

# HIP LIT FOR HIP CHICKS

By Rebecca Vnuk

**Sexy, funny, and sharp**, chick lit is one of the fastest growing fiction genres today. Those of a certain age may not understand the appeal, but masses of young women who may not have considered themselves heavy readers are flocking to libraries to catch up on the latest trend.

Chick lit offers fun, entertaining reading—don't go looking for timeless prose, philosophical musings, or unpredictable plots here!—but that does not completely explain its allure. The genre's aim of eliciting a response of "I'm exactly like that" or "That just happened to me!" has really struck a chord with women in their twenties and thirties who want to be reassured that they are not alone in screwing up their lives—or that screwing up doesn't preclude a happy ending.

## What is chick lit?

What makes a novel chick lit, anyway—the marketing and cutesy, often hot pink, cover? And how does this kind of book differ from "women's fiction" and regular romances? Both mainstream women's fiction and chick lit deal in similar themes—love, marriage, fidelity, work, friendship—and are written by women for women. As ChickLitBooks.com ([chicklitbooks.com/whatis.php](http://chicklitbooks.com/whatis.php)) convincingly argues, the dif-

ference is largely a question of tone. Regular women's fiction, à la Maeve Binchy or Elizabeth Berg, takes life just a bit more seriously. Chick lit, on the other hand, is distinguished by its humor—wisecracking characters or ridiculous situations, usually involving work or dating.

Look also for a big helping of pop culture—great shoes, trendy drinks, celebrities, jobs in publishing. The characters' ages should also tip you off. Chick lit almost always posits young women setting out to make their mark in the world. Add to this mix an urban setting and a heroine who interacts with the world (whereas in a typical romance, the action is highly internal, mainly between the heroine and the hero), and, presto! you've got yourself a chick lit book.

## The British invasion & beyond

In 1998, Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* took the world by storm, giving readers a portrait of a neurotic, average young woman grappling with her boyfriend, her weight, her job, and her bad habits. Readers clamored for more, and a publishing boom was born. Hot on Bridget's heels in 1999 came Melissa Bank's *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, which many critics view as launching the chick lit trend in the United States. In short order came entries from other British and American notables such as Jane Green, Marian Keyes, Jennifer Weiner, and others.

Some say the genre has already hit a high point and is starting to wane owing to oversaturation. Indeed, many of these books may eventually become dated by the very elements that make them so relevant now. Still, the best established authors, like Meg Cabot and Sophie Kinsella, and notable upcoming

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writers, like Sarah Dunn and Shannon Olson, will continue to appeal, thanks to smart, tight writing. By letting their characters and plots speak for themselves, rather than overspicing their books with the latest cultural obsession, these novelists will endure long after the chick lit trend fades.

## Pick your flavor

Chick lit comes in plenty of flavors; the line among genres (mystery, romance, Christian fiction) can be fluid—some may even say fuzzy. But you'll know you're dealing with a chick lit book if it offers most of the elements detailed above. Buy to suit the tastes of your patrons.

- **Brit Lit or "Singletons":** Where it all began, with Bridget Jones and friends, these are sometimes a little sexier than their American counterparts. Notable authors include Isabel Wolff, Carole Matthews, Lisa Jewell, Wendy Holden, and Anna Maxted.
- **Lad Lit:** Chick lit for men. More popular in the UK, this sub-genre's U.S. sales have been disappointing. Jonathan Tropper, Mike Gayle, and Nick Hornby are representative authors.
- **Workplace Tell-all:** The focus here is more on the heroine's career trials and tribulations than her romantic issues. Think Lauren Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada* and Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus's *The Nanny Diaries*.
- **Ethnic Chick Lit:** Terry McMillan's *Waiting To Exhale* began this trend in 1992, but it is just beginning to realize its potential with such titles as Kim Wong Keltner's *The Dim Sum of All Things*, Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez's *The Dirty Girls Social Club*, and *The Gotham Diaries* by Tonya Lewis Lee and Crystal McCrary.
- **Bride Lit:** Bridget Jones gets hitched; mayhem ensues. Examples include Jane Green's *The Other Woman* and Sophie Kinsella's *Shopaholic Ties the Knot*.
- **Mommy Lit:** Bridget Jones has a baby. Excellent titles are Marian Keyes's *Watermelon*, Alison Pearson's *I Don't Know How She Does It*, and Laura Wolf's *Diary of a Mad Mom To Be*.
- **Widow Lit:** Bridget Jones loses her husband! Cropping up in this category are Lolly Winston's *Good Grief*, Valerie Frankel's *The Not So Perfect Man*, and Caren Lissner's *Starting from Square Tivo*.
- **Christian Chick Lit:** *Publishers Weekly* dubs this "Bridget Jones goes to church," and it's rapidly becoming a profitable trend for publishers, with such titles as Judy Baer's *The Whitney Chronicles*, Kristin Billerbeck's *With This Ring, I'm Confused*, and Neda Jackson's "Yada Yada Prayer Group" series.
- **Mystery Chick Lit:** Bridget Jones gets her P.I. license. Debut series trying to appeal to the chick lit generation include Susan Kandel's "Cece Caruso" series (*I Dreamed I Married Perry Mason*), Kate White's mysteries (*If Looks Could Kill*) featuring magazine writer-turned-sleuth Bailey Weggins, Harley Jane Kozak's dating mysteries (*Dating Dead Men*), and Susan McBride's "Debutante Dropout" series (*Blue Blood*).

### GENERAL CHICK LIT

Cabot, Meg. **Boy Meets Girl**. Avon. 2004. 400p. ISBN 0-06-008545-2. pap. \$13.95. (LJ 12/03)

★ Cabot, Meg. **Every Boy's Got One**. Avon. 2005. 352p. ISBN 0-06-008546-0. pap. \$12.95.

The *Princess Diaries* author writes some

really funny chick lit novels. Her unique touch? The plots unfold through emails, voicemail, and other inventive means.

★ Dunn, Sarah. **The Big Love**. Little, Brown. 2004. 224p. ISBN 0-316-73815-8. \$24.95; pap. Back Bay. 2005. ISBN 0-316-01078-2. \$12.95.

- **Hen Lit:** Also called "Matron Lit," this refers to the growing number of women's fiction titles marketed with cutesy covers to capitalize on the chick lit trend. Aimed at an older audience (late 40s–60s), these books are still fun and breezy. Jeanne Ray, Elizabeth Buchan, Haywood Smith, and Claire Cook write some of the best novels.

## Publishers to know

To catch the chick lit wave, many publishers have created separate imprints devoted to this genre:

- **Avon Trade (www.avontrade.com):** The publisher of such popular chick lit writers as Meg Cabot and Valerie Frankel also features several African American authors (Nina Foxx, Kayla Perrin).
- **BET Books (www.bet.com/books):** The Arabesque imprint focuses on mass market African American romance, the Sepia line features contemporary stories.
- **Downtown Press (www.simonsays.com):** Simon & Schuster's foray into chick lit includes anthologies such as *American Girls About Town*, which features stories by Jennifer Weiner and Lauren Weisberger, among others.
- **5 Spot:** Aiming to be "the hip entertainment destination for women," Warner Book's chick lit imprint debuts this fall with a mix of fiction and nonfiction titles, including Lisa Palmer's first novel, *Conversations with the Fat Girl* (Sept.).
- **Red Dress Ink (www.reddressink.com):** The titles of this prolific Harlequin imprint vary widely in quality, but some earlier books, from authors such as Lynda Curnyn and Melissa Senate, are gems. The line is now showing more diversity with ethnic titles.
- **Strapless (www.kensingtonbooks.com):** The Kensington imprint leans toward the racy and features many British authors.
- **Steeple Hill Café (www.eharlequin.com):** Another Harlequin imprint, it offers inspirational fiction for the "hip, modern woman of faith."

## Selecting tips

For every book worth savoring, there are five destined for the dustbin. Librarians should look for reviewed titles as well as browse some reader reviews on the web sites listed below. Chick lit is very "of the moment" and can be treated as such in terms of selecting and weeding. Don't worry about replacing a battered paperback with a new copy unless that particular title is popular; a new author is just around the corner. Also, be sure to check your circulation figures—if a hardcover hasn't circulated in a year or two, it is probably time to toss it.

The following will get you started, but this list is by no means exhaustive! Starred [★] titles are sure bets for most collections.

Alison's live-in boyfriend pops out to the store to buy mustard and doesn't return. Instead, he calls from a pay phone to tell her he's in love with someone else. Dunn moves beyond cliché in this funny and wise first novel about going for the big love or broke. This debut made *LJ's* list of Best Books of 2004. (LJ 7/04)

# Collection Development | Chick Lit

★ French, Wendy. **Smothering**. Forge: Tor. 2003. 304p. ISBN 0-7653-0793-6. \$23.95; pap. 2004. ISBN 0-7653-4703-2. \$6.99. Claire, a telemarketer in Portland, OR, is not happy when her overbearing mother arrives for an unexpected and open-ended visit. Between trying to find a boyfriend, pressures at work, and unreliable pals, she just about has a breakdown.

★ Harding, Robyn. **The Journal of Mortifying Moments**. Ballantine. 2004. 320p. ISBN 0-345-47628-X. \$18.95; pap. Nov. 2005. ISBN 0-345-47627-1. \$12.95. Kerry's therapist makes her write a journal of all her bad dating experiences. These entries pop up against what's happening in Kerry's life now—she hates her ad agency job, her boyfriend's using her, and she decides to bring meaning into her life by mentoring a teen. A funny and touching debut. (LJ 9/1/04)

McInnis, Sheri. **Devil May Care**. Atria: S. & S. 2003. 384p. ISBN 0-7434-6484-2. \$24; pap. Washington Square: S. & S. 2004. ISBN 0-7434-6485-0. \$13.95. Aspiring New York City actress Sally get a streak of good luck after meeting the head of a television network. They begin a romance, with one problem: he's Satan. (LJ 7/03)

★ Olson, Shannon. **Children of God Go Bowling**. Viking. 2004. 292p. ISBN 0-670-03281-6. \$24.95; pap. Penguin. 2005. ISBN 0-14-303456-1. \$14. (LJ 1/04)

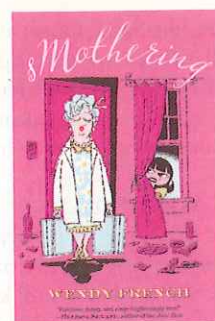
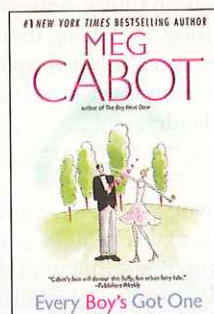
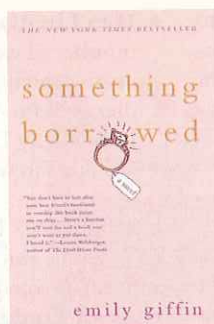
★ Olson, Shannon. **Welcome to My Planet**. Penguin. 2001. 304p. ISBN 0-14-100177-1. pap. \$14.

Less frothy and more thoughtful than some, Olson's two semiautobiographical novels are still charming, fun reads, as heroine Shannon's self-effacing wit is pitch-perfect. Olson represents the best of a new generation of women's fiction writers.

★ Weiner, Jennifer. **Good in Bed**. Pocket. 2001. 368p. ISBN 0-7434-1816-6. \$24.95; pap. Washington Square: S. & S. 2002. ISBN 0-7434-1817-4. \$14.

When overweight Cannie is publicly humiliated by her boyfriend, she embarks on a weight-loss program and tries to come to terms with her life. Sharp writing blends with believable, well-rounded characters, excellent subplots, and great humor. Look for Weiner's newest, *Goodnight Nobody*, this fall. (LJ 4/15/01)

Weiner, Jennifer. **In Her Shoes**. Atria: S. & S. 2002. 432p. ISBN 0-7434-1819-0. \$25; pap. Washington Square: S. & S. 2005. ISBN 0-7432-6711-7. \$14.



Steady Rose and her out-of-control sister Maggie meet their long-lost grandmother and struggle to overcome the past while forging a new family future. The film version starring Cameron Diaz and Toni Collette will be released in October. (LJ 9/1/02)

## BRIT LIT

★ Ahern, Cecelia. **Rosie Dunne**. Hyperion. 2005. 448p. ISBN 1-4013-0091-X. \$22.95. Rosie and Alex are destined to be together, and this novel lets the reader in on all of their personal correspondence from age six to midlife. A fun and charming read by the daughter of the Irish prime minister. (LJ 1/05)

★ Fielding, Helen. **Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason**. Viking. 2000. 352p. ISBN 0-670-89296-3; pap. Penguin. 2004. ISBN 0-14-303443-X. \$14. (LJ 2/1/00)

★ Fielding, Helen. **Bridget Jones's Diary**. Viking. 1998. 271p. ISBN 0-670-88072-8. \$22.95; pap. Penguin. 2001. ISBN 0-14-100019-8. \$14. (LJ 5/15/98)

All collections need to have Bridget—she started it all! Smaller libraries may not necessarily need Fielding's other, less popular novels.

★ Green, Jane. **Jemima J.: A Novel About Ugly Ducklings and Swans**. Broadway. 2000. 416p. ISBN 0-7679-0517-2. \$19.95; pap. ISBN 0-7679-0518-0. \$11.95.

Ugly duckling Jemima Jones decides to find love on the net, complete with a digitally altered photograph. When she hooks up with an American who wants to meet her, she needs to become the beauty she's claimed to be—and in the process learns that being beautiful is no guarantee of happiness. Green is a rising star. (LJ 4/15/00)

Harte, Kelly. **Guilty Feet**. Red Dress Ink: Harlequin. 2003. 320p. ISBN 0-373-25026-6. pap. \$12.95.

Acting on the belief that her boyfriend is cheating on her, Jo moves out and is disappointed when he doesn't beg her to come back. She starts emailing him under a fake name, with interesting results.

Holden, Wendy. **Gossip Hound**. Plume: NAL. 2003. 352p. ISBN 0-452-28393-0. pap. \$13. Grace is a publishing PR hack waiting for her big break—and true love. She gets them, but it's a long (and often hilarious) wait.

★ Keyes, Marian. **Lucy Sullivan Is Getting Married**. Avon. 1999. 432p. ISBN 0-380-97618-8. \$24; pap. Perennial: HarperCollins. 2002. ISBN 0-06-009037-5. pap. \$13.95.

Lucy is disbelieving when a tarot card reader predicts she'll be married within a year. But then Lucy starts meeting all kinds of eligible men. The Irish-born Keyes creates amusing, authentic characters. All of her titles are winners. (LJ 6/15/99)

★ Kinsella, Sophie. **Can You Keep a Secret?** Dial: Random. 2004. 368p. ISBN 0-385-33681-0. \$23; pap. Delta: Dell. 2005. ISBN 0-385-33808-2. \$12.

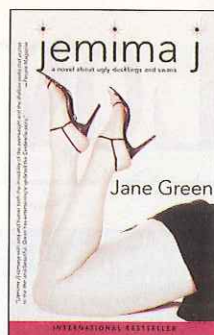
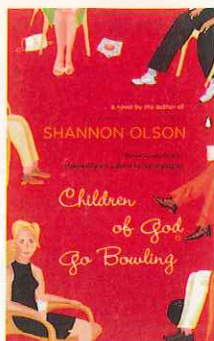
Emma has babbled the intimate details of her life to a stranger on a plane. When they land, she shortly discovers he is her new boss. The success of this fun standalone assures us that Kinsella will continue to write beyond the "Shopaholic" series. Her next book, *The Undomestic Goddess*, publishes this month.

★ Kinsella, Sophie. **Confessions of a Shopaholic**. Delta: Dell. 2001. 320p. ISBN 0-385-33548-2. 2001. pap. \$11.95.

Nothing can keep shopaholic Becky Bloomwood from spending money, even when she doesn't have any. Fluffy and amusing, this is followed by the equally entertaining *Shopaholic Takes Manhattan* and *Shopaholic Ties the Knot*.

★ Voss, Louise. **To Be Someone**. Crown. 2001. 400p. ISBN 0-609-60892-4. \$23; pap. Ballantine. 2003. ISBN 0-345-44378-0. \$13.95.

A former pop star-turned-DJ is disfigured in an accident and decides to do a last radio show, playing the songs (mostly British pop tunes) that form the emotional soundtrack of her life.



## BRIDE LIT

Giffin, Emily. **Something Borrowed**. St. Martin's. 2004. 336p. ISBN 0-312-32118-X. \$21.95; pap. Griffin: St. Martin's. 2005. ISBN 0-312-32119-8. \$12.95.

Mousy Rachel breaks out of the mold when she sleeps with her best friend's fiancé on her 30th birthday. Trouble is, Rachel really is in love with him and her best friend's a nasty person, so it is easy to betray her. (LJ 6/1/04)

★Green, Jane. **The Other Woman**. Viking. 2005. 389p. ISBN 0-670-03404-5. \$23.95. Ellie finds her wedding plans and her life spiraling out of her control, thanks to her fiancé's overpowering mother. (LJ 4/1/05)

Wolf, Laura. **Diary of a Mad Bride**. Delta. 2002. 304p. ISBN 0-385-33583-0. pap. \$10.95.

The diary of a bride who goes through all of the typical hurdles of planning a wedding. Grandma's jealous, her future in-laws are certifiable, and her best friends include a skeptic and a previous mad bride. Post-wedding, the Mad Bride tackles motherhood in *Diary of a Mad Mom-To-Be*.

## MOMMY LIT

Green, Jane. **Babyville**. Broadway. 2004. 464p. ISBN 0-7679-1224-1. pap. \$12.95.

Three friends deal with impending motherhood as Julia struggles to conceive, Maeve is unexpectedly pregnant, and Samantha realizes a new baby won't save her marriage.

★Keyes, Marian. **Watermelon**. Avon. 1998. 432p. ISBN 0-380-97617-X. \$15.95; pap. Perennial: HarperCollins. 2002. ISBN 0-06-009036-7. \$13.95.

Claire thinks her life is perfect until her husband leaves her the day after she gives birth to their first child. Left to raise a baby alone, Claire finds comfort in her crazy Irish family. (LJ 5/1/98)

Pearson, Allison. **I Don't Know How She Does It: The Life of Kate Reddy, Working Mother**. Knopf. 2002. 331p. ISBN 0-375-41405-3. \$23; pap. Anchor. 2003. 352p.

ISBN 0-375-71375-1. \$13.95.

Pearson's snappy debut about the external and internal pressures placed on working mothers was an instant best seller. Clearly, readers responded to Kate's dilemmas, including defacing supermarket cookies to make them look homemade for her daughter's school bake sale. (LJ 11/1/02)

★Weiner, Jennifer. **Little Earthquakes**. Atria: S. & S. 432p. 2004. ISBN 0-7434-7009-5. \$26; pap. Washington Square: S. & S. 2005. ISBN 0-7434-7010-9. \$14.

Three very different women—a chef, an event planner, and a famous basketball player's wife—become friends and deal with the challenges of new motherhood, extended families, and infidelity. (LJ 8/04)

## WIDOW LIT

★Ahern, Cecelia. **PS, I Love You**. Hyperion. 2004. 384p. ISBN 1-4013-0090-1. \$21.95; pap. 2005. ISBN 0-7868-9075-4. \$13.95.

Ahern's debut brings us Holly, who has just lost her husband and soul mate. He has left her a series of letters to open every month for a year after he's gone. Despite the sappy premise, this novel manages to be funny, warm, and uplifting.

Lissner, Caren. **Starting from Square Two**. Red Dress Ink: Harlequin. 2004. 304p. ISBN 0-373-25052-5. pap. \$12.95.

When 29-year-old Gert's husband dies in a car accident, she must look for her happily ever after—again. Her cynical pals aren't much help in the dating world, however.

## WORKPLACE TELL-ALLS

Kizis, Deanna. **How To Meet Cute Boys**. Warner. 2003. 304p. ISBN 0-446-53072-7. \$21.95; pap. 2004. ISBN 0-446-69014-7. \$13.95.

Benamina Franklin, a magazine staffer in L.A., falls for a much younger man. Clever formatting includes lots of magazine-style quizzes and fake articles. (LJ 10/1/03)

Weisberger, Lauren. **The Devil Wears Prada**. Doubleday. 2003. 320p. ISBN 0-385-50926-X. \$21.95; pap. Broadway. 2004. ISBN 0-7679-1476-7. \$13.95.

Wanting to break into the magazine world, Andrea takes a job as assistant to a very demanding fashion editor but finds herself playing personal shopper, errand girl, and all-around slave. (LJ 4/1/03)

## WEB SITES

### Candy Covered Books

[www.candycoveredbooks.com](http://www.candycoveredbooks.com)

Online reviews of over 700 chick lit and women's fiction books.

### Chick Lit for Black Chicks

<http://archive.blackvoices.com/articles/daily/bk20040413chicklit.asp>

From AOL BlackVoices, a brief survey of books for "the hip black chick who has exhausted her library of Terry McMillan...but is not interested in Bridget Jones and her weight problems."

### Chick Lit 101

[www.citypaper.com/2003-09-10/bigbooks.html](http://www.citypaper.com/2003-09-10/bigbooks.html)

This online article gives a good overview of chick lit and some of its main authors.

### Chick Lit Round Table

[www.authorsontheweb.com/features/0402-chicklit/chicklit.asp](http://www.authorsontheweb.com/features/0402-chicklit/chicklit.asp)

A round table discussion featuring 16 top writers, including Meg Cabot and Jennifer Weiner.

### Chick Lit USA

[www.chicklit.us/home.htm](http://www.chicklit.us/home.htm)

An online bookseller of UK titles includes a useful "Chick Lit Dictionary" of British slang.

## THE DEVELOPING SCHEDULE

NOV	AFRICAN AMERICAN ART
DEC	PACIFIC NW GARDENING
JAN	MEN'S HEALTH
FEB	PARENTING A DEAF CHILD
MAR	TRAVEL TO S. AMERICA
APR	JAZZ

For a complete schedule, go to [www.libraryjournal.com](http://www.libraryjournal.com). Publishers wishing to submit titles (new and/or backlist) should contact Wilda Williams four to six months in advance of issue dates listed above (646-746-6472; Email: [WWilliams@reedbusiness.com](mailto:WWilliams@reedbusiness.com); snail mail: Library Journal, 360 Park Avenue S., New York, NY 10010).