audience, this book is considered niche. The reality, however, is that women comprise the majority of readers, which means that books about men are primarily read by women. How might our understanding of identificatory reading be further troubled when one takes into account the fact that women readers are often engaging in the process of identification with male protagonists? If, based solely on book sales, all fiction genres can in some way be deemed “chick lit,” what is it about fiction itself that is still feminized? What does it take for a woman-authored, woman-centered novel to transcend the “woman’s experience” and instead speak to a universal human experience? All of these questions are ripe for future research. In the meantime, however, in order to keep from getting trapped in this centuries-long discourse about women readers, criticism of popular fiction should decenter the idea of “the woman reader” by fleshing out the large range of readers that make up this category.

## **Appendix A: Study Advertisement**

Paid Opportunity to Participate in English Research Project

Hello,

My name is Hannah Engler, and I'm a senior completing my Honors thesis in English. I am contacting you about participating in a research study for the final part of my project. My project explores how women experience "chick lit" novels. I am looking specifically for women who have read the novel "Bridget Jones' Diary" by Helen Fielding and feel that they are able to talk in depth about it. (Having read associated authors, such as Sophie Kinsella, is a huge plus as well!)

Your participation would mean sitting down with me for a semi-structured interview (about an hour long) and you would be compensated with a \$20 Visa gift card. If you are interested, you can contact me at [hmengler@umich.edu](mailto:hmengler@umich.edu) to discuss your participation.

Thanks for your time and let me know if you have any questions!

Best,

Hannah Engler

## **Appendix B: Guide for Interview Questions**

[Talk about yourself + the project]

### **Intro**

Tell me a little about yourself.

Tell me why you decided to do this study.

What kinds of books do you like to read?

What reasons do you read (school, escapism, learning, etc.)?

Do you often read books with female main characters/why?

Do you consider yourself a feminist?

### **BJD**

When did you first see the movie/read the book?

Why did you decide to?

Do you like it?

Why do you like it?

Do you relate to BJ?

What do you relate to?

Can you think of any specific parts of the movie/book that stand out to you for any reason as particularly relatable?

Are there other movies/books that come to mind as being similar to BJD? What are they/why/do you like them as well?

Is BJ feminist (if yes, how would you defend it against people who say it isn't/if no, why not, could it ever be)?

Is BJ realistic? What's realistic about it?

Do you think BJD is considered a "good" movie/book (whatever that means)?

(If they mention “guilty pleasure”) Do you ever feel guilty for enjoying something like BJD (if so, why)?

Do you feel like the movies/books you enjoy say something about who you are as a person/your identity (does BJD?)?

**Social dimensions**

Who do you talk about books/movies with?

Who are the people you engage with BJD with?

How do you find new books to read?

Other ways you participate with books?

Anything else you want me to know?

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