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"Chicks with Bics": Examining Contemporary Check Lit and Embedded Feminist Cultural Commentary

Jennifer Mary Woolston
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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“CHICKS WITH BICS”:
EXAMINING CONTEMPORARY CHICK LIT AND EMBEDDED
FEMINIST CULTURAL COMMENTARY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies and Research

in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Jennifer Mary Woolston
Indiana University of Pennsylvania

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Indiana University of Pennsylvania
School of Graduate Studies and Research
Department of English

We hereby approve the dissertation of

Jennifer Mary Woolston

Candidate for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Thomas J. Slater, Ph.D.
Professor of English, Chair

Chauna Craig, Ph.D.
Professor of English

Lingyan Yang, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English

ACCEPTED

Timothy P. Mack, Ph.D.
Dean
School of Graduate Studies and Research

Title: “Chicks with Bics”: Examining Contemporary Chick Lit and Embedded Feminist Cultural Commentary

Author: Jennifer Mary Woolston

Dissertation Chair: Dr. Thomas J. Slater

Dissertation Committee Members: Dr. Chauna Craig
Dr. Lingyan Yang

Chick Lit, a popular subgenre of women’s fiction, has been marketed to readers for over ten years despite the fact that academic critiques are limited in both number and scope. This study defines Chick Lit, explores its marketing history, examines existing literary criticism surrounding the texts, and investigates embedded feminist cultural commentary present within the pages of selected popular women’s literature. Each chapter analyzes distinct feminist issues and moves them from their textual margins to the center of the critical narrative. Chick Lit is examined via its layered representations of shopping, body image issues that focus on the plus-size heroine, difficulties present with negotiating an Asian American gendered identity, and through its representation of the protagonist as a harassed embodiment of the male gaze.

Taken as a whole, these separate chapters converge to provide an analysis of the ways in which women’s real-life issues and concerns are mirrored in popular Chick Lit texts. Works from American as well as British authors such as Candice Bushnell, Sophie Kinsella, Jane Green, Andrea Rains Waggener, Kim Wong Keltner, and Amanda Brown are explored at length through various theoretical lenses. The cultural significance of Chick Lit is contextualized through the theories of Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Naomi Wolf, Susie Orbach, Audre Lorde, Karin Aguilar-San Juan, Ronald Takaki, and Laura Mulvey.

Moving beyond the predictable response to Chick Lit as “mindless entertainment,” I conclude that not only are such texts a space for dialogue concerning feminist issues, but they are

also a powerful answer to the provocative question “Is a pen a metaphorical penis?” raised by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their influential study *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. I believe Chick Lit becomes a forum for authors to embed third-wave feminist issues into humorous, entertaining stories, thus asking readers to consider larger social issues while they enjoy this literary category. Rather than spurn the texts, both male and female readers are asked to think critically about Chick Lit while scholars are encouraged to continue vital discussions concerning the important social issues present in the fiction.