

Sweet nothing

Novel

An Accidental Real: Chick Lit, Research and the Everyday

Exegesis

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Attestation of authorship

“I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgments), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.”

Belinda Nash, 15 June 2012

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Intellectual property rights

The author asserts the intellectual and moral copyright of the creative work, *Sweet nothing*, contained within this thesis. All rights of the owner of the work are reserved. The publication contained in all its formats is protected by copyright and use of the recording is restricted. Any manner of exhibition and any diffusion, copying, resetting, or editing, constitutes an infringement of copyright unless previously written consent of the copyright owner thereto has been obtained.

Belinda Nash, 15 June 2012

Abstract

This research shows that the production of the genre known as chick lit, being immersed in the unspectacular of the everyday, paradoxically constitutes more than the mundanity of everydayness. It describes the spectacularly unspecial and monotony contained within the everyday of chick lit, and how it starts with something and ends with nothing. This is its promise: *Sweet nothing*. What happens when characters with no special qualities become immersed and visited in the everyday? The novel *Sweet nothing*, written as research in this thesis project in the genre of chick lit, is concerned with an interminable impossibility: that of the capturing of the radical absence of everything – the place where nothing happens – but that is still ‘sweet.’ It is engaged in the continual missing of the everyday by recording, fictionalising and producing it, because the act of capturing it ensures that parts are missed. Contrary to current research, however, chick lit is not a what, but a *where*. Its spatiality and temporality occupy internalities and externalities, spaces and places, and ignores the spectacle and spectacular where popular belief would have the everyday reside. It instead drifts in the nothing and the vacant by woefully documenting the banality of the everyday. The topic, *An Accidental Real: Chick lit, Research and the Everyday* – in itself a problematic grouping of words – invites the question of finding the threshold moment between inscribing the everyday to it becoming research in the everyday where a background of ‘everyday’ becomes the foreground; the place of discovery.

This thesis project, which comprises creative writing, a novel in the genre of chick lit, and an exegesis, pulls at this dangling thread, pulling on the nothing and ignoring the spectacle. It is common, yet it manipulates the reader to believe the everyday of itself is sensational and invites immersion into it, and for the reader to bind with its modes of operation, its production. Production essentially needs to be understood as the places of interactions with chick lit, places, always plural, multiple, innumerable. It encompasses processes, means and relations of production: activating a field of concepts, writing and writing over, bringing to appearance, and inscribing apparitions, watching and waiting, reading and re-reading, locating and consuming chick lit ‘products’. By ‘production’, I do not simply mean the assemblage within the mode of production named ‘publishing’ as the fabricating of a printed thing, its marketing and circulation. In the sense that I want to engage the notion, production is never-ending; one is never done with the thing in its producing-consuming; it is an infinite conversation, to reference Maurice Blanchot. Its success depends upon this very manipulation, where the reader expects something but will be delivered nothing. The exegesis exposes the conflicts and conundrum of chick lit by throwing it over the lofty walls of the academy forcing it out of the darkness, out of the closed circle of chick lit writers and readers, exposing it to the glare of a divergent academy. This push forces the idea and production of chick lit, that which inhabits the margins of inscription – of the everyday – into an academy that resists or ignores its arrival, and by so doing, invites a discourse around what it means to be immersed in the practice of writing the everyday, and asks what writing constitutes the writing of nothing.

Intentions and an Accidental Real

If freckles were lovely, and day was night,
And measles were nice and a lie warn't a lie,
Life would be delight,--
But things couldn't go right
For in such a sad plight
I wouldn't be *I*.

If earth was heaven and now was hence,
And past was present, and false was true,
There might be some sense
But I'd be in suspense
For on such a pretense
You wouldn't be *you*.

If fear was plucky, and globes were square,
And dirt was cleanly and tears were glee
Things *would* seem fair,--
Yet they'd all despair,
For if here was there
We wouldn't be *we*.

E. E. Cummings, 1910

The purpose of intentions

This topic is disruptive and it is designed to be that way. It provokes a complication that scratches down the blackboard of the academy contravening its long-tail pillars of literature and research then butts against the benign pointlessness, the unspectacular and mundanity of the everyday. It attempts to capture that which in capturing is lost. It is a question without a question mark and one that is unlikely to be answered in this thesis or any other. Indeed its answering, could call a halt to its continuing flow into and through my everydayness. It calls upon something deeper than attaching itself to *just* literature and *just* research, and delves into its true matter: the subject of the self immersed in the ordinary banality of the everyday to be inscribed faithfully in the manner of an autoethnographer. It digs into the deep and binding passion that ripples through the passionless action and tactics of the everyday and poses that *this* topic, whether researched or not, exists and continues to exist as I exist.

We bring a camera stop and pull focus on each singular word to form this topic; a process that is unlikely to illuminate the reason as to why this topic necessitates research. The noun 'chick' serves as an adjective when propped against 'lit,' and conjures the meekest meaning of new, little, light, fluffy, vulnerable, young and decidedly female. 'Lit,' by an unwieldy contrast, belongs to a lofty, aged pedigree that attaches itself to the dusty tomes of calf-skinned, hand-inked texts. It has a sturdy past, gritty present and anticipated future. Chick lit, the phrase which has come to mean more and less than intended, emerged like a puff of powder and dissipates with every breath, lingering, as it finds new places to fall. It travels without the biting irony the term first invited and inhabits the misogynistic framework that critics love to loathe. Its genealogy dissipates like the fog, going everywhere and nowhere, leaving it without the heritage of literature from which

the word 'lit' is derived, being considered neither beautiful nor beguiling for its form or prose.

But contrary to current research, chick lit is not a *what*, but a *where*. Its spatiality and temporality occupy internalities and externalities, spaces and places, and ignores the spectacle and spectacular where popular belief would have the everyday reside. It instead drifts in the nothing and the vacant by woefully documenting the banality of the everyday.

This thesis project, which comprises creative writing, a novel, and an exegesis, pulls at the dangling thread, pulls on the nothing and ignoring the spectacle. It is common, yet it manipulates the reader to believe the everyday of itself is sensational and invites immersion into it, and for the reader to bind with its modes of operation, its production. Its success *depends* upon this very manipulation, where the reader expects *something* but will be delivered nothing. The exegesis exposes the conflicts and conundrum of chick lit by throwing it over the lofty walls of the academy forcing it out of the darkness, out of the closed circle of chick lit writers and readers, exposing it to the glare of a divergent academy and the antagonistic force of second wave feminism. This push forces the idea and production of chick lit, that which inhabits the margins of inscription – of the everyday – into an academy that resists or ignores its arrival, and by so doing, invites a discourse around what it means to be *immersed* in the practice of writing the everyday, and asks what writing constitutes the writing of nothing.

The phrase 'chick lit,' then, is joined to 'research and the everyday' where the simple 'and' creates an even more problematic endeavour. Research *and* the everyday is not, as it may sound, uncovering the journey of a bus on the same route with the same passengers in the same city day after day. The bus is not drearily repeating each day rotating in daily sameness. A lingering look at the bus in the everyday reveals new passengers and drivers who are united only by their vast difference, new and changeable weathers, new timetables and a world beyond the route that is in a constant state of infinite change. Its only repetition is in the new and changing. Not even the bus remains the same.

So how does chick lit connect and become entwined to research *and* the everyday? Who is the researcher and what is the researched? Or more pertinently, *where* is the research? Am I both writer and researcher, existing and not existing, both real and unreal? If it is fiction, where is the truth when the only truth we know is that it could all be made up; that it is all, in fact, a fiction? So, we return to the title: *An Accidental Real: Chick lit, Research and the Everyday*; the problematic grouping of words that wants to pull together and join three repelling forces: creative and affective passionate writing; serious, rigorous and original research and the unspectacular nothing concerned with the background noise of everyday practices.

The literary academic organises the unreal to become real, mapping literature along lines of literary theory, illuminating it against comparative texts and philosophy, and extracting meaning from within the text and its historical context. The cycle continues when new scholars with new theories put the same literature to different tests, and so on.

As the naïve and vulnerable baby chick of literature, chick lit has its own fledgling discourse with dedicated scholars who publish their theory in scholarly journals. Its history does not yet span two decades yet we can cite serious references and place chick lit within its own academic, historical and geographical contexts. But this thesis project challenges the current research in two distinct ways. First, it chooses *not* to dwell in the passive and observant but rather it becomes *immersed* in the production of the everyday, a hermeneutic autoethnography, which is built upon syphoned conversation, the watched and recorded nothingness of human being, human having and human doing, inscribed as a fictional novel playing out the unspectacular. And second, it seeks to understand this recording by categorising it against chick lit narratives, academic discourse and the research of the everyday.

Is the goal, then, to carve an academic path for chick lit so that others may come after? After all, it is not unusual to be *the other* in academia, the other being fertile ground for research. Or is its purpose to disrupt the academy all whilst remaining determined to walk away with a degree? My everyday *is* the research topic but it is the unfolding everyday that confines itself within the methodological rigour of the actual production of chick lit itself. I write chick lit. I am serious about this. Let me say something about myself, then.

An Accidental Real

I love the colour pink. Pink roses are my favourite flower. I wear Versace *Bright Crystal* and it comes in a pink bottle with a glittering crystal top. I wrap myself in pink towels. I sleep under a pink duvet, with my head on a pink pillow. I draw hearts when I doodle and I doodle a lot. I love wearing make-up, waxing, shaving, snipping and cropping. I am proud to call myself a feminist. And I love chick lit.

Chick lit sends me to sleep with a smile on my face. It fluffs my hair onto the pillow and gently kisses me good night. It enamours me with its heroines; I share in her delights and reel with her blows. I have read every single chick lit title I have had my hands on since 1998. In an expression of chick lit and it being the echo of my everydayness, I authored two columns in the UK: one a dating advice column and one a sex column based entirely factually on my own life. But chick lit does not define me. It allows me an escape and a momentary recognition of me; it is an expression of who I am somewhere else in the world. Its heroines drink too much, go out with the wrong man while looking for the right man, sleep around, try to honour their parents by pleasing them, tell-all to their best friends, hide under their duvets on their bad days, dress up on their good days, and party like there is no tomorrow in all the days between. They also cry their heart out when it gets broken. In other words, they are just like me.

If you recall nothing else of this statement, remember this – because the chick lit heroine is on a singular journey we are not always shown the parallel story of her aging and ailing parents, her estranged bickering extended family, her best friend who was killed by a drunk driver and the unending court cases that followed, the deep pit of depression she

fell into and dragged herself from, and the wider grim realities of politics and globalisation that she sees on her news streams everyday, those that make her heart yearn for a better world. But they are there. They exist there with her. They are with her when she writes. They are me. Her everyday is my everyday. Her nothing is my nothing. Her commonness is my commonality. This does not make the genre of chick lit subordinate. Rather, through the clever device of humour, its wholly intelligent authors take their readers on the ticklish path of a limerick, which appears at its surface as light and funny, but if you chose to look any deeper – if you *bother* to – you can tap into a vast and wondrous world of love and lust, sorrow and loss, family, friendship, loyalty and passion, and best of all, a happy ending. Because who doesn't deserve a happy ending?

Intentions: false starts, dead ends

'What the hell, seriously, *what the hell?!*' Cat slapped the table again.
'I mean, seriously, what the hell's going on? Tell me what is going on in your head, because I just do not understand. I don't understand you, Lucy. I really do not understand. Oh God...' she rubbed her head, 'you *slept* with him, actually slept with that *fool*? For fuck's fucken sake!'

Belinda Nash, 2011

The only way to unpeel the layers of this research is to collate it under thematic headings that thread together its uneasy purpose. I know this to be true because this is the *third* writing of this exegesis.

The first was a deep and thorough comparative study of the novel *Sweet nothing* against the mythic narrative theories of Christopher Vogler, which were themselves heavily influenced by Joseph Campbell's theories on universal mythic structure and Carl G. Jung's archetypes.¹ It was then intended to compare *Sweet nothing* and triangulate the theories of Robert McKee and Linda Marie Walker to justify the novel by contextualising it against 'real' narrative structures. It was too tempting to use these theories as the lens through which to view my text. But this first exegesis became unhinged, dislodged and failed in its ambition. It dishearteningly failed. And the reason why is obvious, but it hurt nonetheless. It failed because it was *such* an awkward, forced and clumsy fit, and above all, because it denied the topic of my research: *An Accidental Real: Chick Lit, Research and the Everyday*. Theories of narrative structure *cannot* reflect the research of my everyday; it was pitting two opposing matters together, where one subsumed the other, dissolving it altogether.

¹ The first attempt used Vogler's major work *The hero's journey* (2007) for the bulk of the comparative analysis of *Sweet nothing* due to his theories' robust application in Hollywood (particularly in the genre of romantic comedy) for a period of more than twenty years. His theories derive from mythologist Joseph Campbell's *The hero with a thousand faces* (1973; original published 1949), which became the primary source for Vogler's seven-page paper 'A practical guide to the hero with a thousand faces' (1985), which has been credited with setting successful principles for storytelling in Hollywood's major studios including 20th Century Fox, Paramount Pictures, Universal Studios and Walt Disney Pictures, and influencing novelists and playwrights globally. Vogler also drew inspiration from Swiss psychologist Carl G. Jung's archetype theory, which describes universal patterns of personality.

The second exegesis attempted to break down the topic and rebuild it. It comprised two sections: part one of section one examined the product, the novel *Sweet nothing*, by establishing whether there is a legitimate genre called chick lit, and discussed the term's origins and precursor texts. Part two addressed the commonality of social practice and analysed accusations that chick lit is only a market-driven exercise and exists without literary merit. Part three examined chick lit's placement and or exclusion from academia and considered the term's relationship to neo-liberal post-feminism and feminists of the third wave. Part four concluded section one by evaluating the novel *Sweet nothing* against the findings of parts one to three. Section two investigated the process of undertaking a practice-led research thesis. It considered the research paradigm, methodology, method and contextual literature and located the practice in theories of the everyday. But my research had and was continuing to happen everyday *despite* this exegesis attempt, and this sum-of-the-parts approach failed because it sought to analyse that which was continually occurring. The research of the everyday is boundary-less, and yet my analysis of it attempted to frame it as bounded, though it is infinite.

It failed. I saw the failure on the faces of my supervisors and felt it deeply within me. I had failed.

When would the epiphany happen? And would it *ever* come? How was I to create discourse on *Chick Lit, Research and the Everyday* when I was so consumed with playing in the corrective 'he said, she said' space and ignoring what constitutes the practice of the everyday, and exasperation of inscribing it yet remaining truthful? And where was the comparative, analytical and hermeneutic study of *Sweet nothing*? Instead my topic invites the question of finding the threshold moment between inscribing the everyday to it becoming *research* in the everyday where a background of 'everyday' becomes the foreground; the place of discovery. And here starts exegesis number three, beginning with the promise that this explosive, if minute, threshold between the literate and non-literate will be uncovered.

There is no such thing as failing, there is only learning

This research shows that the production of chick lit, being immersed in the unspectacular of the everyday paradoxically constitutes more than the mundanity of everydayness. It describes the spectacularly unspecial and monotony contained within the everyday of chick lit, and how it starts with something and ends with nothing. This is its promise: *Sweet nothing*. What happens when characters with no special qualities become immersed and visited in the everyday? And how are these inscriptions not a diary, a journal, a newsletter delivered in sections, a mere rote notation of what happened each day? And by being in act of recording the some, what is missed of the whole? And where does the emptiness end and the nothing begin?

French spatial theorist Henri Lefebvre asked: "Why should the study of the banal itself be banal?" and I pose that this research be uplifting and while delving deep into the banal – having produced a novel from writing in the milieu of the nothing – that it remains alive

and lively (Lefebvre, *YFS*, 1987, p. 9). The research emerged from the tactics of the everyday, being immersed in the poaching and the ethnographic poaching and recording of the everyday of *Sweet nothing*, then jumps to the exegesis which uncovers the close proximity and philosophy of the everyday, to the spatiality and temporality of literature, to challenging the question around ‘What is chick lit?’ by posing a new question of the *where* of chick lit. It is pieces of many jigsaw puzzles worked in together to create a not previously conceived, new whole.

Affective Passions

Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.

Michel de Certeau, 1984

An essential nothing

The novel *Sweet nothing* is concerned with an interminable impossibility: the capturing of the radical absence of everything – the place where nothing happens – but which is still ‘sweet.’ It is engaged in the continual missing of the everyday by recording, fictionalising and producing it, because the act of capturing it ensures that parts are missed. If we believe Lefebvre to be correct in his belief that the everyday is a product whereby its production “engenders consumption, and where consumption is manipulated by producers,” and that *Sweet nothing* is wantonly immersed in the collection of daily banalities – the functions of walking, eating, driving, talking – is the author, me, using chick lit to perform the literal mechanism for “decoding” the world “according to the everyday” (Lefebvre, 1987, p. 9-10)? And if so, is it an effective tool of research into the everyday or is the something it inscribes serving more to *miss* the everyday than capture it?

Lefebvre embraces the study of the banal and its possibility to “reveal the extraordinary within the ordinary,” but if that ordinary is the place where nothing happens, the continual cycle of repetition and monotony, how might the extraordinary be found in what is an essential nothing (Lefebvre, 1987, p. 9)? Even in the nothing, and in a novel where nothing happens, the contradictory and singular truth of everydayness is that ‘*everything changes*,’ where:

Production anticipates reproduction; production produces change in such a way as to superimpose the impression of speed onto that of monotony. Some people cry out against the acceleration of time, others cry out against stagnation. They’re both right. Lefebvre, *Yale French Studies*, 73, 1987, p. 10.

Michel de Certeau² gives importance to the project of ethnology, inviting the pursuer to “listen otherwise” to encounters of the ordinary which leads to “the business of writing human culture, a writing of culture in which the ordinary, the everyday is simultaneously both inscribed and excised” (Highmore, 2001, p. 255). This lends a cleanliness to the capturing of the everyday, where through the process of articulation ‘everyday practices’, ‘ways of operating’ or doing things no longer appear as merely the obscure background of ‘social activity,’ and yet at once erases much of it through the process of inscribing (de Certeau, 1984, p. xi). This is a paradox that can never – and will never – be resolved in this thesis project, because the immutable fact is that the everyday both escapes and is inescapable.

The everyday escapes

Readers of any novel exist in the space of the unknowable, that is, they cannot know anything within a text beyond that which they are reading. They occupy the space of existence entirely in the milieu, of “an opaque past and an uncertain future”, in the tactile space where only what is happening can be seen (de Certeau, 1984, p. 93). This is their boundary. By contrast, writers operate in the strategic space, of knowing the beginning, middle and end of that which they are writing. This poses a dilemma for the recorder, inscriber and manipulator of the everyday, and in the writing of *Sweet nothing*, I was contained in that intensive and extensive space of attempted passionate virtuosity.

From the French *jour*, meaning day, a journey basks in the movements achieved within a day, and a journal heralds what has been done in a day. It strategises. It lifts the moments out from moments, which together inscribe the whole, and in so doing loses the everyday. When we are immersed in the everyday, we cannot see where it came from and where it is going. In writing the everyday, therefore, we are forever writing what we can never write because in writing, it becomes strategised, until we perfect the seamless shuffle between the two, which is by nature, impossible. Just as the past “is precisely that which cannot be grasped by research, that which is absent and cannot be displayed again” the present slips the inscriber’s grasp (Weymans, 2004, p. 174). As participators in the everyday, the moment as participators in the everyday we try to represent or record it, we rise to the stratosphere of strategy, which by its actualisation allows no awareness of the everyday by presenting no view of it, and thus the journey – the journal – of the impossible begins with the “essential trait” that the everyday “allows no hold,” that “it escapes:”

Despite massive development of the means of communication, the everyday escapes. This is its definition. We cannot help but miss it if we seek it through knowledge, for it belongs to a region where there is still nothing to know, just as it is prior to all relation insofar as it has always already been said, even while remaining unformulated, that is to say, not yet information. ... Nothing happens; this is the

² Scholar Win Weymans describes Michel de Certeau as “a cultural sociologist as a historian, philosopher, semiotician, theologian, and psychoanalyst” as extracted from his complete bibliography edited by Luce Giard, “Bibliographie complète de Michel de Certeau,” in *Voyage*, pp. 191-243 (Weymans, 2004, p. 162).

everyday. But what is the meaning of this stationary movement? At what level is this “nothing happens” situated? For whom does “nothing happen” if, for me, something is necessarily always happening? In other words, what corresponds to the “who?” of the everyday? And, at the same time, why, in this “nothing happens,” is there the affirmation that something essential might be allowed to happen? Blanchot, ‘Everyday Speech,’ *Yale French Studies*, 73, 1987, p. 15.

In *Sweet nothing*, the text exists in the temporal reality of the everyday, recording the details of tasks as they happen:

The Salad Man brought three more coffees to the hapless trio. Cat began the all-consuming task of emptying packets of sugar into her brew. An autumn chill bristled past their exposed legs. Beth shivered and checked the time on her iPhone. ‘Cold much? Summer’s gone, dammit. So when d’you last see Willy anyway?’ she asked, placing her iPhone back on the table after a quick tweet. Lucy wrapped her hands round her cup and sipped slowly from the warm drink. ‘Not for about three weeks now. Yeah... lame.’ Nash, *Sweet nothing*, 2011, p. 110.

This approach relieves the text from the task of being a journal, and is instead immersed in the actions (and nothings) of the characters and what those actions and inactions might reveal about them and how they fill their emptiness. What does this express if not a journal? It instead presents more as instructions in a script, which perhaps if written in the first person, present tense – typical of chick lit – would have the effect of immersing the reader within the scene, imagining each detail as it is happens. What does this say of the author’s – *my* – faithfulness to truth? In other words, what is missing from the exchanges and actions that cause the reader to assume one thing over another? It is this *missingness*, this absence of words and phrases that impact the possibility that this text – or indeed any other – *can* remain authentic. There is so much that is not said, that it is proof positive that the authenticity of the event as it happens in the everyday fails to remain authentic to events – real *or* imagined. And all the while as it is being written it is being strategised as the writer knowingly or unknowingly plots the next moves. The writer’s God’s eye view removes them from being lost in the milieu and the dense cluster of people and conversation.

Writing’s whereabouts

Lucy’s heart was not into the evening’s art exhibition traipse and launch-of-something-special-that-she-had-never-seen-before-(not-this-week-anyway) mingling. Tuesday night every week meant a meander from Britomart, High Street, St. Paul Street, Symonds Street, Queen Street, K Road to Pitt Street, Ponsonby and Herne Bay, if she ever made it that far. Each “exclusive showing” or “cocktail evening” (which never had cocktails, by the way) was punctuated with average wine and bread and dips, or the disappointing array of oven cooked spring rolls, prawns in a spoon or some kind of salmon on something. No one bothered with the

good stuff anymore. The luvvies and socialite set varied from place to place, although not by much.

Belinda Nash, 2011

Writing lives in the locality of affecting passions, a place of emotions – to laugh, to cry, to *feel*. It is not a mere ‘cataloguing or describing’ of ‘daily living’ of an everyday. Instead writing may sidestep institutional systems to bring us in touch with the concept and reality of the everyday. As Kaplan and Ross suggest:

[to]...advance a theory of everyday life is to elevate lived experience to the status of a critical concept – not merely in order to describe lived experience, but in order to change it. ... Even at its most degraded, however, the everyday harbors the possibility of its own transformation; it gives rise, in other words, to desires which cannot be satisfied within a weekly cycle of production/consumption. Kaplan and Ross, ‘Introduction’, *Yale French Studies*, 73, 1987, p. 1, 3.

Situationists reconfigured the spatiality of texts by digging at the margins, developing the *dérive*, the day or week-long “drift” (Ball, 1987, p. 31). Readers echo the drift within a text by becoming players in the production of a novel, immersed as they are in “a silent production: the drift across the page, the metamorphosis of the text effected by the wandering eyes of the reader, the improvisation and expectation of meanings inferred from a few words, leaps over written spaces in an ephemeral dance” (de Certeau, 1984, p. xxi). Do readers passively receive the text, or do they interweave their own life story into it? Here the reader inhabits the property of the writer and “slips into the author’s place” where she “insinuates into another person’s text the ruses of pleasure and appropriation: [s]he poaches on it, is transported into it, pluralizes [her]himself in it like the internal rumblings of one’s body” and in so doing loses moments of his (or her) own everyday, suspended as they are, in another’s reality.

As readers, “As in the ship of fools, we are embarked, without the possibility of an aerial view or any sort of totalisation” and even more so when trapped in the banality of the everyday as it is expressed in chick lit (de Certeau, 1984, p. 11). The reader is not only deprived of any view of the future or the whole, but through the enactment of the everyday, is forced to extract meaning from within monotony and banality, from the nothing.

Drift texts and pointless documents

The spatiality of chick lit is, at once, complex. It is not written in fictional terms but is, rather, more aligned to a reality that corresponds to the situationists’ emphasis on geo-writing (graphy) that is a psycho-logos. Hence, the experiments that seem to produce a

banality of the predictable but in a writing that *plays* with Literature, extending it, in what are “drift-texts” after the situationists,³ “derives” or spatial drifts.

[The Situationists] initiated a series of empirico-utopian experiments under the general rubric psychogeography: the active study of mental states and spatial ambiances produced by the material organization of the urban terrain. They proposed a division of the city into affective zones or microclimates; in more or less organized and only carelessly documented traipses through Paris, they surveyed the city for what might be salvaged and used in utopian reconstruction of social space. Kaplan and Ross, ‘Introduction,’ *Yale French Studies*, 73, 1987, p. 2.

Rilke, that most famous of travelling Austrian poets, turned the practice of walking the city (usually alone) into his everyday to experience “in the liveliest engagement with these countries’ present and past” (Haustedt, 2006, p. 7; cited in Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe aus Muzot*, 1926, p. 409). His going beyond “sensing the atmosphere” where the creation of a single verse becomes reliant upon seeing “many cities, people and things” is how a practitioner of chick lit – as both or either writer and reader – would be advised to proceed. Rilke’s poetry sign-posted cities, most especially Venice where he could point any tourist towards “any destination they wished” (Haustedt, 2006, p. 7; cited in Helmut Woche, *Rilke und Italien*, 1940, p. 73).

The pseudo-leader of the faux linear hierarchy of L’Internationale Situationniste (S.I.) (and irrepressible drunk) Guy Debord said that psychogeography:

Could set up for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotion and behavior of individuals ... [F]rom any standpoint other than that of police control, Haussman’s Paris is a city built by idiots, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. Debord, Guy, ‘Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography,’ *Les Lèvres nues* no. 6, September 1955, (which predates the S.I.).

What of the spatiality of chick lit and *Sweet nothing*? All language has an extensive and intensive spacing to it. Writing contains its own density and sparsity; this is the space of literature: the God’s eye view versus being lost in the milieu and dense cluster of people and conversation. Chick lit then is a production of careless documentation of the heroine’s drifts in spatiality. The scene at Mondial in *Sweet nothing* (pp. 170-184) is so lost in the noise of people and conversation that, like the characters within the text, it becomes increasingly difficult to orientate and know who is talking when, particularly in the penultimate scene, which crescendos to near breaking point when Cat, G, Big Al, Ginga Boy and Lucy are part of the one conversation (Nash, 2011, pp. 182-183).

³ *Time* magazine said the tag “situationists” was “for those without preconceived ideologies who judge each situation as it arises” (*Time*, 24 May, 1968; cited in ‘The great sideshow of the Situationist International,’ by Edward Ball, *YFS*, 73, 1987, p. 22).

Where is chick lit?

...intellectuals are still borne on the backs of the common people.

Michel de Certeau, 1984

Chick lit is peculiar. It is a spatial practice that occupies the space where essentially nothing happens. Just as the newspaper escapes the banality, the tedium and the everyday by specialising in the sensational, the “something is happening” by transcribing the “strange, sublime, abominable,” chick lit finds a home in that which is rejected because it dwells in manifest boredom and is defined by its series of disconnected physiological and social technical acts – waking up, making breakfast, walking to work, talking on the phone, tweeting – and encounters of the physical, spatial, sexual and spiritual (Blanchot, p. 18). Blanchot says it is these acts of the ordinary that serve to define the everyday:

...the everyday is what we are first of all, and most often: at work, at leisure, awake, asleep, in the street, in private existence. The everyday, then, is ourselves, ordinarily. Blanchot, *Yale French Studies*, 73, 1987, p. 12.

Chick lit thrives in the ordinary. Like the practice and absorbing of language, it is practiced before it is known. Therefore, there exists a curiosity to locate the whereabouts of chick lit; to find where it is encountered and therefore *lives*; to ask where do you go to *find* chick lit? *How* is chick lit practiced? Where is chick lit read, consumed and rewritten as the reader becomes writer of the text? Where is it bought, borrowed, lent, misunderstood, lost and destroyed? Does it become dog-eared, bookmarked, repeat-read, loved or put down never to be finished? Does an author’s beloved text end in the bargain bins at The Warehouse, bought for a snip then forgotten? Are off-loaded books sold for 50c at the Salvation Army Store? Or is the story sold to Hollywood and transformed into a box office smashing romantic comedy? Chick lit is infinitely mobile and can be encountered and be assimilated everywhere, in its production from writing, reading, being and watching through to reading about the production of chick lit in reviews. The locations of chick lit are its places of being and practicing, passive and active.

Chick lit’s pervasive presentation

The question, therefore, becomes where does chick lit present itself? It is not solely the practice of writing chick lit, of capturing the real and mundane of the everyday, the unremarkable sameness, but that its practice encapsulates the experience and spatiality of the reader, viewer, participator. We attempt to find the definition of what is chick lit in the following pages, but assuming it is largely *the act of living the everyday where varying human relationships unfold*, it becomes the practice of tactics of the passive – such as reading, watching television⁴ and movies, observing others – and of the active –

⁴ *Sweet nothing* has been optioned for a television series and book publishing. If it proceeds, it will enter the realm that sustains in the space of 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is reliant upon the exchange of

encountering others, resolving tensions and conflicts, inscribing the events of human relationships in the everyday.

It therefore touches on the temporal and spatial locations of wherever it is chosen (or not chosen) to be practiced, such as at movie theatres, in homes, on planes, at the beach, on holiday and in last thing at night in bed before sleep. *Sweet nothing* is practiced at Conch Records, SPQR, Mea Culpa, Good One café, Dizengoff, Landreth & Co., Gypsy Tea Rooms, Mondial, the Basement and Euro, and other localities, in Auckland City, and latterly Queenstown, LA, London and Brighton, both in the situation of its writing and the characters' being, and of the author's whereabouts.

I wrote in those places and live day-to-day in those spaces. This is *my* 'real' within the pages of *Sweet nothing*.

The localities invite a temporal and spatial challenge for the reader, who can – if they choose to – practice chick lit by sitting at the same chairs, at the same time of year and be immersed in the same spectacle of the nothingness; the same but different. In this case, chick lit therefore is not something to be read, rather, in the space of tactical becoming, is a temporal warp enabling the reader to experience the spatial practice of the writer and the characters. This experience is not then limited to that one temporality. It is question of how chick lit is practiced, where chick lit has the uncanny spatial and temporal localising that seems to foreground the situatedness of a perennial 'nothing happens' as essential for the something that is necessarily always happening. Scholars and critics have enacted the practice of strategising chick lit by asking *what* is chick lit not *where*. My thesis project differs markedly in that it practices the *where* of chick lit before investigating its *what*, then asks where, and therefore comes upon differing conclusions. But we will now play in the space of genre and see what the critics have had to say.

The what of chick lit is well-practiced and has nearly two decades of rehearsal. While critics have agreed and disagreed and answered and not answered the question, they have not advanced in assessing what makes the practice of chick lit singular, something my thesis project endeavours to qualify by asking: 'Where is chick lit?' Chick lit is a term so utterly and profoundly demeaning that it is a wonder that any women would want to publish in the genre at all.⁵ This is a genre primarily written by women for women since the mid-1990s (that is if you ignore the popular *Tales of the City* (1978-1982) novel series by Armistead Maupin, set in the everyday of an unspectacular apartment block, which

selling advertising. The condition of the distraction of television would plug *Sweet nothing* into the anesthetic rush, which is more alive than alive and more dead than dead.

⁵ Patty Campbell says the combined words chick and lit add up to a term that is at best "inherently demeaning," and more probably, sexist: "Chick is a derogatory term for the presumably empty-headed girls or young women who are both the characters and the readers; lit is an ironic reference to the assumed lack of quality writing in the form. Whether any, or all, of so-called chick lit deserves this scorn will remain to be seen over time" (Campbell, 2006, p. 487). Her blanket derision of the genre reflects the popular opinion of second wave feminists and academics, some of whom have questioned whether the sexual revolution achieved anything at all, such as critic Norah Vincent, following the first flush of Bridget Jones mania, who says: "It seems that the whiny, feckless Bridget...is not quite the daughter feminists were hoping for back in the Seventies...She has nailed the liberated vixen for the cream puff she is, and if you're one of the millions of working girls who read this novel with any glimmer of recognition, then she has nailed you, too" (Vincent, 1998, *National Review*, p. 49-50).

differs only marginally from the genre known today as chick lit).⁶ American writer Curtis Sittenfeld nailed popular critical sentiment when she said chick lit is so cruel a label that it is akin to calling “a woman a slut.”⁷ Thankfully, say they, like sluts the world over, chick lit is no more than “a passing fad” (Gelder & Salzman, 2009; Bullen, Toffoletti and Parsons, 2011, p. 502).

Chick lit is both a sociocultural phenomenon and a literary genre with thousands of creative responses.⁸ Which? And does it matter?⁹ Words may float over the practices, techniques and “must-haves”¹⁰ of the genre, but what makes its thousands of readers enraptured with the lives of ordinary “wisecracking characters or ridiculous situations, usually involving work or dating” (Vnuk, 2005, p. 42)? *Bridget Jones’s diary*¹¹ didn’t sell

⁶ The back cover of the 2001 print of *Sex and the city* cites the book’s author, Candace Bushnell, as being “An Armistead Maupin for the real world”.

⁷ *The New York Times*, American bestselling novelist Curtis Sittenfeld made the statement in 2005, which arguably coincided with the genre’s peak of popularity, if not its decline (Aviv, 2006; Sittenfeld, 2005). What was made apparent by Sittenfeld’s passionate vitriol was that there was – and still is – both documented loathing and plaudits of the genre, which sit at disparate ends of a very widespread debate. Three year after her comments, in a national radio interview, Sittenfeld admitted she had got herself into “hot water” by her earlier comments and amended her opinion to suggest that chick lit has become so broad as to defy concrete definition. She even dished out praise for some of the genre: “when I read a great, smart book about a young woman making her way in the world, it’s a reason to rejoice” (Sittenfeld, 2008, National Public Radio interview text). Coincidentally, in 2003, popular chick lit author Jenny Colgan bemoaned the term chick lit, saying it “is a deliberately condescending term they use to rubbish us all. If they called it slut lit it couldn’t be more insulting” (Razdan, 2004, p. 20).

⁸ In her doctoral thesis, Federica Balducci (2011) describes the genre as having gathered “extraordinary media and public attention, in terms of sales and readers’ reception, the term itself has often been used pejoratively, and the limitations pointed out by literary critics range from endless solipsism in terms of authorship and subject matter, to predictable narrative formulas that entertain the readers superficially without challenging them.”

⁹ Scholar Kerstin Fest describes the genre as “modern fairy tales, as guilty pleasure or purely escapist reading” (Fest, 2009, p. 44). Suzanne Ferriss, in her review of Stephanie Harzewski’s book *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, in the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*, 2.1 (2011) says whatever it is it has “faced derision, if not outright hostility.” Ten years after chick lit’s popular emergence, Ferris and academic Mallory Young investigated the genre to write, *Chick lit: The new woman’s fiction*, 2006. US librarian Rebecca Vnuk calls the books: “Sexy, funny and sharp,” which, paired alongside scholar Mary Ryan’s intersection between feminism and popular culture: “typically featuring female characters in their 20s and 30s as they make their way through their lives and tackle the obstacles in their way, everything from finding Mr. Right (or, at least, Mr. Maybe) to finding the perfect career to finding the perfect shoes, along with everything in-between, all told in a humorous and self-deprecating tone,” makes for an apt, possible definition (Vnuk, 2005, p. 42; Ryan, 2010, p. 72). Scholar Federica Balducci disagrees, saying the nature of chick lit, in fact, makes it resistant to definition (Balducci, 2011, p. 22).

¹⁰ Chick lit author and writing coach, Cathy Yardley in her how-to guide entitled: *Will write for shoes: How to write a chick lit novel*, lists eight must-have elements of chick lit, including that: it must be located in an urban setting; the heroine has an exciting career; an “evil boss”; a best friend who is possibly gay; falls for the wrong man; along with her best friends, the protagonists go on a “man-hunting expedition”; the heroine faces a major life blip that requires her to actively take a change of course; and placement of well-known brands throughout the text, and relevant pop culture references (Yardley, 2006, p. 10-15).

¹¹ *Bridget Jones’s diary* is a year-long tale of a single woman living in London who has an affair with her boss, changes jobs, gets a boyfriend and deals with her mother having a mid-life crisis, all the while drinking, eating and smoking with her best friends. The second in the series of the *Bridget Jones’s diary* by Helen Fielding broke away from what would later become the genre norm. The book, entitled *Bridget Jones’s diary: The edge of reason*, while successful, did not exceed the success of the first in the series, and today barely passes a mention in the story of the genre’s history. This may be because rather than staying within the ordinariness of life, the plot eloped to Thailand where Bridget imprisoned in Thailand awaiting sentence for allegedly attempting to export heroine.

shed loads of copies¹² at the height of ‘girl power’¹³ because it was crafted to fulfill a prescribed genre. Chick lit didn’t even exist then. And *Bridget Jones’s diary* and many of the genre’s benchmark texts¹⁴ evaded the lolly-paper wrapping of today’s titles, so it wasn’t propelled into success by the well-ordered marketing ploy the genre was destined to become.¹⁵

Fans would have us believe chick lit is “Smart, fun and modern fiction for females,”¹⁶ and yet despite their immersion within the consumption of chick lit, they still occupy the view of the *strategist*. Butler and Desai strategise that the genre’s titles tell: “clever, fast-paced stories about young, predominantly white women’s messy journeys of personal and professional growth,” while scholar Rachel Smydra accusingly states that the genre, and therefore its literary practitioners, kowtow to plagiaristic, one-note tendencies¹⁷ leading some readers to experience shame in reading the repeated nothings (Butler and Desai, 2008; Smydra, 2007; Rowntree, Bryant and Moulding, 2011, p. 2). Perhaps the genre’s confessional narrative¹⁸ – a byproduct of the literal inscribing and enactment of the

¹² Ferriss, among others, identify that Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s diary* launched the genre in the UK, noting that by 2006, the title had broken global sales of more than two million books and was published in no less than 30 languages. Its film of the same name (2001) made more than \$245 million at the box office. As Jenny Colgan quipped, not all copies of Fielding’s novel have been “bought by lovelorn single women in London” (quoted in Fiachra Gibbons article in the *Guardian*: ‘Stop Rubbishing Chick Lit, Demands Novelist,’ August 21, 2003. Print 2011).

¹³ Federica Balducci cites Stéphanie Genz’s “popularization of feminist ideas and language” located as: “a playful/ironic reconfiguration and consumption of feminine signifier” Genz, *Postfemininities in Popular Culture*, p. 86, quoted in Balducci, 2011, p. 26,

¹⁴ Benchmark chick lit texts include: Marian Keyes’s *Watermelon* (1995); Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s diary* (1996); Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the city* (1997); Melissa Bank’s *The girls’ guide to hunting and fishing* (1999); Cecelia Ahern’s *P.S. I love you* (2002); Allison Pearson’s *I don’t know how she does it* (2002); Lauren Weisberger’s *The devil wears Prada*. (2003); Lucy-Anne Holmes’s *50 ways to find a lover* (2010); Sophie Kinsella’s *The secret dreamworld of a shopaholic* (2007); Jenny Colgan’s *Amanda’s wedding* (1999); Jennifer Weiner’s *Good in bed* (2001); and Emma McLaughlin and Nicola Kraus’ *The nanny diaries* (2002).

¹⁵ Chick lit’s marketing and “consistency, easy identification and broad applicability” make selling and purchase decisions easy, says scholar Balducci (2011, p. 29).

¹⁶ This definition, also cited by Ryan, is sourced from the fan author of chicklitbooks.com, which has the tagline: “Smart, fun and modern fiction for females”, who also says “it’s like having a best friend tell you about her life” (chicklitbooks.com, retrieved February 5, 2012).

¹⁷ Smydra suggests that because “Most chick lit plots do not depend on originality in story development” publishers are seizing upon this niche-driven genre and “modifying the plots” for maximum appeal, and writing sequels to top sellers, which “undermine the legitimacy of chick lit as a bona-fide genre” (Smydra, 2007).

¹⁸ Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s diary* led the way with its direct diary confessional template. Others follow the first person voice but not (usually) a diary narrative. The diary confessional model appeared most significantly in popular culture, in 1982, in the BBC Radio 4 book and television series *The secret diary of Adrian Mole* by Sue Townsend. The series was directed at the same generation of readers who, at the time, were pre-teen and that would later be the age (mid-20s) of Fielding’s protagonist, Bridget Jones, more than a decade later. Marian Keyes adopts the confessional narrative in her own columns for *Irish Tatler* and in most of her twelve novels, including centering a series of her novels on the Walsh family of sisters Claire, Rachel, Maggie and Anna, in respective titles by Keyes: *Watermelon* (1995), *Rachel’s holiday* (1998), *Angels* (2002) and *Is there anybody out there* (2006). In her very personal, semi-autobiographical novel, *Rachel’s holiday* (1998), Keyes takes readers on a journey through the protagonist’s rehabilitation from alcoholism and depression. Keyes succumbed to alcoholism and depression in the late 1980s and early 1990s soon after moving to London. After completing rehab in her homeland, Ireland in 1994, Keyes wrote her best-selling novel *Watermelon* (1995) about single motherhood and divorce. *Rachel’s holiday* followed in 1998 and is the fictional story based on her true-life rehabilitation experience. Keyes refers to her alcoholism in her column with the title ‘The Pissed is a Foreign Country, They Do Things Differently There,’ which appeared in her

everyday – has the tendency to *feel* plagiaristic rather than (due to its expression of sameness) actually *being* plagiaristic? Perhaps the experiences of the practitioners of chick lit *does* echo each text that has gone before it, because fundamentally, the functions of the everyday are necessarily repeated; that *the act of living the everyday where varying human relationships unfold*, the writing of human culture and “ways of operating,” rarely *can* differ.

In the search for seeking the where of chick lit, it makes sense to ask the where of the protagonist. Where *are* these big city¹⁹ gals who “contend with messy roommates, noncommittal boyfriends and callous bosses” (Jain, 2003, p. 2)?²⁰ Where do they dwell? Where do these “thoroughly nice, caring and emphatic” people who “put their friend and family first” drive encounters and be faithful to the practice of everyday and of their “common experience” (Fest, 2009, p. 44; de Certeau, 1984, 15)? They operate in the cultural milieu. They are encountered at work, in cafés, bars, waiting for the bus, in the express line at the supermarket. They are a collective of qualitatively differing individuals all on a unique path of sameness, immersed in the busy nothingness of life. Our protagonist is immersed in the activity of the everyday – shopping, chatting, having lunch, driving, walking – the activities of nothing that fill the emptiness (Vnuk, 2005, p. 42).²¹

monthly column in *Irish Tatler*, which in her words, “covered most aspects of my life,” and was later compiled into a collection entitled *Under the Duvet*, published in 2001. She says: “No one sets out to be an alcoholic. It certainly wasn’t part of my life plan, but it happened anyway. Luckily I was one of the fortunate ones. At the start of 1994 I got help and was able to stop, which was when the real business of growing up began.” Ferriss suggests that it is through the intimacy of the “confessional narrative” that the reader most identifies with the protagonist (Keyes, 2011).

¹⁹ An urban setting is integral to chick lit, whether the plot is contained within a large city or the protagonist makes her escape from it on her path to self-realisation. Yardley lists it in her “checklist” of chick lit staples (Yardley, 2006, p. 10). The city of New York in Bushnell’s novels is “a recurring character” (Kakihara, 2009, p.4) and indeed, Bushnell’s *Sex and the city* collection of columns allude to the reason for being, but also its locations: The Bowrey Bar, for example, is the setting for four of Bushnell’s columns. References to SoHo, the Meatpacking District, Brooklyn and Park Avenue, as examples, serve to locate a character’s background and status within New York’s socio-economic plane; its characters and characterizations: Bushnell outted New York’s famous serial daters, the “modelizers” in her chapter: ‘Meet the guys Who Bed Models’ – one of the benefits of living in New York city (Bushnell, 1996, p. 32-33).

²⁰ In her article ‘Head over heels for sassy chick lit,’ Anita Jain describes how publishers struck gold and the “lucrative” genre, saying: “The books have found a niche among young urban women looking for a sassy voice that defines their generation. Their popularity is breathing new life into a sagging book industry dominated by older readers.” In evidence, Jain interviewed a smattering of publishers and readers of the genre. One reader, 31-year-old Manhattanite Aren Cohen “who works at the Guggenheim Museum and devours about half a dozen of the cheeky novels each summer,” who quips: “It’s all the best and all the worst of that experience of being a single twentysomething gal in the city” p. 2-3 (2003).

²¹ Scholar Rebecca Vnuk describes the dwelling place of the protagonist as being in the place of “...great shoes, trendy drinks, celebrities, jobs in publishing” (Vnuk, 2005, p. 42). This is apparent too when Weinberger locates her characters’ friendship in everydayness: “The girls chatted straight through the entire *Grey’s* episode, an *Entourage* rerun, and bits and pieces of Dateline’s *To catch a predator*. They were just about to get sucked into *Notting Hill* on the Oxygen Network when Emmy announced she was exhausted and had to be up the next day...” (*Chasing Harry Winston*, Lauren Weisberger, 2008, p. 175). Vnuk’s comments were made in 2005 during an “oversaturation” of the genre in the marketplace when chick lit was already heading into decline in popularity. Vnuk says the location of chick lit and its protagonists causes them to date more quickly than other fiction. Vnuk is likely correct. Chick lit is entrenched in the urban setting and trends of the day, so that technology assets locate the story in a very specific time and therefore the novels

They are in constant movement and preparedness for the next nothing they separately and together encounter. The advantage of this sameness, suggests scholar Katie O'Donnell Arosteguy, is that such personalised narrative orientate the reader within the text as if she is reading "her own life" (O'Donnell Arosteguy, 2009, p. 5). The reliability of *knowing* the text secures readers' empathy because, in reading the "me," flaws and all, they *feel* the emotions that propel and disable the protagonist (McWatters, 2011, p. 26).

The wit of chick lit

Chick lit is at times achingly funny, wry and observant and is told with such comedic sass as to become punctuated by the reader's (my) laughter and in so doing gains her complicity. Humour is not concerned with saccharine sentiment says Gregory Ulmer quoting Roland Barthes, where humour is concerned with being: "...the emblem of the logical subversions [that] releases demonstration from its demonstrative attribute" (Ulmer, 1987, p. 42; Barthes, pp. 80-81). In her cutting summation of the dull and witless novel *Dot.homme* by Jane Moore (2004), reviewer Victoria Guild aims for a punch between the eyes: "good chick lit novels make you laugh out loud and occasionally cry. This did neither" (*The Nelson Mail*, 2004, p. 31). *Ouch!* It failed in its deliverance of "cathartic release and escape" (McWatters, 2011, p. 25). Despite her self-diagnosed allergy to chick lit, *The Spectator* literary critic Celia Waldon dismisses any attempt to navigate the chick lit formula *without* being "firmly tongue-in-cheek" (Waldon, 2006). Rosalind Gill would have us believe the misused tool of observational irony *creates* the stereotypical heroine it intended to critique (Gill, 2007, *Gender and the Media*, p. 257 and 266, cited in Balducci, 2011, p. 54).

Queen scholar of chick lit, Stephanie Harzewski has puts the genre through a strainer in her book *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011).²² For her, chick lit's aversion to subtlety and tactical navigation of hyperbole illuminates the text, adding that "these urban period pieces offer parodic commentary on significant demographic shifts in the United States and the United Kingdom" (Harzewski, 2011, p. 3).

With writers like Lucy-Anne Holmes churning out copy like this, below, the maturation of this genre and its authors may yet bring surprises:

Julia bought the magic bra for me ages ago. It rescues my breasts from somewhere near Clapham and squeezes and raises them until they are close to my chin. I can't work out if it looks sexy or as though I've got a child's bottom stuck to my chest" Holmes, 2009, p.157.

outdate quickly. It is made to be digested in a consumable locale. It could be regarded as the fast food of literature – not a lot of substance, but great at the time, and craved every now and then.

²² In her introduction to her studies, Harzewski says: "In vain I have struggled to mask the dumbing-down effect on sentences that is nearly instantaneous with the inclusion of the phrase "chick lit". ... The phonemic proximity of "chick lit" to a brand of chewing gum impedes rigorous considerations from the get-go" (Harzewski, 2011, p. 3).

Humour loiters at the intersection where the heroine interacts with her friends. Friendships and their exchangeability are the pillars of strength that underpin chick lit²³. Friendships in chick lit challenge the “dominant definition of family” and bring “fun, stability and emotional fulfillment that seem to be lacking in heterosexual relationships, says Balducci (Balducci, 2011, p. 41). Friends in the city are the new family, and they are as much immersed in sharing (in the daily banality and sameness of the) protagonist’s life as her family would have been as she grew up. Harzewski gives plaudits to the “comedic genre deliberately written for women, whose light-heartedness and optimism upstage social criticisms,” adding:

Chick lit’s general status – or lack thereof – as entertainment reading frustrates the feminist critic who hoped the genre would not just reflect but transform society. The genre will not provide feminisms “fourth wave.” Nor will it provide prize fiction. At this juncture, chick lit has transitioned from an offshoot of the 1990s American literary avant-garde to entertainment reading characterized by a vigorous interchange with media and consumer forms. Its success affirms the permanence of light reading with vicarious wish fulfillment its modus operandi (Harzewski, 2011, p. 147).

Where critics may lack ironic bite chick lit authors do not. Acerbic authors like Lauren Weisberger reference the movies of *Bridget Jones*, knowing that her readers will absorb its meaning (Emmy in *Chasing Harry Winston*, Lauren Weisberger, 2008. p. 22).²⁴ In fact, chick lit – knowing its place in the strata of “literature” – is quick to self-mock and not ashamed to do so. It goes with the territory.

²³ If one word were chosen to define chick lit, it would be friendship. Chick lit pivots on the binding relationships a heroine has with her peers. Best friends co-exist in the plot to provide the protagonist with happiness, healing and solutions, as well as revealing the good and bad extremes of a heroine’s character. In her comparative analysis of the evolution and importance of female friendships over time, Sakoto Kakiyama compares the novels of Edith Wharton and Candace Bushnell, comparing Wharton’s *The house of mirth* (1905) and *The age of innocence* (1920) to Bushnell’s *Sex and the city* (1997) and *Lipstick jungle* (2005) and finds that a significant difference between the fictions is that Bushnell’s books “feature groups of close female friends, markedly absent in Wharton’s novels” (Kakiyama, 2009, p. 3). She adds that while *The age of innocence* character Ellen Olenska can navigate New York “only by finding a male companion to support her,” Bushnell’s four leading female characters “rely on each other for emotional support and intimacy” (Kakiyama, 2009, p. 2-3). Many chick lit friendships are enduring; in particular, the heroines of UK chick lit authors Keyes, Colgan and Holmes whose friendships usually hark back to childhood. Keyes’ book *Last chance saloon* is a story of friendship where best friends Katherine, Tara and Fintan’s friendship is tested when Fintan is diagnosed, treated for and cleared of non-Hodgkin lymphoma, and the three resolve to turn their lives around by setting and sticking to new life resolutions (Keyes, 2000, p. 107-108). Friendship in chick lit is that healing utopia like no other. In *Sex and the city* the protagonists inhabit one another’s lives to “protect them from bad men, but also to protect themselves from losing their female friends to men who are unworthy” (Kakiyama, 2009, p. 4). In chick lit, the characters take turn about being rescuer and being rescued. In Holmes’ *50 ways to find a lover*, Rachel and protagonist Sarah form an initially resistant friendship that blossoms in the sequel²³ when they are both relocated in LA (in *The im(perfect) girlfriend*, 2010), and friends like Sarah let friends like Rachel cry on their shoulder (Holmes, 2009, p. 357).

²⁴ This is both a parody and justification of the genre in which Weisberger writes. She defends chick lit, describing one title as having “a sensible structure and coherent language. That maybe it wasn’t exploring too many lofty intellectual themes, but so what? It was witty, clever, and fun to read – something Mr. Literary Hotshot could use in triplicate right about now” (Leigh in *Chasing Harry Winston*, Lauren Weisberger, 2008, p. 196-197).

We could postulate that the more significant outcome of a chick lit heroine's journey is self-realisation (where the device of romance²⁵ is used to achieve this end). Conflicting desires beat at the heart of chick lit for Wenche Ommundsen, who says the genre is typified by its protagonist's coming of age through actions and inactions taken to resolve "conflicting desires" (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 108).²⁶ But knowing that our heroine operates in the milieu of the everyday, there is in effect, no outcome or journey's end. A protagonist would not know she was battling conflicting desires (because they would be part of her daily sameness) nor approaching a moment of self-realisation, and when reached, it is never fully realised. This is the impossibility of an implausible end-destination.

The Proper and the Common

The proper ending for any story about people it seems to me, since
life is now a polymer in which the Earth is wrapped so tightly,
should be that same abbreviation, which I now write large because I
feel like it, which is this one:

ETC.

Kurt Vonnegut, 1973

²⁵ Bushnell's *Sex and the city* columns document a more cynical, weathered view of romance and when a typical New York gal overhears a conversation about marriage from his neighbouring table and asks about love, he's quickly dismissed with a "pitying look" and an "I don't think so" reply (Bushnell, 2001, p. 24-25). The references to marriages in Bushnell's *Sex and the city* are more similar to marriages prior to the twenty-first century, where marrying for money and status was the key driver for being married, rather than love. While Bushnell has removed romance from the marriage equation altogether, it is evident that romance, not marriage is the goal of most chick lit heroines, and protagonists, like Jane in *The girls' guide to hunting and fishing* who unceremoniously refuses a marriage proposal (Bank, 2000, p. 198).

²⁶ In her analysis of global chick lit titles located in Beijing, Riyadh, Sydney and New York, Ommundsen said the primary influence of Bushnell's *Sex and the city* and Fielding's *Bridget Jones's diary* could not be overlooked, and each of these books, and the ones that follow, illustrate conflict. Characters in Indigenous Australian author Anita Heiss's inter-linked novels *Not meeting Mr. Right* (2007) and *Avoiding Mr. Right* (2008) are four females, two of whom take the lead: Alice and Peta, two women both publically and privately proud Aborigines seeking Mr. Right. Ommundsen says the four: "drink copiously, swear heartily and sleep around. Conflict is mirrored in the taut relationship chick lit has with critics who are immersed in intensive battle against the genre. Elizabeth Merrick's tirade is typical: "Its form and content are, more or less, formulaic: white girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss, and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay Friend. Chick lit is the daughter of the romance novel and the stepsister to the fashion magazine. Details about race and class are almost always absent except, of course, for the protagonist's relentless pursuit of Money, a Makeover, and Mr. Right." (Elizabeth Merrick, 2006, p. 7-8). Ryan suggests that in contrast to the vitriolic criticisms it sustains, chick lit authors are not armed with glue-guns, sticking one cliché to the other, but that they are pioneers, with authors like Marian Keyes anchoring marginalised groups solo mothers and gay people in the mainstream of a moral-obsessed Ireland (Ryan, 2010, p. 138).

Genealogy is a conflicted place. The further we travel the more displaced the origin becomes. This is especially so in the case of chick lit considering that we do not know what kind of origin we are seeking. Could we be seeking the emergence of diaries, journals, letters, confessions? The catalogue of women's writing? Writing about the everyday? *What?* De Certeau warns against ignoring the heritage, which is the precursor to a text:

In "forgetting" the collective inquiry in which he is inscribed, in isolating the object of his discourse from its historical genesis, an "author" in effect denies his real situation. ... It removes the traces of belonging to a network – traces that always compromise the author's rights. It camouflages the conditions of the production of discourse and its object. For this negated genealogy is substituted a drama combining the simulacrum of an object with the simulacrum of an author. A discourse can maintain a certain scientific character, however, by making explicit the rules and conditions of its production, and first of all the relations out of which it arises. de Certeau, 1984, p. 44.

Naturally then, the genre popularly known – since *Bridget Jones's diary*²⁷ – as chick lit began as a muddle. Neither critics nor scholars agree on who seeded the genre. However, it can be said that a generation of young women has responded creatively to Bridget Jones with titles emerging from as far afield as China, Austria, Hungary, Italy, Australia, New Zealand and Saudi Arabia, despite being met by critical and scholarly disdain.²⁸ Perhaps

²⁷ Especially given some of the novels allied to the genre precede Fielding's book, such as 1995 novel *Watermelon* written by Keyes (one of the genre's most prolific writers), and German author, Gaby Hauptman's book *In search of an impotent man*, which was published in Germany in 1995 (*In search of an impotent man* by Gaby Hauptman, precedes Fielding's *Bridget Jones's diary* by a year, although was not translated, published into English and released in the UK until 1998. The back cover of the 1999 edition, published by Virago, describes the "international bestseller" as being: "a hilarious and deeply irreverent satire on the age-old theme of the search for Mr. Right." In typical chick lit modalities, its protagonist is a "thirty-something temptress" and career-girl who takes control of her dating to find The One).

²⁸ Stephanie Davis-Kahl tells the woeful story of "disdain for the genre" in an article where she makes the case for academic librarians to introduce chick lit's most significant titles into their catalogues. Does the snobbery, which distances itself from chick lit authors' "claim of legitimacy," as she suggests, bear sinister correlation to the genre's overwhelming marketing activity (Davis-Kahl, 2008)? Chick lit leaps from the shelf of any bookstore or library, or online with its brightly coloured, often dazzling, paratextual features of bold, internationally recognisable cover designs which typically feature gender-stereotype objects like shopping bags, shoes, handbags, stars, butterflies and jewellery (Perez-Serrano, 2009, p. 137). This has led to a thriving industry where readers are encouraged to "judge books by their covers" (McWatters, 2011, p. 29). These covers, says Federica Balducci, have gone so far as to influence "their cultural and critical reception" (Balducci, 2011, p. 14). Inside the book, chapters are usually short, but books lengths vary, ranging from a 300-page novel to the epic outputs by Keyes, which soar to double that – *The other side of the story* had 528 pages; *Anybody out there?*, 2006, contained 593 pages; and *This charming man*, 2008 reached 676 pages. Ryan suggests that the over-packaging of chick lit novels by publishers means that its authors "recognize that their work risks not being taken seriously, simply because of how it is marketed" (Ryan, 2010, p.81). Scholar Stephanie Harzewski attests that it is wholly unfair that the widely recorded economic gains of chick lit have caused it to be shunned from scholarly analysis (Harzewski, 2011, p. 53). Jain suggests however that the genre-specific covers are more likely to add to the marketability of chick lit. Jain interviewed publishers in 2003 and they said that chick lit "fans are scooping up two or three (of the books) at a time," and regardless of the enormity of the criticism directed at the genre, these books can be credited for having "young women reading" (Jain, 2003, p. 3). Mazza criticises the publishing industry for occupying

the question of origin is redundant, and rather the traditions within each performance response allies one within the genre to another (Balducci, 2011, p. 66).

Fielding herself probably had no idea what genre she was writing Bridget into. Was it her intent to write Bridget as the genre's leading protagonist, someone who would forever exist with a target on her back, or was Bridget's emergence merely a sign of the times? Was weight-obsessed, smoking and drinking Bridget ever contrived to be the genre's first lady? After all, the book began as a newspaper column in February, 1995 in London's the *Independent*, not as a novel to launch a genre (Harzewski, 2011, p. 58)²⁹. There are claims of the genre existing well before *Bridget* with Michelle LaVigne citing the phrase "chick lit" as being first used in 1993 by journalist Warren Barry in his effort to link female-centric novels to the rapidly emerging culture of reality television³⁰. A comedic personality like Lucy from *I Love Lucy* (1951-57), who lived through a series of everyday mishaps, may be equally qualified as an on-screen chick lit heroine or precursor. Surely? And what of that most famous of American sitcoms where nothing happens, *Seinfeld* (1989-1998), and the other New York sitcom about nothing, *Friends* (1994-2004). These could rightfully be considered precursors to texts set in the everyday about nothing. Where is the beginning of the encounter of the protagonist immersed in the everyday – if we include in books, on-screen, in life, where did it start? What and where defines the emergence of chick lit?

Knowing, as we do, that everything today is the culmination of a multiplicity of influence, then isn't the Western lineage to, say, Edith Wharton, Sylvia Plath, Fannie Flagg, Margaret Atwood, Louisa May Alcott, Virginia Woolf, the Brontë sisters, Jane Austen, for example, an overly simplistic and impossible connection as being a singular influence for chick lit? Why must its heritage be Western? And why must it be from literature at all? By necessity, modern chick lit hails from everything that has been before whether implicit or explicit. It is often observed that Fielding "piggybacked" on the success of the BBC's production of *Pride and prejudice* and why would Austen *not* be an influence among the many (Harzewski, 2011, p. 58-89)?³¹ Nothing provokes the ire of

its phrase 'chick lit,' saying they did not foresee the tag they (assumed *they*) created "greasing the commercial book industry machine" (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 108). And they were right. Cris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell say *they* first coined the phrase in their edited anthology of women's writing, *Chick-Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*. As Mazza's tells it: "This was the ironic intention of our title: not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype" (Ferris and Young, 2006; Source: Davis-Kahl, 2008, 'The case for chick lit in academic libraries', *Collection Building*, Vol. 27 Iss: 1, pp. 18-21. Davis-Kahl also talks of how Mazza and DeShell's collection was received: "Though the venerable *Oxford English Dictionary* and the website WordSpy note that the (sic.) one of the first uses of the term was in 1996 in a piece by Vicki Hengen in *The Boston Globe's* Living Section, Hengen's reference was actually in response to an article by James Wolcott in *The New Yorker*, in which he characterizes journalistic writing in the nineties as "sheer girlishness" and refers to "pop-fiction anthologies like 'Chick-Lit' where the concerns of the female characters seem fairly divided between getting laid and not getting laid" Davis-Kahl, 2008, pp. 18-21.

²⁹ "Helen Fielding's weekly column first appeared in the *Independent* (London) on February 28, 1995, and was later moved to the *Telegraph* in 1997" (Harzewski, 2011, p. 58).

³⁰ In this first iteration of the term, says LaVigne, the phrase 'chick lit' combines only to mean "thinly veiled reality conveyed in prose form" (LaVigne, 2006, p. 1).

³¹ Harzewski dedicates one chapter to the linkages of Austen to *Bridget Jones's diary*, entitled: 'Bridget Jones's diary and the Production of a Popular Austen.' In it she says: "Fielding can be credited with adapting one of

critics more than chick lit being in *any* way connected to Jane Austen but, in fact, their ongoing argument gives oxygen to the myth.

Jane Austen, chick lit and the everyday

The day passed much as the day before had done.

Jane Austen, 1797

Have woken up v. fed up. On top of everything, only two weeks to go until birthday, when will have to face up to the fact that another entire year has gone by, during which everyone else except me has mutated into Smug Married, having children plop, plop, plop, left right and centre making hundreds of thousands of pounds and inroads into very hub of establishment, while I career rudderless and boyfriendless through dysfunctional relationships and professional stagnation.

Helen Fielding, 1996

It is a nonsense that Jane Austen and chick lit could share the same sentence. They are *nothing* alike. Nothing. It is a slap in the face of all those young, single middle-class woman of a marriageable age penned by Austen; these are witty, articulate, giggling women whose lives centre on friendships, gossip, fashion, socializing, ensnaring Mr. Right, the fraught relationship with their mother, and whose sisters are their best friends. They are nothing like the female protagonists of chick lit. How did Austen even get tied into this messy gaggle of modern-day writers of sub-par literature? So what if chick lit authors cite Austen as a role model and Fielding admits “to borrowing material from Austen on countless occasions in order to shape Bridget’s character” (Dalarna, 2009, p. 9; O’Donnell Arosteguy, 2009, p. 4). It is loathsome to connect the two, says writer Maureen Dowd: “Please do not confuse these books with the love-and-marriage of Jane Austen. These are more like multicultural Harlequin romances” (Dowd, 2001, 2007).³² How dare we link chick lit to Austen’s clever and often heated exchanges between opposite sexes in their pursuit of finding a happy relationship? God forbid that Austen’s aspiring English gentlewoman should be dragged into the muck of harlequinesque multiculturalism!

It is absurd. So absurd that both Elsbeth Witt and Högskolan Dalarna dedicated their theses to it³³ and, in a remarkable feat, managed to squeeze out the impossible:

the most beloved novels in English literary history into a comic record of modern everywoman’s dating tribulations” (Harzewski, 2011, p. 78).

³² Dowd’s article appeared in 2001 in *The New York Times*. She later said in a 2007 column, that the protagonists of chick lit are: “a long way from Becky Sharpe and Elizabeth Bennet. They’re all chick and no lit” (Dowd, 2001, 2007). This is a direct contradiction to editor of Downtown Press, Louise Burke, who maintains “This generation wouldn’t be caught dead reading a bodice ripper. They’re more cynical, more savvy” (Jain, 2003, p. 2). And Butler and Desai criticise these one-eyed critics of chick lit believing them to be wedded to the view that chick lit excludes any text that is not depicting dominantly white, middle-class, heteronormative postfeminism (Butler and Desai, 2008).

³³ Elsbeth Witt’s 2007 thesis titled *Austen’s Power: Four contemporary chick lit novels compared to the works of Jane Austen* compared Jane Austen’s *Pride and prejudice*, *Sense and sensibility*, *Emma* and *Persuasion* with Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s diary* (1996), Belinda Jones’s *I love Capri* (2002), Sophie Kinsella’s *The secret*

commonality. Witt concluded the characters in the texts are women of their age: “The characters are clever women who have a mind of their own and both Austen and authors of chick lit use such women to comment on women’s social status and the social conventions for women in their particular era” (Witt, 2007, p. 10).³⁴ Dalarna agrees with Maria Nilson who, in her 2008 book, *Chick lit. Från glamour till vardagsrealism*, locates the “feminism light” of chick lit where “the oppressed woman takes on an independent, heroine role and struggles for equality up until the point where she finds a man and lives happily ever after” and that both Elizabeth Bennet and Bridget Jones “put [their] feminist issues aside when they have found love” (Dalarna³⁵, 2000, p. 17-18). Scholar Rachel Smydra presents the parallelism between Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf’s works and chick lit, saying: “Since the plots revolve around essential issues relevant to women, such as personal issues, work-related problems, and societal pressures, chick lit allows readers to live vicariously through these young fictional characters and explore their roles as females in the 21st century” (Smydra, 2007).

Even if Witt and Dalarna forced a parallel, we know it cannot be true that *Bridget Jones’s diary* spurred a passion for Austen’s works, “Austenmania”³⁶ (Ferriss, 2011, p. 3). This simply would not be possible given the tenuous link between Austen’s novels and the

dreamworld of a shopaholic (2000) and Allison Pearson’s *I don’t know how she does it* (2002). Högskolans Dalarna’s 2009 thesis titled *Women of substance: The aspect of education, career and female identity in Pride and prejudice and Bridget Jones’s diary*.

³⁴ Witt says: “This comparison is not as extreme as it may at first seem. Just as chick lit novels focus on the daily lives of ordinary women, so do Austen’s novels. ... It is interesting to see how both Austen’s heroines and chick lit heroines struggle with the same issues, such as the pressure of finding the right partner and meddling mothers who think they know what is best for their daughters. The characters often feel trapped in conventions and feel pressure to perform well. The style of the novels is realistic and at the same time ironic, although Austen’s novels have a more literary style than most chick lit novels.” And: “Many websites and articles devoted to the genre mention Jane Austen as a chick lit author and sometimes even call her the mother of chick lit. Dutch website chicklit.nl, for example, labels Austen a “historical chick” and claims that the television series of (sic) *Pride and prejudice* “starring Colin Firth, inspired Helen Fielding to write *Bridget Jones’s diary*. This book is a *must* for lovers of chick lit and definitely deserves to be on this site”. The site, for example, says about Elizabeth Bennet, heroine of *Pride and prejudice*: “Elizabeth spends a lot of time thinking about which man to choose and has her own opinion. Even the irony that is so characteristic of chick lit can be found in this book.” (Witt, 2007, p. 10).

³⁵ Dalarna concludes that Fielding’s book was more commentary on how society “has changed much” since Austen’s time, where: “In Austen’s time, women were supposed to be weak and subordinate, whereas today...women are expected to be strong and subordinate...Society today is more understanding towards female independence but yet reluctant towards it” (Dalarna, 2009, p.22-23).

³⁶ This is according to Harzewski (Ferriss, 2011). In her 2011 book *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, Stephanie Harzewski’s examines the genre spanning from the mid-90s to 2006 where she acknowledges Jane Austen’s *Pride and prejudice* (1813) and Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s diary* (1996) as precursor and founding texts respectively. But her research also cites other pre-21st century novels as influences (Leonard, 2011), including: *The house of mirth* (1905) and *The custom of the country* (1913) by Edith Wharton (1905), which are said to have influenced primary US chick lit title *Sex and the city*, by Candace Bushnell (Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the city* sits alongside Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s diary* and is cited as founding text in the US; Harzewski says that rather than being typical of the genre, *Sex and the city*: “can be credited more with inspiring commercial chick lit than directly authoring it” (Harzewski, 2011, p. 108; Ferriss, 2011). Says Attwood, “Both Candace Bushnell and Helen Fielding have been compared to Jane Austen” (Attwood, 2009, p. 10); *Wither*, by Dawn Powell (1925); *Skyscraper* (1931) by Faith Baldwin; *The best of everything* (1958) by Rona Jaffe; *Sex and the single girl* (1962) by Helen Gurley Brown; and *Sheila Levine is dead and living in New York* (1972) by Gail Parent (Harzewski, 2011; Leonard, 2011). Ferriss also adds to the list: *Gentlemen prefer blondes*, by Anita Loos (1925) (Ferriss, 2011). It is significant that these novels precede the genre as it is defined today by more than sixty years.

watered down literary outpourings of chick lit authors. Yet it is undeniable that Austen's novels reside in romantic comedy, even if the satire was largely missed by contemporaneous readers and critics³⁷ and the books sold in tiny numbers.³⁸

What is more deserving of inquiry however is how the notion of place is impacted over the shift of time periods and social contexts. Austen wrote of an everyday that escaped her, of an unrelenting sameness in eighteenth century England in and around Bath. More than two centuries later women, writers of chick lit, still draw from this well of sameness – of dressing, eating, walking, shopping, travelling – and these parallels are considerable in their timelessness, as inferred also by de Certeau and Giard:

The wordless histories of walking, dress, housing, or cooking shape neighborhoods on behalf of absences; they trace out memories that no longer have a place – childhoods, genealogical traditions, timeless events. Such is the “work” of urban narratives as well. They insinuate different spaces into cafés, offices, and buildings. ... For this reason, they render the city “believable”, affect it with unknown depth to be inventoried, and open it up to journeys. They are the keys to the city; they give access to what it is; mythical. de Certeau and Giard, 1998, p. 142.

Just as chick lit readers are invited to have a relationship with the everyday places that are common settings for the genre, so too are Austen's readers who can visit the novel settings, go to Bath where Austen lived, or enjoy by researching and imagining. As with the spatiality of chick lit, they can drift in the (shadow of the) spaces of Austen's eighteenth century world, albeit centuries after.

What most separates the musings of today's self-obsessive authors of chick lit is that Austen's characters, her Emmas, Elizabeths and Mariannes, were outspoken in an era where it was unusual and sometimes unwise to be both female and outspoken. This gave the characters of Austen's tales something immediately special about them. There is nothing special about an outspoken actress-cum-waitress-cum-blogger on a manhunt in London in 2009. But still, all these years later, in the functioning and autonomy of her everyday, the city-dwelling 20 or 30-something woman, faces an expectation, whether accepted or rejected, that they *will* find and marry someone of the opposite sex, merge finances, have children and co-habit until “death do us part.” Women who do not

³⁷ Austen collected opinions and reviews, and: “Notably absent from these ‘opinions,’ as indeed from all the contemporary views of Jane Austen's work, is any sign that her readers were conscious of her satire, an edge turned towards themselves” (Southam, B. C. 1968, 1, p. 16, cited in Witt, 2007).

³⁸ At around a print run of 1500 copies per novel, it is fair to say that even compared to bestsellers of the day (that had runs of 10,000 copies as with *Rob Roy* by Walter Scott) Austen's novels were hardly rushing out of bookshops (Witt, p.14, 2007). So much so the 1995 Hollywood movie, *Clueless*, derived its plot from Austen's *Emma* (‘The return of the pink: *Legally blonde*, third-wave feminism, and having it all’, by Carol M. Dole (Chapter 4, p. 64). Eds. Ferriss and Young, *Chick flicks: Contemporary women at the movies*, 2008.), comedic sass intact (Like other books adapted as movies, *Little women* (1994), *Sense and sensibility* (1995), *Clueless* (1995), along with *The portrait of a lady* (1996), *Mrs. Dalloway* (1997), and *Mansfield Park* (1999), are all screenplays adapted by female screenwriters with largely original female authors, female directors and producers and indeed, a female heroine as its lead character (with men largely accessories to the plot) Hollinger, 2008, p. 223-224).

subscribe to this anatomy of chick lit rail against the “feminine mystique.”³⁹ In her thesis entitled: ‘Women of Substance: The aspect of education, career and female identity in *Pride and prejudice* and *Bridget Jones’s diary*’ (2009), Johanna Lindgren, dissected two primary characters separated by 250 years: Jane Austen’s Elizabeth Bennet and Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones⁴⁰ and there unearths an underlying conflict in the lives of both women, that being the expectation that they marry whomever they can get and be done with it.⁴¹

Misogyny, feminism and the space between

‘Yeah, I collect Crown Lynn,’ she replied, ‘And Kartell, and ’60s Playboys, but I’m not ‘girls’, I don’t do ‘girls’ stuff. I’m not normal; I’m not ‘girls’,’ she exhaled. ‘You men, you want it all. You want a whore in the bedroom and a chef in the kitchen.’
Will grinned. ‘And?’ he winked.
‘Well... I’ve mastered the whore part,’ she smiled back.
‘Yes you have,’ he said reaching to pat her bottom. ‘And you’re a beautiful whore; you’re my beautiful, darling whore.’

Belinda Nash, 2011

The chick lit protagonist faces a quandary. She lives in the realm of “novels of disillusionment” where she is stuck between the proverbial rock and hard place, where the rock is misogyny, the hard place is feminism, and the space in between is the “distinctively post-feminist sensibility” suggested by Gill and Herdieckerhoff (Tania Molenski, 2008, *Loving with a vengeance: Mass-produced fantasies for women*, 2nd edition cited in Balducci, 2011, p. 40).

³⁹ The “feminine mystic” suggested the secret to a woman’s happiness in becoming a wife and mother (Friedan, Betty, 1963, p. 344; sourced from Betts, 2004, p. 76).

⁴⁰ Lindgren’s thesis opens with: “Two women who strive for equality between men and women; two women who both fall in love with a Mr. Darcy; two women who live 250 years apart, but who are more similar than different.” She analyses the characters looking at female identity and connection to education, work and career (Lindgren, 2009, p.1). Lindgren uses feminism by definition of the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary as the benchmark to assess the characters, which is: “the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men [and] the struggle to achieve this aim” (p. 565).

⁴¹ Says Lindgren: “In *Bridget Jones’s diary*, the obsession with money and finding a wealthy husband is as evident as in *Pride and prejudice*, even though the main protagonists (of either text) do not focus on this particular as opposed to what their family and friends so. As Bridget is told at dinner, about Mark Darcy, “[h]e’s one of those super-doooper top-notch lawyers. Divorced. Elaine says he works all the time and he’s terribly lonely,” whereupon Bridget thinks: “I don’t know why she didn’t just come out with it and say, ‘Darling, do shag Mark Darcy over the turkey curry, won’t you? He’s *very* rich’” (Fielding, 1996, p. 12) ...This echoes *Pride and prejudice* and implies that he [Darcy] would be able to support Bridget financially, which means that the main goal in life for a woman is still to marry the “proper man” (Lindgren, 2009, p. 10). Like Miss Bennet several centuries before her (Elizabeth Bennet, uncharacteristically for the era, rebuffed two marriage proposals; the first from her father’s cousin, Mr. Collins, whom she later describes to friend Charlotte as being “a conceited, pompous, narrow-minded, silly man” (p. 116), and Mr. Darcy, whom she later accepts), Bridget Jones is equally compelled to defend her being unmarried citing the cause as there existing a dearth of “unmarriageable” men, saying: “there’s a whole generation of single girls like me with their own incomes and homes who have lots of fun and don’t need to wash anyone else’s socks” (Fielding, 1996, p. 42).

The misogyny in chick lit is curious. It doesn't leap from the pages as a loathing of women by men, rather it reveals itself in the insidious behaviour of the protagonist most often towards herself. When Bridget Jones tallies herself saying: "Thigh circumference 18 inches, negative thoughts 600 per minute, panic attacks 4, crying 12 (but both time only in toilets and remembered to take mascara" following the announcement by her boss (with whom she had been having an eight month affair) that he was getting married, instead of confronting him, she takes her vengeance out on herself (Fielding, 1996, p. 186). Lucy in *Sweet nothing* does the same:

After everything he's done and he's not done more's the point, I actually do like him. He's a rat, treats me like his personal call girl and sometimes he's just downright mean –and I let him– yet I still like him. Mum would slap me into next century if she knew the half of it.' Lucy sighed. Nash, *Sweet nothing*, 2011, p. 108-109.

She passively enables Will's insufferable behaviour towards her – paying for his taxi when he turns up at her house drunk wanting a bit on the side, constantly trying to please and accommodate him, then begging for his love. Will's behaviour is intolerable but that she tolerates it is more an indication of her self-loathing, not his contempt (or otherwise) of her.

Contrarily, the feminism in *Sweet nothing* is illuminated in the text most authentically by men. First by Lucy's father:

'Dad! I don't need a man to rescue me. That's so old-fashioned. And I'm happy just as I am.'
'Yes, well I've always thought of you as being independently happy and perfectly complete just as you are.' Nash, *Sweet nothing*, 2011, p. 25.

And later by her brother, Bobby:

'Oh please don't start Bobby...'
'–What? Who says I'm going to start anything? All I want to say is, Lucky, you are your own person and you don't need any man to make you complete. You're small but perfectly formed just as you are. So there. See, I'm not just an arse you know?'
Lucy smiled. 'You really mean that, Bobby?'
'Yes,' he nodded and swivelled to face her, looking her dead in the eye. 'Yes, I do,' he enunciated. 'I've always thought of you as being perfectly independent without needing any man to prop you up. You're an inspiration, actually. I can't do it, I always need a man.'
Nash, *Sweet nothing*, 2011, p. 285.

Doctoral scholar Federica Balducci's discourse into sociocultural contradictions within postfeminist chick lit says gaining personal choice, financial independence and achieving self-empowerment is lit by the fuse of femininity *and* feminism (Balducci, 2011, p. 10). She believes that neoliberal postfeminism is "most represented" where "the rhetoric of choice is translated into market-driven consumerism and discourses of individualism and empowerment" (Balducci, 2011, p. 167). So is it better to rebut the post-feminist tag and

remain in the company of Dalarna, and accept the tag “feminism light”⁴² (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006, p. 489, Dalarna, 2009, p. 22, Lindgren, 2009)?

As our heroine is buffeted between the rock and hard place, she sometimes hits the bumpy ground somewhere in between. The Western culture the protagonists inhabit puts relatively few limitations on their movements; their dilemma is that they want it all – freedom, good jobs, sex, consumer goods, romance, marriage, and children – and find that some of these desires are incompatible” (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 111; 116-117).⁴³ Ivy League foursome and writers of *Fab* have written characters that want it all, but find they are paralysed by choice:

We, as women, have been told that we can have it all. And usually we believe it. But I know we can't. Bianca in *Fab*, Batts Morrow, Anderson, Carter and High, 2005, p. 172.

Protagonist Ivy League scholar and New York lawyer, Taylor laments: “I began to wonder whether I was honestly and truly meant to work from sunup to sundown this far after the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation” (Taylor in *Fab*, Batts Morrow et al., 2005, p. 224-225).

Just what exactly did the modern woman earn when she gained the right to work through every daylight hour? These are the daughters of second-wave feminists who “fought for nothing more than their own misery” if Susan Faludi is to be believed, and caused a sort of malaise, a “hopeless ambivalence” in our chick lit protagonists (Dalarna, 2009, p. 2; Dalarna, 2009, p. 11-12). On the occasion of Leigh’s engagement in *Chasing Harry Winston*, it “rankled her” that her mother regarded her engagement as her “greatest achievement to date” (Leigh in *Chasing Harry Winston*, Lauren Weisberger, 2008, p. 91).

The conundrum of desiring feminism and yet resisting its propelling force is keenly felt by readers. Rowntree, Bryant and Moulding concluded that women *are* conflicted about their feelings towards the genre, where: “While still enjoying the books or films as escapist entertainment, respondents commonly express simultaneous negative feelings, such as guilt, embarrassment, anger, irritation, impatience, deflation, and abhorrence at certain representations, particularly those that depict women as needing a man to be happy or needing to keep him happy” (Rowntree, Bryant and Moulding, 2011, p. 8).⁴⁴

⁴² Feminism light is used by Maria Nilson in her book *Chick Lit* as describing the female protagonist’s journey through the path of “oppressed woman” until she meets a man and “lives happily ever after” (cited in Lindgren, 2009, & Dalarna, H., 2009, p. 17).

⁴³ Ommundsen continues in her analysis, adding: “Ironically, it is in these novels where feminism is taken for granted and no one seriously questions women’s rights to equality, that the heroines end up embracing the most conventional gender roles.” Ommundsen criticises Heiss’s novels, however, for their pop psychology and “muddled” gender politics, and suggests the paradox for wanting everything and yet gaining not much afflicts chick lit more generally even suggesting this is a dilemma for women in real life. She suggests the outcome in gender roles for women in chick lit novels is “not altogether inaccurate” and may accurately reflect the dilemma of real life women (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 117-118).

⁴⁴ Rowntree et al.’s 2010 study asked 41 women (each of whom acknowledged a critical understanding of feminism) one question via an anonymous, online survey: “Could you say why you enjoy, hate or have mixed feelings towards chick lit or chick flicks or both?” (Rowntree et al, 2011, p. 2).

Happily ever after?

Whether cynical and weathered or feckless and fresh, the heroines of chick lit pursue and (usually) triumph in matters of love. Its readers, say LaVigne, are buoyed on the journey by knowing they will be rewarded with the predictable “happily ever after” ending and are thus empowered “to deal with their own particular reality and to make choices about their lives without being “slave[s] to love” (LaVigne, 2006, p. 4). Chick lit authors and protagonists live in the cynical age where *The Rules* – penned by self-declared dating coaches Ellen Fein and Sherrie Schneider⁴⁵ – resides. *The Rules* pits subservience against strategic withholding from men – which stems from an unapparent loathing of men⁴⁶.

But through all this, *how* can our heroine depend on her *feminist* sensibilities and get her happy ever after ending? This is troubling for everyone, in particular feminist scholars.⁴⁷ Gill and Herdieckerhoff stamp their feet and say they don’t. They say the chick lit story ends *not* with the heroine “Being Myself” and impressing the suitor with her “spirit and intelligence,” but rather when they have succumbed to “traditional stereotypes of femininity,” adding that narcissistic books like *Bridget Jones’s diary* “Far from offering a more hopeful version of femininity this emphasis (on smoking and calorie-counting) relocates women in their bodies, indeed *as bodies*, and makes them morally responsible for disciplining the body/self as post-feminist, neo-liberal subjects” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006, p. 495, 498, 499). They say this bothersome shift from objectification to subjectification is most apparent in the chick lit protagonist’s “voracious heterosexual appetite” (Gill and Herdieckerhoff, 2006, p. 495, 498, 499; Bartky, 1990). Harzewski says in contrast to women in chick lit, men are “shadow” characters who “serve functions within the novel,” where they are upstaged by Manolo Blahniks:

The hero is relegated to a cipher as the protagonist’s suitor or fiancé figures analogously to men in bridal magazines. ... They are not really valued as individuals as much as a means to a lifestyle, wedding, or in some cases beauty boost” Harzewski, 2011, p. 33.

And what of the heteronormative sexual explicitness of chick lit? Attwood says its appeal to readers “rests on a claim to locate sexual practice in everyday life and to reflect the

⁴⁵ *The rules* were designed for women to snare a husband, and advised that women listen attentively (to men), never talk first, never phone men and only rarely return their calls, let men take the lead, men always pays, and they remain demure and mysterious.

⁴⁶ The wave of apparent contempt for men revealed itself in the opening of German author Hauptmann’s *In search of an impotent man*, where the protagonist pours scorn on men who are so visible in their appreciation of her sexuality (Hauptmann, 1999, p. 1-2). But how is any of this serving our protagonist? Bank tests *The rules* in *The girls’ guide to hunting and fishing*, where protagonist Jane uses them to disastrous effect, and Batts Morrow et al.’s chapter ‘The “Rules” are off’ begins: “I am a feminist. I am a liberated, liberal independent woman. I am adamantly pro-choice...from the time I was in utero my parents have insisted that I, and all other women, can do anything we want, anytime, anywhere, and that I can have it all and do it all just by Being Myself” (Carolyn in *Fab*, Batts Morrow et al., 2005, p. 78).

⁴⁷ Feminist writer Suzanne Leonard in her review of Stephanie Harzewski’s book *Chick lit and postfeminism* says that Harzewski’s conclusions about chick lit “may be troubling for feminist scholars” (Ferriss, 2011; Leonard 2011). Leonard indicates too, that her findings highlight the scope and merit for undertaking a study of the genre, despite its lack of scholarly support, saying: “*Chick Lit and Postfeminism*’s perspective on this relatively understudied genre competently assess how chick lit intertwines women, consumption, and romance in mutually enticing ways and explains how contemporary socioeconomic norms have provided fertile ground for such associations” (Leonard, 2011).

truth of women's sexual identity, creating an imagined community of female readers, adding that "female 'sexperts'⁴⁸ are increasingly visible online and in print, and sex talk has become associated with women's television dramas such as *Sex and the city*" (1998-2004; 2008; 2010) (Attwood, 2009, p. 7). Chick lit illustrates the modern woman's choice, which, says Balducci, is "liberated" in our approach to sensual and sexual playfulness (Balducci, 2011, p. 39).

Widespread criticism raged in popular media when women leapt onto the "confessional blog" mode of sexual revelation in fiction and non-fiction texts.⁴⁹ Holmes' *50 ways to find a lover*, based on real-life autobiographical blog the *Spinster's quest*, makes reference to masturbation on a crowded train in fictional Rachel Bird's sexually explicit blog, which is a direct reference to Belle de Jour's real-life blog episode (Holmes, 2009, p. 80-82; de Jour, 2005, p. 83). Catherine Townsend, real life sex columnist who exhibits no restraint when talking about sex, says the quandary for women is that they are continually reacting to men's Madonna/whore complex, and she's determined to "meet someone who I have amazing debates with over dinner and fuck senseless in the bedroom" (Townsend, 2007, p. 148, 216).

Sweet nothing presents its most offensive and misogynistic conversation when protagonist Lucy, against a tidal wave of men's opinions, suddenly finds her voice in a singular moment of clarity:

Gazza rolled his head back and cackled. 'See, the way I see it,' he continued, '—men use love to get sex and women use sex to get love. It's the fundamental difference between men and women. It's a lose-lose situation. Mind you, men still get the sex.' ... Lucy turned to Big Al and Ginga Boy.
'You don't really believe all that bravado crap do you?'
The pair shifted in their seats and looked at each other.
'Well...' replied Big Al, 'Gazza has a point. The love-sex thing, however badly he told it, well it's kinda not too far off the mark. Sometimes you can smell the desperation on women.'

⁴⁸ I was a 'sexpert' in the UK during the mid-2000s, authoring two columns in lifestyle magazine *Insight*, in Brighton (2004-2005). One, a dating column where I offered real-life, pragmatic advice on dating. The other, unimaginatively entitled *Sex and the Seaside*, was an anonymous, acerbic view of my real-life sexual encounters.

⁴⁹ Such was the disbelief that a woman could actually *enjoy* primal, kinky and ostensibly perverted acts of sex that 2005 book *Belle de Jour's* authorship was thoroughly – and unsuccessfully – sought and investigated over a period of several years by leading newspapers (Attwood, 2009, p.8). *Belle de Jour* was an explicit blog detailing the life, sex and loves of a highly paid, attractive call girl working in London, called 'Belle'. It was published under pseudonym in a book entitled *The intimate adventures of a London call girl*. It later became a television series called *Secret diary of a call girl*, starring Billie Piper in the lead role of Belle. Dissent raged in the UK's *Sunday Telegraph* and the *Independent* in their bullish path to out whom they believed to be a "middle-aged male hack" (*Sunday Telegraph*, 2005; Attwood, 2009, p.8). While Belle kept her identity hidden until the end of 2009, when child health research scientist, Dr Brooke Magnanti revealed herself to be the infamous, sexually ravenous author in November 2009. Magnanti worked as a call girl in London to fund her PhD and blogged about her experiences 2003-2004. Zoe Margolis was not so fortunate. Author of the sex blog, *Girl with a one track mind*, she was pursued, threatened and then had her name published by the UK's *Sunday Times* in 2006. Critics believed Margolis' revealing blog read as an idealised catalogue of male sexual fantasy (Williams, 2006, online). In 2007, former *New York Magazine* gossip columnist and the *Independent's* sex and dating columnist Catherine Townsend detailed her real life sex life in her book: *Sleeping Around: Secrets of a sexual adventuress* (2007).

'Says you!' Lucy exclaimed. 'Do you have any idea just how pathetic a horny man in a bar is? Or worse still, a cluster of horny men lined up against the walls all wearing their ridiculous matching jeans-and-a-nice-shirt combo? ... Try being a single female and going to the Ponsonby clubs on a Saturday night. It's like being fresh kill being watched by vultures. It's positively feral. ... Bars like that are just wall-to-wall desperados. Do you think any woman with half a brain would want to have sex with them much less fall in love with them? You boys are delusional. Either that, or you've seen far too many rom-coms and believe what happens in the last five minutes. You're not all that, you men. You still have a lot to learn too. So don't be starting on the relationship blame-game.' Nash, 2011, p. 177-78.

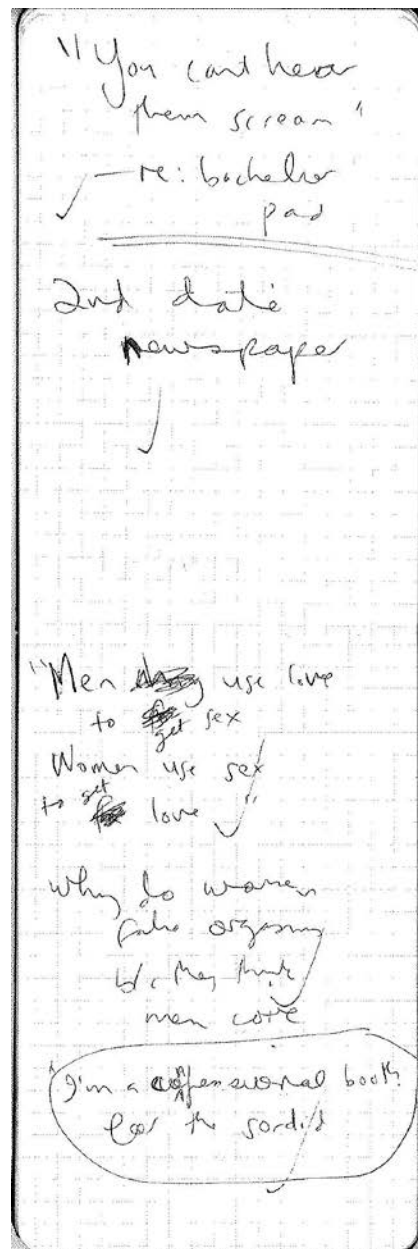


Figure 1. Notes written into moleskin notebook in a conversation at SPQR in Ponsonby, Auckland (Nash, 2011).

And yet, Lucy, Cat, Beanie and Beth bemoan their treatment by men – and in fact, spend much of their time *talking* about men – in an allegory of feminism, which fails at every real-life hurdle:

‘Men! They don’t know what they want,’ Cat shook her head. ‘We know what we want, but they have no fucken idea what they want, no clue at all. And they mess us round while they sort their shit out. I don’t know how they ever settle down, I really don’t.’ ... ‘And I fall into one trap after the other all set by me.’ Lucy frowned. ‘We write these crap scripts for ourselves then wonder why it doesn’t end happily ever after. Oh well, we’ll see what happens when I send my email to Will, I s’pose. I feel a bit sick about it actually, but I know I have to do it. Rewrite the script, perhaps?’ ... Beth nodded. ‘Hmm, yeah, I guess so. Nothing to lose, right?’ Lucy shrugged. ‘Yep, sweet nothing.’ Nash, 2011, p. 111.

Chick lit authors may beg to differ. Keyes – no pushover herself – has *Watermelon* (1996) heroine Claire confront the husband that left her for another woman (and who later told Claire he’d come back to her (but that she must change) saying:

...if you loved me, you wouldn’t have wanted me to change into some wimpy woman who was afraid of you. If you loved me you wouldn’t have tried to manipulate me or control me. And most of all, if you loved me, you wouldn’t be afraid to admit that you’re in the wrong. Keyes, 1996, p. 543-549.

Feminist critics popularly denounce chick lit because of its conflicted heroine facing an “identity crisis” at work often leaving her to “put up or shut up”⁵⁰ (O’Donnell, 2009, p. 5; McWatters, 2011, p. 41). By doing so, they denounce an entire industry largely founded, funded, and inspired by women. Scholar Katie O’Donnell Arosteguy says:

The idea that women achieve empowerment by making choices...has become the key ingredient in a chick lit narrative. This has, in the process, angered many literary and feminist critics who see the genre as incapable of offering any social or cultural critique because of the focus on the individual. This position rests on the faulty assumption that because the books are marketed as postfeminist, they are necessarily anti-feminist in nature. O’Donnell Arosteguy, 2009, p. 2.

Why *not* dwell in the mundanity of an office says scholar Leanne McWatters, given most of us live there from day to day (McWatters, 2011, p. 2)? It is a pattern of the female protagonist to “seek jobs that challenge them and reflect their values” (McWatters, 2011, p. 23). How is this not feminism? Ommundsen sizes up non-Western chick lit against

⁵⁰ There is a “perceived incompatibility of femininity and professional success” and that work and “true” femininity don’t quite go together” say scholars, Kerstin Fest and Leanne McWatters (Fest, 2009, p. 43; 54). Fest discusses reigning chick lit champion of workplace woes, Weisberger’s *The devil wears Prada* – a novel founded in the real life experience of Lauren Weisberger when she worked as assistant for notorious Anna Wintour at *American Vogue* – and concludes that: “Nice girls, according to *The devil wears Prada*, are not attempting to be successful” (Fest, 2009, p. 55, p. 58; McWatters, 2011, p. 41-44, Balducci, 2011, p. 18). Dalarna says the genre “celebrates” the career girl, with Arosteguy declaring it to “illuminate anxieties surrounding many aspects of women’s lives” despite the wails of critics that it does no such thing (Dalarna, 2009, p. 9; O’Donnell Arosteguy, 2009, p. 9).

Western narratives and finds that “self-determination is assumed by most Western chick-lit heroines” while with “non-Western texts (*Girls of Riyadh* is a good example) the desire for freedom of choice often comes up against much more restrictive social and cultural environments,” (Ommundsen, 2011, p. 119). Feminist scholars Pamela Butler and Jigna Desai criticise feminist critics of the genre for in fact *themselves* falling into the narrative they set out to discredit. The pair roundly criticise feminist deconstruction of the genre for the fact that they themselves fall into white, middle-class, heteronormative narratives, which are “isolated from the questions of race, economics, citizenship, and globalization” (Butler and Desai, 2008, p. 7).

The lit of chick lit

Literature, chick lit, *Sweet nothing* all reside in that place where in attempting to grab the truthfulness of it, we lose it. So can chick lit speak the real? It may be a question of meaningfulness and we could find that it has no meaning at all. Just as we practice before we know and we live before we know, how in the ‘capturing’ the everyday do we ensure its pithy realness is not lost? Just as language is practiced by even the youngest child before it is ‘known’, the experience of the everyday is known and practiced before it attains the status of ‘production.’ Weyman assesses that:

For Certeau, such individual experience beyond speech does not exist, because every experience must be expressible through language. Similarly, identity cannot exist independently of social context. Weyman, 2004, p. 170.

The question therefore should be around how do authors ensure chick lit, our “literary butterfly,” our self-reflexive “frivolous and flamboyant creature,” can be a “challenging field of enquiry in its own right” (according to Balducci) while it is much more and much less than that (Campbell, 2006, p. 487; Balducci,⁵¹ 2011, p. 59).

Critics may well have been asking the *wrong* question.⁵²

⁵¹ Balducci examines popular Italian chick lit finding that “the textual and intertextual features that have framed these novels in a space that is local and global, literary and popular, real and fictional” (Balducci, 2011, p. 161).

⁵² Suzanne Ferriss praises Harzewski for her comprehensive look at the genre in her book *Chick lit and postfeminism*, saying its “great benefit to chick-lit scholarship is in taking the texts seriously as works of literature, as texts which are often cleverly and creatively engaged in reappropriating and rewriting generic conventions while providing enormous pleasure to readers – and not just women” (Ferriss, 2011). Stephanie Davis-Kahl and Justine Alsop made separate cases for academic librarians to include chick lit in their collections inviting the exploration for comparative scholarship with women’s fiction and academia (David-Kahl, 2007; Alsop, 2007). In her paper, Davis-Kahl links the disdain felt for chick lit to the “long-standing derision towards women’s writing” following the dotted line back to George Eliot, who maligned female writing for being “frothy, prosy, pedantic” (Davis-Kahl, 2007, p. 18, 19; Eliot, 1856). Alsop suggests chick lit is not the first genre to “plague English literature selectors” citing Ted Striphas’s observation five years earlier that “the academy still refuses to take the popular seriously,” linking it with detective and science fiction novels (Alsop, 2007, p. 581). Scholars Ferriss, Young, and Anjula Razdan say the popularity of chick lit gives us a clue as to its downfall in academia, where niche research does not stretch so far as *this* unpalatable genre concerned only with whimsy and insignificance: “The genre is wildly successful and that

The avoidance of literary elitism, says Balducci, has been both the genre's downfall and triumph (Balducci, 2011, p.10). Chick lit authors have not "set out to create canonical masterpieces" and nor should we set out in defence of them (McWatters, 2011, p. 23).⁵³ What is interesting is rather that these authors are creatively writing in the realm of the everyday, and *that* in and of itself is a triumph. That they can express everydayness and find an audience and meaningfulness is fulfilling the evolution of writing. If writing serves the real and chick lit speaks the real, then the question of literature – of literate and non-literate – is made doubly complicated and irresolvable. The notion of chick lit being on trial in this thesis project is misplaced. Rather, there is an exemplar of *practice* creating the situation where writing the everyday becomes the immersed writing the writer.

Owning the spectacle

The trappings of the city – a place which necessitates working simply to survive in let alone enjoy it – requires spending, financial transactions, in order to capture a moment of oneself, whether in an act of truism or delusion. Guy Debord is scathing of the capitalist economy and describes the human condition as having suffered because of it in a pattern of "degradation of *being* into *having*," which hails in a "generalized sliding of *having* into *appearing*" (Debord, 1970, as quoted by Edward Ball, 1987, p. 28). Debord's theories of representation echo of the Platonic *World of forms* and bear more than a passing nod to Marx's theorisation on "commodities and money." Ball frames it as "the spectacle:"

One does not buy objects; one buys images connected to them. One does not buy the utility of goods; one buys the evanescent experience of ownership. Everywhere, one buys the spectacle. Edward Ball, *Yale French Studies*, 73, 1987, p. 28.

oddly enough, is the problem" says Razdan, who describes the reaction to this mutinous literature causing feminists to take up arms to battle the "antifeminist pabulum" (Razdan, 2004, p. 20). Alsop says this in itself is problematic for academic librarians given the "sheer volume of novels being published each year" and "budgetary constraints" although, should they scratch the surface, a list of the genre's benchmark texts is easily found Alsop, 2007, p. 582-583). Smydra nails the arguments against in saying those in academic opposition rally against content that is notable for its "lack of rich, thought-provoking topics" and "the books are not literary in content and thus should not be placed alongside literary works." Supporters, says Smydra, argue that chick lit is the touchstone for contemporary "essential issues relevant to women, such as personal issues, work-related problems, and societal pressure," indeed, where else would we read this living social commentary (Smydra, 2007)? But Harzewski deserves more of the floor here, having undertaken an exploratory look of the genre beyond just a handful of texts and having found that chick lit has "monumentally changed the representation of single women in literature by portraying not figures of pity, illness, or derision, but a cast of funny, usually capable women not looking to settle" (Harzewski, 2006).

⁵³ McWatters defends the 'literary' component of chick lit, saying: "The critics and general population who attack chick lit for its apparent lack of literary value frequently cite the authors' lack of writing ability. Certainly, there aren't many sentences in chick lit novels that would cause a reader to stop and admire the writer's technical agility, but a good chick lit novel shouldn't make its readers pause at all. Though chick lit writers, for the most part, aren't sprinkling their prose with beautifully apt metaphors, their ability to fully engross the reader without requiring her to stop mid-sentence is a skill that garners little formal appreciation in our literary culture...But isn't the ability to win the reader's attention – against so many competing entertainments – a skill to be celebrated? To keep a plot moving and believable isn't something that should be dismissed so easily" (McWatters, 2011, p. 24-25).

The chick lit protagonist reveals life lived as a spectacle, as moments of ‘appearing.’ But what is that act of having or appearing? Should we bother seeking a deeper meaning behind Emmy buying a cashmere robe in *Chasing Harry Winston* (which cost “a bigger chunk of her monthly rent than she cared to remember”), or Becky’s out of control spending in her *Shopaholic* series? Or is it a matter of author’s intent to transform the cocooned protagonist into a butterfly as a means to nudge the plot along? Shopping has a purpose in chick lit just as it does in real life,⁵⁴ be it function-driven or simply an indulgence.

Chick lit heroines consume for more complicated reasons; they consume in an effort to fashion their identities and negotiate the disparate expectations surrounding women with the potential access to education and professional opportunities. O’Donnell Arosteguy, 2009, p. 8.

Butler and Jigna suggest that consumption in (predominantly) white chick lit is a positive indicator for Western women in the feminist debate, where it represents a signifier of choice.⁵⁵ But a discerning eye would see the messages hidden *behind* and *within* the vacuous exchange of consumerism and see into basic human desires, such as to be comforted, transformed, well-regarded and enticing, which recalls us back to Debord’s theories on becoming a *human appearance*.

The competency of the text

To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, 1953

What if instead we explore the *competency* of the text of *Sweet nothing*? By setting it adrift for the moment away from being purveyor of the everyday, and instead investigate its poetics, what would happen? Should we investigate, even in the most simplistic way – experimentally – the way the language within *Sweet nothing* moves and distances itself from “the language of a poem and its critical interpretation” (Culler, 1975, p. 114-115). As an exercise, how would it be to put Jonathan Culler’s test into action whereby a transplanted slice of text from Candace Bushnell’s *Sex and the city*, Helen Fielding’s *Bridget*

⁵⁴ In her true-life book *Sleeping around*, which reads every bit like a chick lit, Catherine Townsend shops with her friend to take her mind off a break-up, adding: “no matter how crap the state of my love life, somehow shopping for lingerie always gives me fresh hope that a fine-looking man will be taking it off with his teeth at some stage” (Townsend, 2007, p. 133). Bushnell readily illustrates material aspiration in her columns with quotes like “I already have too many Chanel bags. They bore me” and consumerism in *Sex and the city* is a visual feature of the HBO television series and the movies that followed (Bushnell, 2001, p. 109). The need to have become entwined in the plot when protagonist Carrie in the onscreen version got a job as a columnist at *American Vogue*.

⁵⁵ They suggest that though consumption of designer labels, for example, or excessive spending on non-essential items that is so prevalent in chick lit, we are led to believe that women have moved into the higher social and economic ranks, rather than married into them (Butler and Jigna, 2008). This locates female consumerism in a paradigm of neoliberal feminism. This view, however, marginalises immigrant women as being “regressive and dependent,” they say.

Jones's diary, and for our own extended pleasure of the text, Jane Austen's *Pride and prejudice* and my own *Sweet nothing*, is laid out on the page within the more typical conventions of a poem and the "intimidating margins of silence" (Culler, 1975, p. 161)? What are the expectations of the four texts? And how do they invite new interpretations and accelerated (or not) "bliss"?

Now to feign a poetic lyricism of *Sex and the city*:

Jonsie
seemed to be convinced that it worked a little differently.

He
kept using the word
"pro".

We
weren't sure if he meant an
actual prostitute who specialized in threesomes

or something else.

Bushnell, p. 65, 1996.

Bushnell's 'poetic' rendition highlights the characters as having opposing, or at least, divergent views. We don't know who Jonsie is, but in this exchange he is "the other" and the reader's views are more likely to be drawn in parallel with the "we" and so become part of the "we" and therefore share the view of the majority. The space between the sentences gives greater separation between the characters and more intrigue around the phrase 'or something else.' This leads the reader to perhaps believe that there is something more to the "something else" but that it is another topic for another day.

How does 'text' manifest in *Bridget Jones's diary*?

My mother has become a force I no longer recognize.

She burst into my flat this morning

as I sat slumped in my dressing gown,
sulkily
painting my toenails
and watching the preamble to the racing.

'Darling, can I leave these here for a few hours?'
she trilled,
flinging an armful of carrier bags down and heading for my bedroom.

Fielding, 1996, p. 65.

In this interplay between the mother and daughter, what is drawn out most in the text is the pace and opposing natures of the couple in this scene. The mother, described as "a force," "burst" into the daughter's private domain where she was "slumped." The

movement is that of a fox and a hare, where at any moment the fox, if not there to eat the hare, is certainly there to leave it bemused and overly-cautious.

And, how do its poetics present in Austen's *Pride and prejudice*?

Mr Collins was not
a sensible man,
and the deficiency of
Nature
had been but little assisted by education or society;

the greatest part of his life
having been spent under the guidance
of an illiterate and miserly father;

and
though he belonged to
one of the universities,
he had merely kept the necessary terms,
without forming at it any useful acquaintance.

Austen, 1797, p. 65

Austen's prose in this treatment does not favour the ugly, lacklustre aura of Mr Collins' character. The play of spatiality within the text, breaking the sentence at the semi-colons, alludes to Collins' father being influential in Collins' life in the most underwhelming way, and concentrates the reader's view that Collins is an echo of his past, both born and made. The text without the poetic treatment, however, reads similarly. Austen incorporated her own metre to the text where the semi-colons thread the supporting argument that links Collins' unappealing features to his history, to prove that he was "little assisted by education of society."

How does *Sweet nothing* similarly or contrarily reveal its 'textual' competency?

'He's a fucken cunt,'
Lucy announced
to Beanie, Cat and Beth over pizza and wine at SPQR
one week later.

A spit-polished beige couple glared at her
as the c-bomb
echoed
against
the plate glass windows.

'A cunt!'

she repeated.

She glowered at the couple's
tight
ashen
faces

and shovelled a generous wad of folded pizza into her mouth.

A chunk of cream cheese
lingered

on

her

lower lip for longer than was absolutely necessary.

Lucy licked it away with a food painted tongue.
'How could he not know it was from me?

He's such an asshole.'

Nash, 2011, p. 65.

The spatiality and temporality within the text alters dramatically to convey a collection of words with a dramatised and enacted meaning, to become a whole and completed experience. Space between and within each singular word is controlled by explicit splicing and shifting of words and phrases; the text finding breath and space within which a banal scene affecting a more damning summation of events. Allowing an "echo" to reverberate within the poem causes the word "cunt" to gain its full, shocking value where Lucy's ramblings are juxtaposed against the "uptight" couple in the role of spectator, all set within a public social setting that adheres to its own set of rules of propriety. In this interpretation, the word "arsehole" marks the next serve to the couple, thus ending the play on a suspense-filled cliffhanger. In Culler's summation, we have become witness to "the specificity of literature" through the means of poetic lyricism (Culler, 1975, p. 162). Add to this the fact that the production of a poem – the making of a poem – alters course when it is written, spoken or asserted within poetic constructs such as rhythm and phonetic patterning. So our production of *Sweet nothing* may therefore manifest as a play, a theatre of tension.

Living on: the research of my everyday

The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which He sees me.

Roland Barthes, 1975

Speaking the true

The writing of a novel as research presents a conflict. In writing 'fiction' what is 'discovery' and what is 'truth'? Where is the *research* of this research? Determining the veracity of the discovery requires certain methods and procedures. And, of course, fiction is not reality, nor should it be, but nonetheless it has to be real and present an authenticity. It is not therefore presenting the 'truth' but it is – and *must* – speak the true.

It must decode a reality to speak it truthfully to be “the text that comes from culture and does not break with it” (Barthes, 1975, p. 14). The reality of chick lit is the continuous nothing of the everyday, dwelling ad nauseum in the banal mundanity of life as it repeats itself. Peter Conrad described Jane Austen’s work in that: “By such large parenthetical dilations of time and space, Jane Austen’s miniature measures the large but vacant and tedious world beyond it” (Conrad, Introduction to *Pride and prejudice* by Jane Austen, p. xxiii, 1991). Similarly to Austen’s minutiae of the everyday, readers of chick lit are treated to every ache, pain, weight loss or gain,⁵⁶ experienced by the heroine; every eyebrow plucked, every drink sipped,⁵⁷ every headache and hangover,⁵⁸ every passing glance either received or given, and every inane thought that pops into her mind. This is the cultural milieu of chick lit, its ‘real.’ This real, this speaking the true of chick lit is at the same time, therefore, autobiographical – to a point – because it operates, emerges from and engages with *my* everyday milieu. In this sense its methods reflect and comment on my life world, and seek to write *past, through and around* the writer’s – my – inevitable blind spot. So in order to discover and uncover the ‘true’ of chick lit, to be able to write within and about it, a writer – *I* as writer – must exist in this banal mundanity, inside the cultural milieu of *this* everyday, the everyday that is *mine*, without deigning to alter it.

⁵⁶ Bridget Jones famously led the charge for a chick lit protagonist to agonise over their weight, body image and ageing. In the mid-1990s, when heroin chic became mainstream in popular media, chick lit became a channel for female writers and readers to express or relate to body image issues. Kate Moss became the poster girl for heroin chic, which was represented in fashion by androgynous, bony and angular models, with anemic pale skin and black circles under large, doe-eyes. Keyes, someone who struggled with weight gain, expresses her own weight challenges through her characters. These messages often carry with them a more sinister tale, that of the heroine being bullied by her husband or boyfriend to lose weight, such as with Tara in *Last chance saloon* and Claire in *Watermelon*. In the following excerpt, Tara articulates her weight-loss turmoil and restraint: “On Monday morning when Tara woke up she was starving. But she was filled with a great determination not to eat...She’d been wearing a size fourteen for sometime now, but it was only ever meant to be a temporary measure, until she’d lost weight and gone back to being a size twelve. Mind you, wearing a size twelve was only meant to have been a temporary measure also, until she slimmed down and went back to her correct weight, her true size, her spiritual home of size ten...She hated her body, how she hated it. Having to lug all that lard around with her, she felt as though it didn’t belong to her” (Keyes, 1999, p. 118-119).

⁵⁷ Alcohol features in most chick lit and is used as a literary lubricant in the plot. *Rachel’s holiday* by Keyes, is exceptional in the genre where alcohol – or lack of – is central to the plot, and is the author’s own fictional adaptation of her true-life alcoholism and rehabilitation in Ireland in 1994. While not central, the act of drinking, being drunk or hungover underpins many of the activities central bringing people together under friendship, dating, sex, awkward family occasions, workplace friendships and relationships, and occasionally for being alone and self-administering therapy after a break-up, like Bridget Jones’s post-Daniel Cleaver drinking binge at home. Vogler says these are necessary gatherings at the “watering hole” that compel people to regroup and rethink plans (Vogler, 2007). In her transnational research of chick lit, Ommundsen referred to alcohol consumption not just being typical of Western chick lit titles, but also of Asian and Indigenous Australian (Ommundsen, 2011).

⁵⁸ Alcohol and its partner in crime, hangovers, are omnipresent within chick lit text and – as happens – often linked to sex, from Bushnell’s description of friends who “all went out and got drunk, and Cici made out with one of the Texas guys,” to describing a typical Christmas party where “Someone was puking in the bathroom...the floor was awash in alcohol, and a cadre of druggies had taken over the bathroom” (Bushnell, 2001, p. 189). It is even personified in the text or used to reveal a particular view (the authors?) on alcohol, such as when Claire, in Marian Keyes’s book *Watermelon* can’t find a drop to drink in her parent’s house: “As it was, the chances of procuring even an alcoholic drink were unpredictable. Neither of my parents drank very much. And they kept very little alcohol in the house...In my younger days, those halcyon days before I discovered what alcohol could do for me, we had a full, if eclectic, drinks cabinet. Purest Polish vodka jostled shoulders with litre bottles of Malibu. Bottles of Hungarian Slibovitch behaved as if they had every right to stand next to a bottle of Southern Comfort. There was no cold war in our drinks cabinet” (Keyes, 1996, p. 74-75).



Figure 2. Notes recorded on the back of the closest available ‘paper,’ a condom packet (Nash, 2011).

My reading of Michel de Certeau’s eloquent and definitive prose chapter ‘Walking in the City’ reveals an infinite world through the poetic realities that reside within the depths of this everyday action and inaction (de Certeau, 1984, pp. 91-110). A city planner’s view from on high denies the muscle – that heartbeat of the city – that makes it breathe, that gives it life to become more than the sum of its parts. Investigated within the cultural milieu, up close, in proximity, the city becomes the place of small intensive and extensive details; fragments that touch the walker rather than tell him or her anything; where people of the streets each singularly possess a “qualitative character: a style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation” (de Certeau, 1984, p. 97). So to serve in the role of “recorder,” a writer must inhabit that same realm and become *within* it. She must research the truth of that reality so that the reader, caught within the sociolect of chick lit, is then drawn into the very moment happening on the page – the ‘exhibiting’ of the true – into the everyday malaise and joy of a protagonist’s life.

Therefore, as recorder, I can’t *help* but disperse myself through the text as I cannot help but disperse myself through my own life. Historian and Professor in the history of consciousness, James Clifford, says of Father Lafitau’s *Moeurs des sauvages américains*: “the 1724 frontispiece...portrays the ethnographer as a young woman sitting at a writing table amid artefacts from the New World and from Classical Greece and Egypt” (Clifford, 1998, p. 21).⁵⁹ Perhaps it was the same with me as the ethnographer three centuries ago.

⁵⁹ An intrigue that a woman as ethnographer is portrayed in a time when women were less regarded for written or academic fortitude, but also, is she a picture of me three centuries ago marrying the day-to-day realities and her artefacts within the context of where they came from, as the illustration invites us to deduce?

My artefacts are the objects of wanting, desiring and have subsumed the objects of function, yet the chick lit protagonist and I are consumed with and attend to our artefacts as much as this ethnographer. It is probable therefore that *all* characters are a living, breathing evolution, not only of every person the writer has met, whether conscious or unconscious, but of the writer herself. Just as a photographer is in every photo she takes, a writer is dispersed throughout every character and every action within a novel. So assuming each person a writer has met to be a one-off, an original, long before they merge into the shape of a writer's character, how then can critics conclude that the characters of chick lit are clichéd? Conversely, aren't we all clichéd in some way? Even divergent and marginalised characters succumb to a cliché of sorts, where cliché and norm find their common ground, where writing's normality is easily mistaken for the overly norm phrase.

Self-reflection, say Stevens and Cooper, is what makes students *become* students, that it is essential and powerful to examine life, in particular, one's own: "Reflection is the path both to self-knowledge and to greater personal efficacy" (Stevens and Cooper, 2009, p.3). Journal writing, they say, is a powerful form of reflection and a time-tested, well-established method for examining our lives" (2009, p. 3) and that the experience of journal-keeping gives our experience meaning. My collecting and recording of the everyday was inscribed in journals (but not *as* journals) that were kept with me – in hands, in bags, beside my bed – around the clock. Through the method of conversation, eavesdropping, immersion, observation, journal-taking, remembering – I recorded the milieu and the mundane of my everyday.



Figure 3. A collection of journals used in the recording of *Sweet nothing* (Nash, 2011).

So the question becomes, how can the writer present that possibility of knowing what will happen beyond what is happening? The *where we have come from* and *where we are going*,

confoundingly, doesn't exist in the 'true' of chick lit. What is reached *there* is yet more nothingness: the nothing of the everyday.

Confessional places and spaces

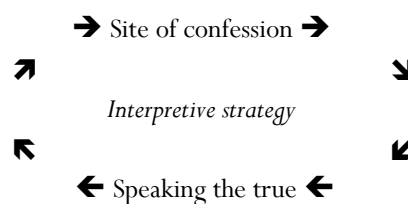
'And the next thing I know,' Lucy went on, '—is I woke up at Will's house. And now I just feel... really ashamed.' Tears blocked Lucy's eyes and snot dripped from her nose into her mouth. Her shoulders shuddered and her chest heaved.

'Ashamed is right,' Cat replied, her voice gentle.

'Fuck Cat, what the... fuck? I hate... myself, I really do...' she hiccupped. 'I don't even remember... I don't even remember how it happened. What have I done? I can't fix this.'

Belinda Nash 2011

While my research methods associated with 'speaking the true' determine approaches to the genre's milieu and object of enquiry, another arena of research methods is to consider how thematic concerns for the novel emerge from that reflexive milieu. If the initial methods concern an autoethnography, thematic concern engage a hermeneutics we could call 'confessional.' Its circuit looks like this:



Thus, what I found I was 'recording'⁶⁰ in the locales of my everyday was the characterising of 'speaking the true' — that is, the momentum of the narrative sets off confessional episodes — social, sexual, transgression of behaviours and language. In the literal sense, chick lit is prescriptive in the way its protagonists typically narrate their own story, appearing (but not being) master (mistress) of their destiny, in the playing out of a modern cosmopolitan women's confessional.⁶¹

⁶⁰ I eavesdropped, took notes, transcribed conversation as they happened, where they happened, collated, halted conversations just to transcribe them, repeating them back, verifying them before letting the conversation depart from me. And these transcribed words left my fingers later, alone with just the quiet, persistent hum of a fridge for company. (See appendices, Figures 10 and 11, for additional examples).

⁶¹ It is widely suggested that the confessional narrative of chick lit draws parallels with the tradition of women keeping journals and diaries, and latterly their propensity for writing deeply personal columns for print and blogs published online (Attwood, 2009, p. 6). It makes sense then that newspaper and magazine columns and blogs so easily converted to chick lit. Blogs delve into the deeply personal, are written in private and, in somewhat of an oxymoronic and conflicted journey, they are published on a very public-facing domain, the Internet (Attwood, 2009, p. 6; Ray, 2007, p. 98). It is a natural progression then that some of the more popular columns and blogs were snapped up by publishing houses and turned into books. The very obvious advantage of taking these pre-published articles was in already knowing that they had an audience. From the mid-1990s until the mid-2000s, newspaper columns found their way to be collated into

But at a deeper level, the characters are connected by their singular enactment of their confession, revealing – and reveling in – every detail. Through this portrayal of themselves, the characters present the truth of their everyday. The most banal scene in *Sweet nothing* occurs at Conch Records where The Salad Man talks about his new jeans – a conversation that continues on for two and a half pages:

‘Hey,’ he patted his thighs, ‘check out my new jeans: Nudie. I’m gutted though ’cos look,’ he gestured down to below the crotch, ‘– they’ve gone all loose fitting. Look.’ He bent his knees and concertinaed up and down on the spot like a bandy-legged cowboy. Lucy was peering at his crotch just as her friend and Conch regular, Silkie came in.
‘You alright, mate?’ Silkie asked nodding at The Salad Man and giving Lucy a peck on her cheek. ‘What’s happening, Luce?’
‘Yeah, good thanks. We’re just checking out Salad’s new jeans.’
...‘New jeans. Nice. Nudie, you reckon?’ Nash, 2011, pp. 158-159.

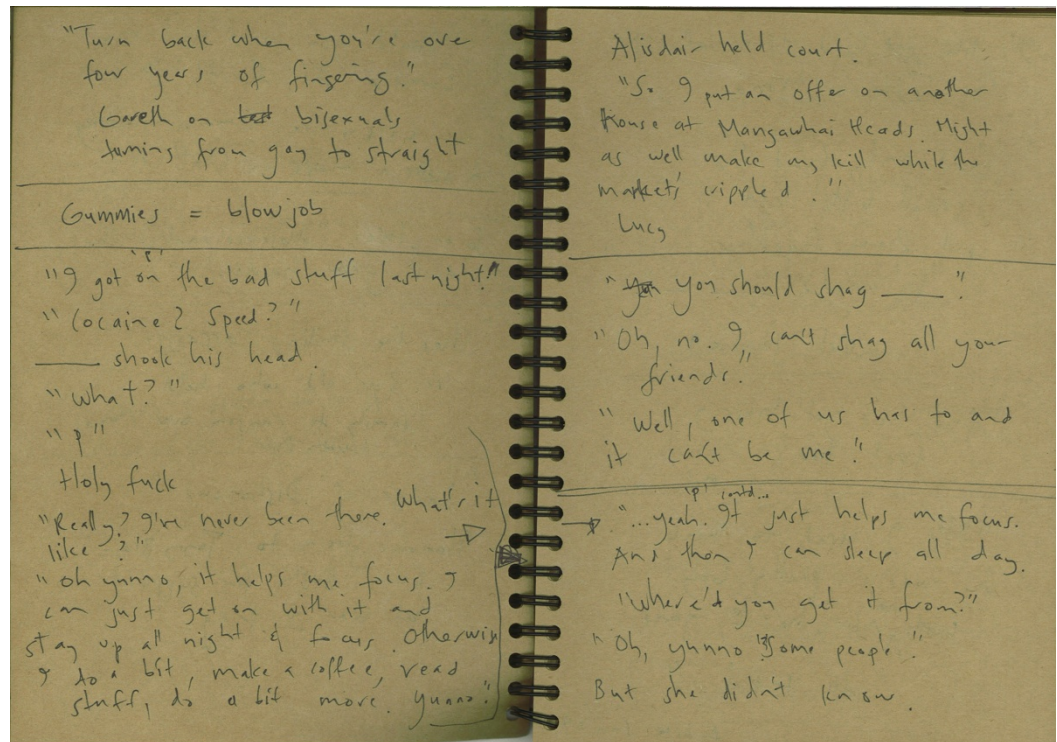


Figure 4. Recorded notes and conversation that did not make it into *Sweet nothing*.

By contrast (and yet similarly), the most hectic and temporally slowed confessional scene happens in *Sweet nothing* at Mondial where Lucy engages in the most lurid and intimate

books for print, such as Bushnell’s cynical *Sex and the city* (1997), Marian Keyes’ acerbically witty *Under the duvet* series (2001; 2005) and more within the genre. Latterly, as blogs became mainstream by the mid-2000s, they saw transition into print. British actress Lucy-Anne Holmes’ hilarious, hugely popular and very public autobiographical search for a boyfriend, the *Spinster’s quest* blog, became the chick lit novel *50 ways to find a lover* in 2009, followed by its sequel, *The (im)perfect girlfriend* in 2010. Laura Barnett in her *Guardian* review of the first book in the series says: “Sarah-Sargeant – twentysomething waitress, struggling actor...could quite easily pass for Bridget’s younger sister”, referring of course to the “utterly solipsistic” Bridget Jones (Barnett, 2009, online). Barnett continues, saying the blog is the diary for the “Noughties generation.”

confessional conversation with three men which endures over 15 pages – appearing almost as if in real time (Nash, *Sweet nothing*, pp. 170-184). The characters confess part of their nature (their behaviour and the telling of their behaviour both serve as confession) – whereas the author remains shielded, protected in a peculiar place of non-existence. This is the most literal showing of confession as ‘speaking the true’. In other places, somewhat literally, the characters reveal their confession – their behaviour – in thought, where the reader becomes voyeur to the text:

Lucy tip-toed out of her bedroom and into the bathroom. She stepped over the empty gold condom packet on the floor sitting guilty beside her knickers.

Dammit.

And on a school night, too. Nash, 2011, p. 191.

Chinese author Hwee Hwee Tan says these confessional spaces enable the reader a real view of people, adding that most Asian women she knows are much more like Bridget Jones than the mystical heroine painted in many Chinese fiction novels (Tan, 2002, p. 66).⁶² The success of the Bridget Jones characters in chick lit, and the characters of the city, which shared their intimate adventures with Bushnell for her *Sex and the city* columns, gained a following in part for their candid “truth about women’s daily lives” (Witt, 2007, p.6). If this is true, then critics of chick lit are denying the autoethnographic aspect of the storytelling and therefore cannot be correct when they lament (in Doris Lessing’s footsteps) that “It would be better, perhaps, if [female novelists] wrote books about their lives as they really saw them and not as these helpless drunken girls, worrying about their weight” (Ferriss, 2006; sourced: Smydra, 2007). And the most often quoted line – and retort to the critics – is Fielding’s own about *Bridget Jones’s diary* success being attributed because it “represents women as they actually are in the age in which they are living” (cited in Ferris and Young, 2006, p. 9).

So, through its commodification, is *Sweet nothing* the tautological proof of *my* everyday? While as author I am ‘protected’ from being a confessor – a writer outside of the exchange – is *Sweet nothing* my confession?

⁶² In her review of *Wild ginger* by Anchee Min in *Time International*, Tan believes the women in Chinese female literature are “completely removed from the experience of the contemporary Asian woman.” She quips: “Quite honestly, the major issues I’ve had to struggle with the past month were a) how to lose weight, b) how to remember where I’ve parked my car in the labyrinth car park and c) what shade of highlights I should get for my hair” (Tan, 2002, p. 66).

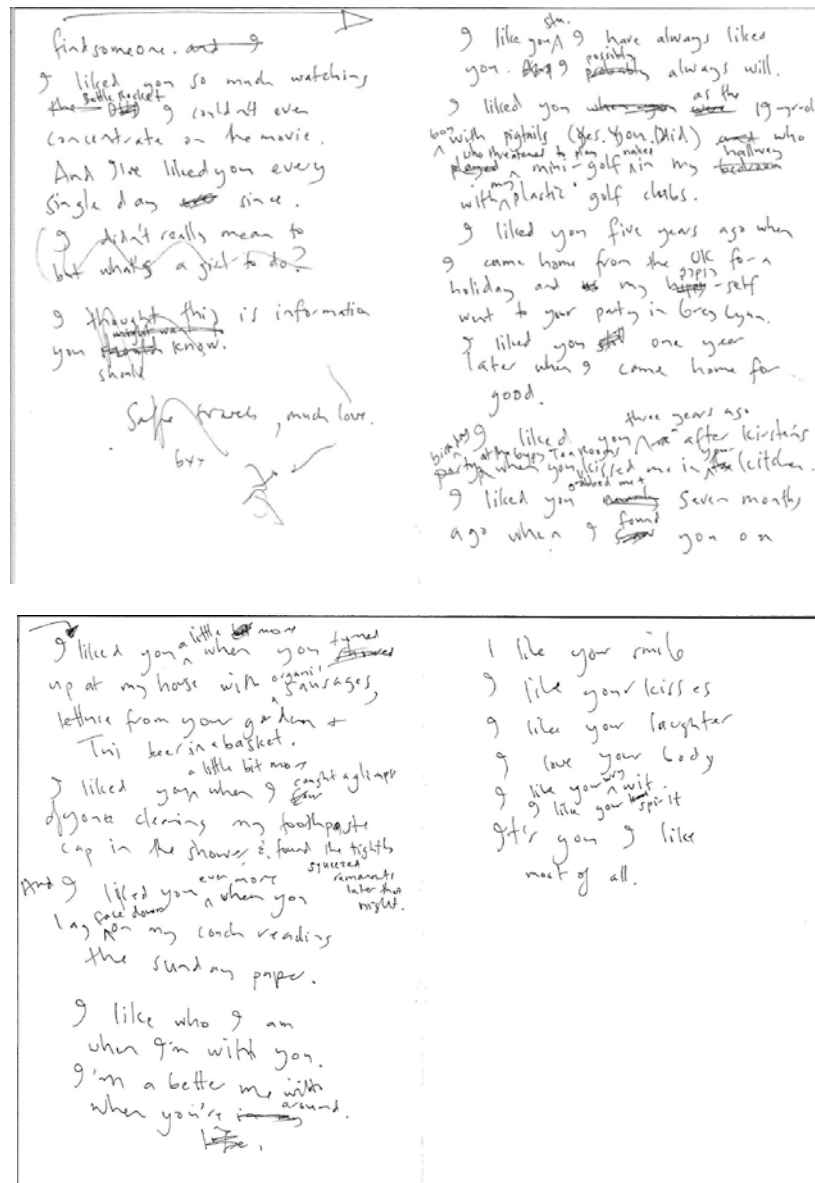


Figure 5. This real rehearsed letter became Lucy's email declaration to Will (Nash, 2011, pp. 106-107).

Words and things

'It's official Cat, I am a cliché.'

Belinda Nash, 2011

The "having said" and "wanting to say" uses language to speak a world of things. A novel (or writing in general) is thing-presentation sublimated in words, an expression of things. Hence a third arena of research methods concerns at two levels, a relation of words to things. At a first level, my everyday is ineffable – it cannot be spoken and written except at the moment of its loss in writing – but writing's own momentum is precisely the lure of the ineffable. How can something that is too great to be expressed be expressed? Can

there even exist a method to capture that which cannot be captured? One a second level, within the text (narrative) of the novel, writing (story) is the perpetual negotiation between characters' (empty) obsessions with things and the language they use to fill this emptiness. That is, the cast of chick lit is so immersed in the pedestrian utterances of the everyday and is constantly preparing itself for the nothingness ahead to fill the emptiness within which it lives. This is the one constant of *Sweet nothing*: that the characters are perpetually in motion racing against the time they set *against themselves*, preparing physically, mentally and emotionally for the next event where nothing happens, and within which (yet again) they confess their all.

The place of confession – the place of the cultural milieu of chick lit – is that most “salient characteristics” the city⁶³ (Harzewski, 2011, p. 30). Here the noise of the city presents a thrilling yet unrealisable concept: that of the realm of possibility and opportunity (for heroine and reader) and the notion that anything can happen.⁶⁴ But – and this is the curiosity of chick lit – *it rarely ever does*. The landscape of the day-to-day and the preparedness to that landscape prevents the characters from being consumed with anything other than the nothingness in which they dwell. The city becomes the place and space of confession. Auckland city is wedded to the narrative and confessional spaces of *Sweet nothing* – many having been written from within its real places and spaces⁶⁵ – inviting a reader to spatialise the text and read within the spaces contained within the text (to observe what cannot be observed because even if it once existed, it is now passed).

Sociologist Harold Garfinkel says the language of conversation – of which chick lit is primarily built – is even more intriguing than written language due to its omissions and its role in ethnographic storytelling, which is evident in *Sweet nothing*. Garfinkel's

⁶³ The locations of a city are wedded to the text and reveal “a very specific socioeconomic experience and background’ for the characters” (Joanne Knowles, 2004, ‘Material Girls: Location and Economics in Chicklit Fiction, Or How Singletons Finance The Jimmy Choo Collections,’ *Diegesis*, p. 37, quoted in Balducci, 2011, p. 43). Yet it is far too trite to talk about the importance of “the City” in Bushnell's collection *Sex in the city*, how the pace of the city matches the pace of the stories, and how it is no less a character within the brash, sensationalist stories than its leading ladies. And it is too easy to point out that sites of production of chick lit – London, Dublin, New York, LA and Sydney, among them – are those same cities of consumption, and those cities are depicted in the everyday lives of chick lit enactment.

⁶⁴ Or perhaps the city represents the ‘other than.’ By having the story set in a city it is purposely not a small town and not the countryside. Or is it a narrative tool for the writer, like Keyes in her *Last Chance Saloon*? She uses London to relieve and contrast the heightened anxiety of friends Tara and Katherine when they collect (cancer-stricken) Fintan's family Heathrow taking them directly to hospital, where they behave “like the O'Grady's were in London for a holiday” pointing out such delights as “Kensington Palace...It's where Princess Diana used to live” (Keyes, 2000, p. 248-249). So too is the city present even when it is not there, as in Jenny Colgan's novel dedicated to city escape – and dare we say possibility and opportunity – *Where have all the boys gone?* Protagonist Katie takes her search for a man out of London to the fictional Scottish village of Fairlish and the author juxtaposes the “miserable” rush hour of a people-crammed, stifling Tube, 26-pages later with, the chill of the Scottish air and Katie being able to see into “the horizon... [where] she thought she saw something else move; a white dot, far in the distance” (Colgan, 2005, p. 5, 31). Again, when she gets there, not a whole lot happens, other than her self-realisation, of course. Fest compares another novel, Kinsella's *The undomestic goddess*, where “The country stands for affection and simplicity; the city for rivalry and coldness” (Fest, 2009, p. 53).

⁶⁵ I wrote *Sweet nothing* from a variety of places, most significantly Good One café every Saturday morning and Conch Records every Sunday, and I took notes, capturing atmosphere and conversation, in my moleskin notebook while seated with friends at the Gypsy Tea Rooms, Mondial, SPQR and Mea Culpa. These are *my* places and spaces.

examination of the colloquy in conversation is revealing by what is *not* said rather than what is. That is, understanding in conversation comes on the basis “not only of what was actually said but what was left unspoken” (Garfinkel, 1967; 2008, p. 39). He evidences the “process of attending to temporal series of utterances” that lead to accurate interpretation enabling the conversation to continue without halting (Garfinkel, 1967; 2008, p. 39). Conversations are, in short, a communication device where not only is less more, but fewer words are required to attain the same level of understanding. In conversation we fill in the blanks.

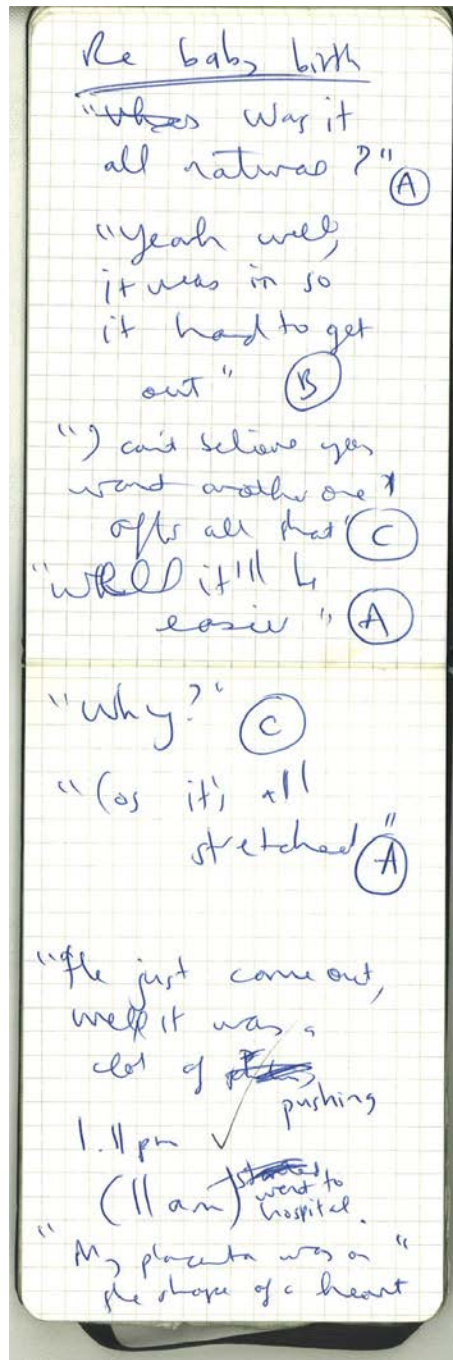


Figure 6. A real coffee conversation with two friends became Lucy's conversation with Beanie and Cat (Nash, 2011, pp. 198-199).

What does this mean for chick lit, a genre known for its incessant dialogue, and specifically, *Sweet nothing*? Philosopher Art Berman's view that the modern French poststructuralists "reasoned that if what we know of the world is formed, shaped, by language, then language may be said to constitute our knowledge of the world." When merged with the Marxist view "that the contents of consciousness and, therefore, the "self" are constructs determined by the environment, including language," then is language a cultural construction of the internal psyche (Berman, 1988, p. 116; 119)? That is, we are what we say; we write what we are? Or is it, as Barthes says of "the impossibility of living outside the infinite text ... [that], the book creates the meaning, the meaning creates life" (Barthes, 1975, p. 36)?

Pertinently, do we even have an awareness of what we write, as Lévi-Strauss would have us believe, as if we are merely carriers of language? Bearing in mind "structuralism deals with the "conditions" of meaning and not with the meaning itself" assuming a connection between the two, literature, says Berman, is founded on the transference and understanding of meaning without recalling historical context of the language (Berman, 1988, p. 126). Words afford an intrinsic value without either the user or receiver of language truly understanding each word's heritage or even language's evolution (Berman, 1988, p. 127; 134-135).

In writing, a writer exists in a suspended reality, which is real, but is not real to the text, the place of passionate virtuosity. In reading, a reader spatialises an author's text. Rather, they do not take in (or even necessarily know) the author's intent of the text, rather they enact within their progress through that text and the sense they make is not on objective presence but on a singular encounter in order to "negotiate their own relationship" with the texts (de Certeau, 1984, p. 97; Barthes, 1975, p. 62; Balducci, 2011, p. 50). For each reader, therefore, there is the singularity of a writer (knowing that if writers embody the relationship with their reader as the primary motivator for writing, they will get nothing of worth done):⁶⁶

Each of us has a private Austen.
Jocelyn's Austen wrote wonderful novels about love and courtship
but never married. ... Bernadette's Austen was a comic genius. ...
Sylvia's Austen was a daughter, a sister, an aunt. ... Allegra's Austen
wrote about the impact of financial need on the intimate lives of
women. ... Prudie's was the Austen who died, possibly of Hodgkin's
disease, when she was only forty-one years old. ... None of us knew
who Grigg's Austen was. Fowler, 2004, pp. 1-5.

If, as Berman suggests (in his review of Saussurian structuralist theory): "Language itself structures the world; the world known is determined by the language used," how important is the relationship between a writer's meaning of and a reader's interpretation (Berman, 1988, p. 115). Or does it matter at all?

⁶⁶ Despite Sandra L. Giles' advice that writers consider their writing processes, and "think about your intentions regarding rhetorical elements such as audience and purpose" (Giles, 2010, p.191).

Discipline, creativity and constraint

A writer rarely confides the mood in which an act of writing is established. Sometimes the mood, the *Stimmung*, the pitch and the voice, remain hidden even to the writer herself, or she ignores a headache and continues to write, or something has made him anxious, which he tries to suppress as he gets on with the task at hand.

Avital Ronell, 2002

Anthropologist Shirley Fedorak says that we can “learn as much about human nature through popular culture in our own backyard” as from a distant culture, and that scholars need “to finally accept that popular culture is a relevant field of study,” and this is not research of the “frivolous and shallow” (Fedorak, 2009, p. xi-xii).⁶⁷ *Sweet nothing* is not a passive endurance. In its progression from life into text, I am voyeur, player, puppeteer, all three and none of these. Because *I* was there: in every real scene and present in every scene played out in my imagination. Methodologically speaking, writing a novel and doing an MPhil do not normally coincide. And this exegetical writing is not likely to interest a publisher (probably) the way a novel might.

So what is the discipline of writing a novel? In starting *Sweet nothing* I as writer was still faced with that most famous of encounters – the vast openness of empty pages that do not exist until they are filled – known affectionately as the writer’s block. How did I remain passionately open to that which I was continually missing? An effective writer is one who can weave seamlessly in and out of strategies and tactics, that of passionate virtuosity, from the conceptual and imagined to the actual and real. What method did I employ to fill those as yet non-existent pages? There were fundamental structural applications necessary to draw out the content because, after all, I had committed to producing a novel inside the context of academia. It was going to happen.

I wrote because I had to.

How then might the discipline (control) help the creativity? My method to write creatively required an abundance and equal measures of self-imposed and self-regulated discipline and creativity. It relied upon the synergy and symbiotic interplay between moving easily between the two and knowing when to do so. This meant at times I would write, extracting from my scribbled post-it notes, my moleskin and other notebooks that I carried everywhere with me to notate conversation, and delving into my memory and imagination. With these tools, I wrote. When numbness struck my right brain, the left resumed control and I edited. I immersed myself in the text, reflected, reviewed,

⁶⁷ According to Shirley Fedorak, it symbolizes cultural identity and is framed within polarised popular culture theory, where the mass culture theory and populist theory place popular culture at opposite ends (Hunter, n.d.). Mass culture theory suggests chick lit is the inferior food of the unquestioning masses, and populist theory says it is a reward and escape from the mundanity of daily life. Ray B. Browne and Pat Browne suggest: “Though daily existence is made up of specific events and localities, all are tied together somehow in the flow of generalities. Events of one day are part of what happened yesterday and will continue to occur tomorrow in the same or different location. But in order to make some kind of sense out of these recurrences we need to have generalities that connect them and tell us what they all mean” (Browne and Browne, 2005, p. 3).

refreshed and renewed. My writing was a play of opposites, equal composites of fluidity and creativity, and rigidity and mastery; the subjective versus the objective, as de Certeau may suggest, where the subjective expounds on truth, and the objective frames it, until 90,000 words sat cleanly, row after row, upon 300 pages.

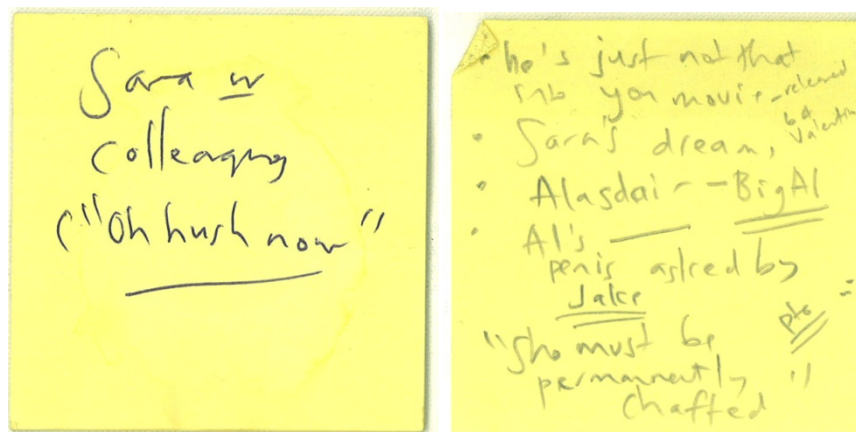


Figure 7. Post-it notes posted around my flat helped me to both strategise and record the tactical moments that occurred within the everyday.

How does the degree, a Master of Philosophy – that elusive lure that inches closer to my reach – then *constrain* writing creativity and its necessary processes? What of this constraint when we know from the outset – because the rules have been established – that the novel has to be completed and assessed? Let us leave the most obvious parametres of crafting novels – character, language, dialogue, genre, tone, plot points, structure, setting, subject matter, theme, narrative voice, dialogue, punctuation, drama, originality, skill, choosing the title, publishability, editing, audience and critics – and instead enter into the abstract – vision, imagination, inspiration, sense of direction, listening, courage, ego, possibilities for transformation and conveying ‘truth.’⁶⁸ Let us navigate the real world of writing a novel, one with constraints that sit outside of any form of creativity or discipline.

Richard Goodman hones in on the crux of this great challenge when he says: “Much of writing is purely mechanical, like wiring a house. Skill is often what’s needed, not genius or talent.” In his maxims about writing Goodman quantifies writing ½ page a day for 365 days, and “you’ll have 182 pages – an impressive stack – in front of you”. He has a friend

⁶⁸ John Gardner says that deft use of technique is paramount, believing it separates the skilled writer from the amateur. He says the failure of writers to employ basic skills in grammar and syntax for example, violently takes the reader out of the fictional dream: “We are abruptly snapped out of the dream, forced to think of the writer or the writing”. He says the purpose of fiction is to maintain a “continuous fictional dream”, and a writer’s failure to do so is a great failure indeed (Gardner, 1984). Earnest Hemingway believed the writer’s chief obligation is to tell the truth: “His standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be” (Hemingway, 1942). He believed the writer’s dedication to conveying truth in his or her fictional world, whether in a fantastical world or one mirroring reality, must be so convincing as not to jolt the reader out of his or her creative fiction. Wyatt agrees that a factual ‘reality’ must be created to maintain the integrity of the writing: “Creative fiction writers lay store on imagination and the invention of scenes that they may not have witnessed, but that could have happened”.

in creative writing author, Jane Rogers, who says: “No matter how complex or ethereal the inspiration for a novel is, what it boils down to, is writing words on a page” (Rogers, 2007, pp. 116 – 125). And of her own writing, Cameron advises: “There is something very right about simply letting yourself write. And the way to do that is to begin, to begin where you are” (Cameron, 2000, p. 5).

This is the point with writing: *writing* is the key to writing.

As is *living* so that a writer can *write*. Without a full life, there is nothing to write at all. A full life means obligations to family, friends, working and engaging in the day-to-day process of life. There is no opt-out button. How does one fold the busy-ness of life in with the discipline of writing? One cannot exist without the other, but too much of either will snuff the other out. How do they mutually co-exist so both may grow and change?

A writer must live so that they can write.

This day-to-day process then encapsulates experiential hermeneutics where the hand has a relationship to the keyboard, the mind to the hand and the everyday to the mind. The reader then transforms the text into something else by relating it to their own intimate world. The text becomes the reflexive performance as Frow suggests, which “performs the genres by which they are shaped,” in this instance chick lit, and though it convey my reality and truth (Frow, *Genre*, p.18-19, quoted in Balducci, 2011, p.30). My life and how it interplays with the hybrid fiction I am creating day-by-day as research then becomes symbiotic.

A professor I admire greatly told me that arguably part of the process of writing is stocking up on cleaning products, to which I replied a hearty: “Yes! You do that too?” But of course. Just as we break down the components of living and writing, so must we break down the smaller moments – the constraints – before, between and after writing. Any scholar will tell you that they cannot do *nothing* between their studies, they have to do *something*, and that something is often the nothing of cleaning. My house has never looked nor smelled so clean as it is now; my plants never more tendered; my silver so polished and windows so gleaming. Are cleaning products then the tools of a writer?

Sketching the face of nothing

My third most invasive interaction in the expressions of the product *Sweet nothing* (the first being when my literary supervisor read the text for the first time; the second when my academic supervisors read it), was writing a brief for the cover of my novel.⁶⁹ The four main protagonists of *Sweet nothing* were bestowed the right to feature on the cover and it fell to me the task of entrancing the designer in a one-page brief. These four

⁶⁹ Three third-year illustration students undertook the paid project to design the front and back cover and spine of *Sweet nothing*: Helen Olsen, Philippa Johnston – a self-confessed chick lit fan and Yangling “Kaylee” Liu. I chose three people as I was curious as to the outcome and thus be able to draw parallels with the process a writer might have with a publishing house. Only Philippa and Kaylee completed the project.

entangled characters are the people with whom I have journeyed for the past three years. They are real and exclusively mine. I am their Godforce, their ally and trickster. They were drawn from the real through me into the production of the text, to become fiction, where, as they become increasingly fictitious, they themselves became real. Their physical and emotional ideal had to fold into a communicable brief that would triumph within the constraints and marketability of the chick lit genre.

Was I betraying my friends by handing them to strangers who were tasked to express them in two-dimension. Would the brief be causal in confining the designers within the straitjacket of “bright colors, mostly pink and chartreuse green, and images of scantily clad dressed women who are shopping” (Smydra, 2007)? Would I plagiarise from the genre with my heavy hand in steering a preconceived design ideology? Would I cause critics such as Lauren Adams to have their senses assaulted by the pre-adolescent “bright pink, green, and orange” (Adams, 2004, p. 669).

Instead I let go. I entrusted the task to the people I employed (and paid) and trusted that the brief I wrote would translate as images on a page.

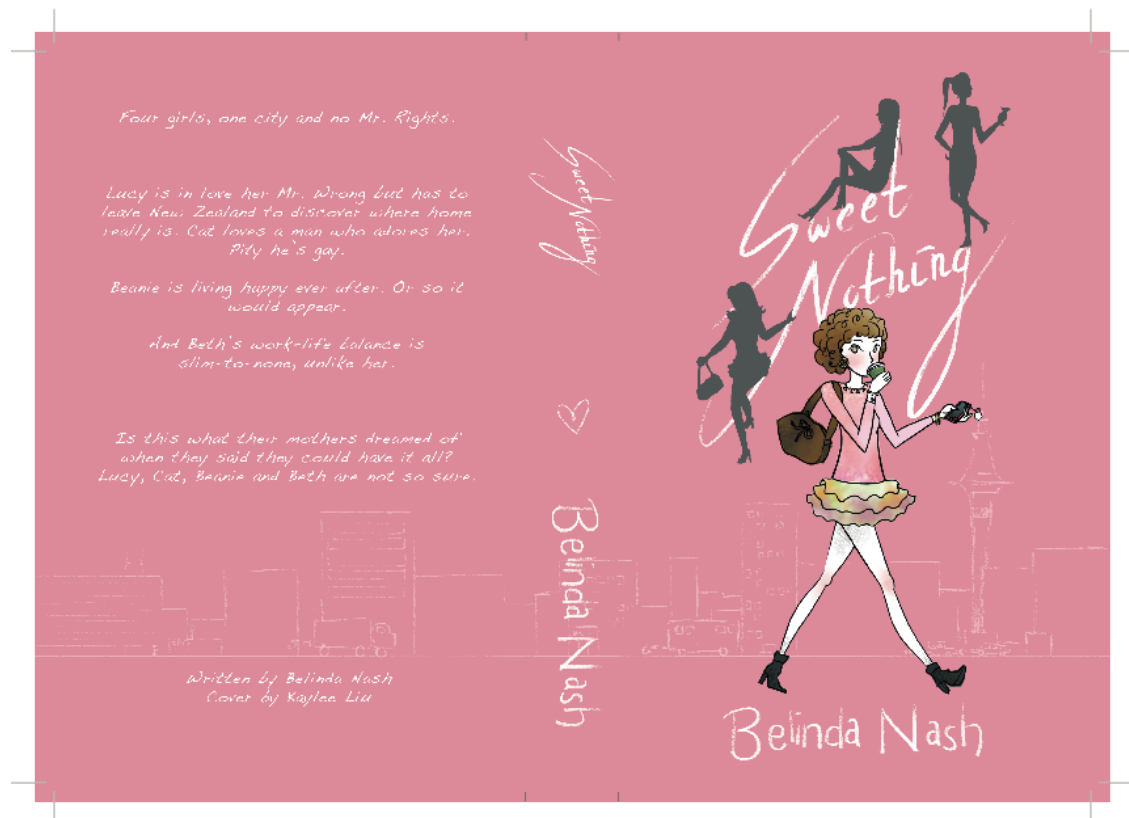


Figure 8. *Sweet nothing* cover design by Auckland University of Technology Bachelor of Design 3rd year student Yanling ‘Kaylee’ Liu.

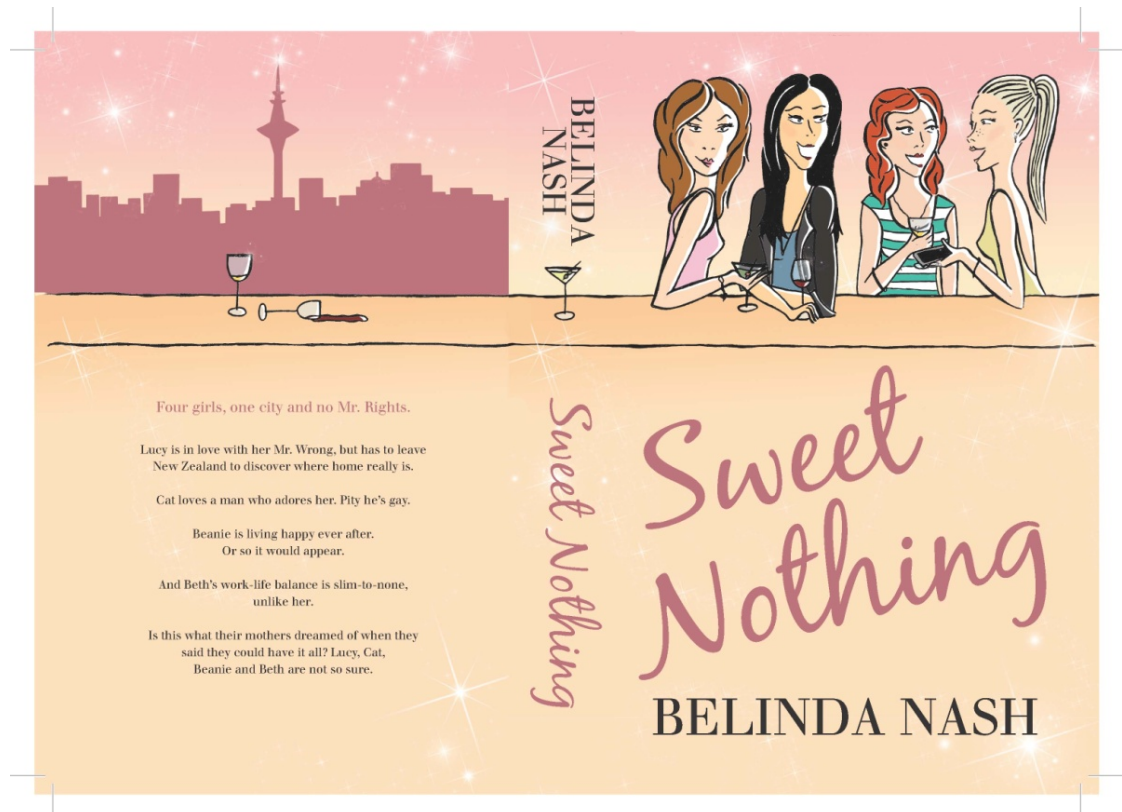


Figure 9. *Sweet nothing* cover design by Auckland University of Technology Bachelor of Design 3rd year student Philippa Johnston. This one I chose for my novel cover for examination.

Conclusion: pleasure of the text

"Rabbit's clever," said Pooh thoughtfully.
 "Yes," said Piglet, "Rabbit's clever."
 "And he has Brain."
 "Yes," said Piglet, "Rabbit has Brain."
 There was a long silence.
 "I suppose," said Pooh, "that that's why he never understands
 anything."

A.A. Milne, 1928

Novelty of an academic everyday

Is *Sweet nothing* an academic novel, a novel written within academia, neither or both? Or is my life an extended, assumed yet hidden, denouement to *Sweet nothing* (McWatters, 2011, p. 45)? Or is it an experiment to be "read as a cultural practice" (Balducci, 2011, p. 27)? It is a question that confounds examiners, say scholars Carey, Webb and Brien: how can academic examiners "engage with work that might not precisely match their

expectations of how a thesis should look, as well as requiring a range of assessment competencies” (Carey, Webb and Brien, 2008, p. 4)?

Sociologists have churned the debate around the validity of creative writing as research. Creative writing scholars Graeme Harper and Jeri Kroll discuss the merits of the intersection between practice, research into practice and the critical knowledge connected with it,” saying: “Creative writing is a practice-led activity (with) critical understanding drawn from investigating that practice” (Harper & Kroll, 2007). Oxford University Professor Geoffrey Walford is less agreeable, quipping: “if people want to write fiction they have every right to do so, but not every right to call it research.” But if “good research has an impact upon us; it changes us,” as is suggested by Jonathan Wyatt, then creative writing indeed performs the role of transformation (Wyatt, 2007, pp. 318-331).

In the field of research, then, does creative writing need to be autoethnological, something Carolyn Ellis believes should be experienced (Ellis & Bochner, 1996). Does it, in fact, add meaning to the world, as she suggests? And does it add value to the lives of others as Eva Georgii-Hemming claims, where a life gathers its momentum of meaning through hearing about another’s human experience. The process of writing, in this instance, enables the writer to discover who they are through narrating and hermeneutics provides a context for the human experience: “when we read or hear people’s stories, our imagination is stimulated and we exercise our capacity to grasp what it is like to be another human being,” Georgii-Hemming writes, adding: “within hermeneutic science the interest is not usually in how the world *is* but how the world *is conceived*” (Georgii-Hemming, 2007, pp. 13-28).

This is practice-led research amalgamated to the practice of my everyday. How do I get to high levels of discovery, autoethnicity and originality in my work, and do I aspire to write elegant fiction? Plainly, no. Surely then, through the research of the practice of my everyday, the output will add to the usefulness of creative writing as a field of research? Without an exegesis, a creative writing scholar cannot fully be developed, and critique and articulate the process that led to the completed work (Bourke and Nielsen, 2004, p. 12). So was I, *am I* – because I am writing these words you are now reading – constrained by writing a creative novel while undertaking the research of my everyday whilst also scrutinising the product and process? There’s an ‘academy’ to please, after all.

Nigel Krauth calls the “academic novel” the “new beast” and says it has entered into a battle of examinability not publishability, where: “...under the glare of spotlights where process and product, technique and innovation, tricks and slick moves are anatomised, highlighted, teased apart, zoomed in upon, like some sort of pornographic display or anatomical teaching model. (Krauth, 2008, p. 10-20). Is it ever possible that such product and process can then withstand both academic and publisher scrutiny once squeezed through the machine? Bourke and Nielsen say the academic novel is, in fact, unpublishable (Bourke et al., 2004, p. 2). Perhaps they are right.

Davis-Kahl suggests that: “Academia’s reception of chick lit as a legitimate area of study has been lukewarm, at least in the area of research and scholarship,” reasoning that the

term chick-lit is regarded as too distasteful to merit discourse. This, she says, suggests scholars are falling into “low culture” assumption (Davis-Kahl, 2007, p. 19). My own search for popular chick lit novels yielded only a handful of the genre’s key titles. It is startling, too, to find that the people most adamantly negative towards the genre and working to repel scholarship in the area comprise “mostly female” professors in women’s literature and women’s studies⁷⁰ (Davis-Kahl, 2007, p. 20; sourced from Ferriss and Young, 2006, p. 1). And yet, this study of the nothing immersed in the everyday *does* reveal something of the nothing that has passed. It *does* capture the mundanity, the banal, the unspectacular and the unspecial. And what it captures overrides what was missed, because in its capturing, me – as writer – ensured that it was not lost.

The some of the nothing was *not* lost.

So this short journey of musings in the everyday is over. The banality of the nothing, ends, here, now, today. No more will the emptiness be filled with the nothing. Which prompts the question: have we traveled the course together, scaling walls, negotiating borders and scurrying through tunnels, and ended with something? Or have we been simply left holding *Sweet nothing*?

⁷⁰ Given it is hard to believe men will take up the research conundrum of chick lit, can we then assume, if female scholars themselves lock the gate to research in an area they simply do not think upholds the true values of women, that this slice of an *entire* female population’s written perspective be omitted from rigorous study and therefore wiped from future academic history? Why would a worthy academy *not* extend its hand to researchers in this field? “Shouldn’t feminist criticism be open to the latest crop of women’s popular fiction?” and “Why are their professors berating them for their choices when having a choice is what feminism is all about?” (Ferriss & Young, 2006, p. 1, 2). Moreover: “who says a surgeon can’t wear pink nail varnish and kitten heels anyway?” (Ferriss and Young, 2006, p. 1, 2).

‘Something more than nothing, I s’pose. But when all said and done, it’s footnotes to a feeling really.’

‘Huh?’ Beth raised an eyebrow.

‘Oh, something Armistead Maupin –the guy who wrote *Tales of the City*– said once about sweet nothings, that they really are just that: nothing, nothing at all. He said they were like footnotes to a feeling. That they were pretty much so small and insignificant as to be pointless. I sometimes feel those four words summarise my life: “footnotes to a feeling”.’ Lucy took a deep breath and let it out slowly. ‘A whole lot of sweet nothings that add up to nothing. Sweet nothing.’

Belinda Nash, 2011

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Appendices

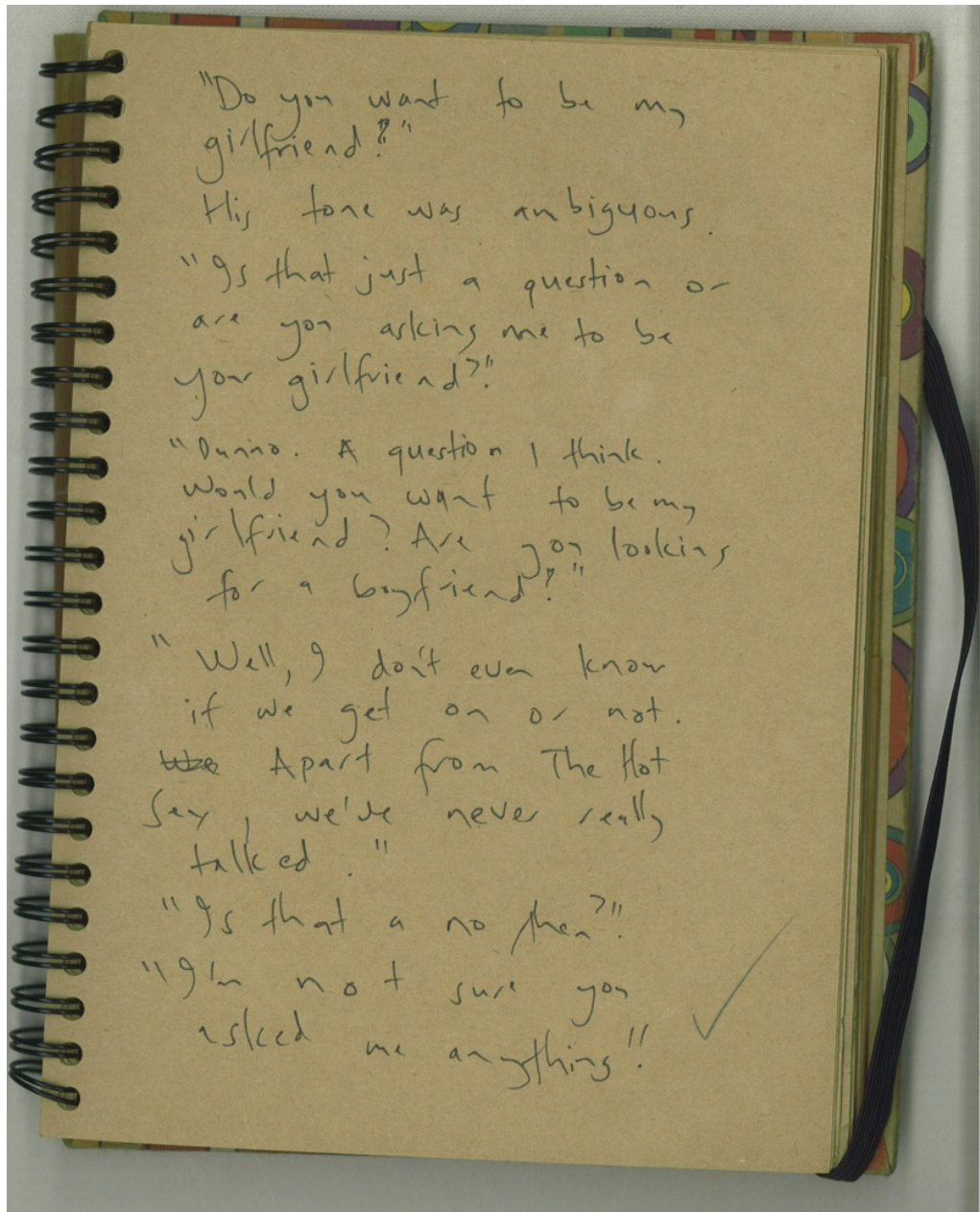


Figure 10. A real life (bizarre) conversation became an exchange between Lucy and Will (Nash, 2011, pp. 14-15).

"when you go
 she'll tell me
 all ab. her
 bowel movts. (A)
 "it's important" (B)

"if you don't shit
 you die" (C)

"You've got
~~the~~ the aura
 of a much
 smaller man"

boy only
 -birth
 "looks like they
 pulled her out
 by her nose"

Figure 11. This scribbled note become a conversation between Cat, Beth and Lucy; and Lucy's earlier tirade against Will (Nash, 2011, 223-224; 190)