IN SEARCH OF FEMINIST ROMANCE IN AUSTRALIAN ‘CHICK LIT’

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This thesis is presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy of Murdoch University 2015
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary education institution.

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Lauren Kate O’Mahony
“This is not a straightforward story of romance. Which is not to say there are no happy ever afters, but that you ought not to open this book knowing that the Prince and Princess disappear hand in hand into a glorious sunset.

In many ways, the story I’m about to tell you is not about romance at all. If anything, it is a story of real life. Of how each of us may think we know exactly what we need to make us happy, what will be good for us, what will ensure we have our happy ending, but that life rarely works out in the way we expect, and that our happy ending may have all sorts of unexpected twists and turns, be shaped in all sorts of unexpected ways.

And our own personal paradise may be someone else’s version of hell. Or indeed vice versa...”

The first paragraphs of Jane Green’s Life Swap
Sections of this thesis have been peer-reviewed. Various sections or ideas have been accepted for publication:

**Journal Articles**


**Conference Papers**


Abstract

In November 2005, Australian author Melanie La’Brooy published a defence of ‘chick lit’ in the Review section of Australia’s national newspaper, The Weekend Australian. La’Brooy responded to criticisms of the genre, particularly those made by prize winning authors Beryl Bainbridge and Doris Lessing. Bainbridge had asserted that people were wasting their time reading ‘chick lit’ while Lessing dismissed the genre’s authors for writing “instantly forgettable books.” La’Brooy referred to other critics who decried the genre for being antifeminist because the search for and acquisition of romantic love was a central concern of the plot. In defending ‘chick lit’, La’Brooy asked, “Does romantic idealism immediately polarise a desire for political, professional and social equality?” Her question highlights two concerns raised by contemporary literary and feminist scholars including Pamela Regis, Stephanie Harzewski and Imelda Whelehan. The first concern focuses on the compatibility of romance novels in particular and the romance plot more widely with ‘feminism.’ Historically, feminists such as Germaine Greer have criticised romance novels for their form (including their plot, characters and endings) and their supposed affect on readers. Yet, as early as 1984, Margaret Ann Jensen’s Love’s Sweet Return: The Harlequin Story showed that mass market paperback romances had changed in response to feminist criticism. Likewise, Janice Radway’s Reading the Romance (1984) argued that romance novels have a complex affect on their readers. The second concern of feminist and literary scholars in relation to romance novels is how best to define and apply ‘feminism’ as a concept and set of theories when studying contemporary literature. This concern has been complicated by the ‘posting’ of feminism, where feminism’s meaning is now determined largely by whom is speaking and the context of the discussion. Many definitions of feminism abound including the different perspectives mapped in Rosemarie Tong’s Feminist Thought (1989) to the more recent theories of feminism as first wave, second wave, third wave and/or postfeminism. Thus, these recent theoretical developments have led to ‘feminism’ becoming an ‘overloaded’ concept and a highly contested theoretical terrain. This complexity is problematic for literary analysis.

The relatively new genre of ‘chick lit’, female authored novels with contemporary settings and eighteen to forty-five year old heroines, enables an exploration of these concerns about romance and feminism. Most chick novels employ a traditional romance plot to represent a heroine living in the 1990s or 2000s. The use of contemporary settings means that ‘chick lit’ automatically represents Western culture radically transformed by the modern women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. The most interesting avenue for inquiry raised by ‘chick lit’ is the inherent tension between the genre’s representation of a post ‘second wave feminist’ setting and the romantic narrative structure.

This thesis explores the relationship between romance and feminism in a selection of Australian chick lit novels. I undertake a traditional literary analysis focusing on the plot, character and themes of the novels. Five permutations of Australian chick lit are examined: urban romances, cosmopolitan Koori lit (Indigenous chick lit), comical suburban novels, the rural romance and the red dirt romance. My reading of Australian chick lit draws upon Pamela Regis’s A Natural History of the Romance Novel (2003) to examine how the novels utilise romantic narrative elements, construct romantic characters and represent themes of love and romance. I do this to determine the degree
to which chick novels adhere to the essential elements of romance and explore how companionate love is portrayed. My feminist reading of Australian chick lit also examines the plot, characterisation and themes of the selected novels. I assess whether chick lit deviates from the romance plot and whether such deviations can be deemed feminist. I apply feminist theory to explore the representation of the protagonists in chick lit, particularly the genre's heroines. I focus on the gendered identities of each heroine and consider whether they exhibit postfeminist and/or third wave feminist characteristics. I then apply contemporary feminist theory to critically analyse the central themes raised by each subgenre of Australian chick lit including consumption, body image, gender and racial discrimination, social relationships, success and 'having it all' and gender inequality in the workplace. I argue that my selected novels use their narrative structure to critically engage with these themes while seeking out resolutions for the main characters.

My analysis of Australian chick lit reveals that some novels can be read as strong examples of feminist romance. However, this depends on the text, who is reading it and the characteristics of feminism and romance being applied. I argue that the subgenres of Australian chick lit examined here continue the tradition of prose romance while engaging with, and sometimes championing, the quest for women's empowerment.
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Lastly, I wish to dedicate this thesis to two amazing, inspiring women: my grandmother Peggy Kathleen Hall Clark (1917-2005) and my dear friend Lisa Jones (1973-2004). Both women showed me the importance of strength in mind and body as well as the power of 'care'—care for oneself, others and the environment.
Chapter One: In Search of Feminist Romance Fiction

Feminist genre fiction is not the result of an ‘instance of postmodernist thought’ but is an important phase in the development of a feminist consciousness and of the complex feminist subject.

Anne Cranny-Francis

Why Search for ‘Feminist Romance’?

Since the global success of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* (1996), popular novels about twenty and thirty-something women in contemporary settings, dubbed ‘chick lit’, have been variously derided in terms of their literary worth, their representation of romance and their relationship to feminism. Reviewers, academics and literary prize judges alike have described chick lit as poorly written pap for the masses that, at best, serves only to entertain readers. Furthermore, the genre’s faithfulness to romance is seen as another flaw deserving of untempered ridicule. Critics have emphasised romance’s presence in chick lit as a central theme and tirelessly repeated narrative structure. The implication is simple: chick lit’s emphasis on romance clearly aligns it with the conservative romances of the 1980s, a fictional form that the women’s movement criticised voraciously as a tool of patriarchy. For critics, chick lit’s near universal retention of the romance plot reflects its lack of progressive gender politics and what Rosalind Gill (2007) terms the “postfeminist sensibility”. A key feature of this sensibility is a failure to engage seriously with feminist ideas, appearing to “take feminism for granted” or “repudiate” it

altogether. Therefore, many critics resoundingly view chick lit as a politically regressive genre.

The name ‘chick lit’ is automatically problematic. The word ‘chick’ offends some who interpret its association with youthfulness, animals, food and consumption as belittling to women. In their Introduction to Chick Flicks (the follow-up to their edited anthology on chick lit), Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, comment on the employment of the word ‘chick’ to describe film and fiction texts for women. They note that during the 1970s women’s liberation movement, “[r]ejecting [...] terms [such as chick] was a declaration of equality and independence”. They added:

To the feminists harking from this period—those now known as second-wave feminists—the contemporary revival of these terms signals a return to the infantilizing of women and the failure of their efforts to create a society based on gender equality.

However, Ferriss and Young note a generational difference in the reception of chick texts where young women use ‘chick’ positively “to convey solidarity and signal empowerment”. It appears that women from younger generations are less fazed by the term’s negative connotations, seeking to reappropriate and reclaim it.

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4 See Whelehan (2005), Madison and Storr (2002), McRobbie (2004b) and Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) for discussions of chick lit’s engagement with feminism.

5 The Oxford English Dictionary (1989) describes the association of ‘chick’ with chickens, as in a baby chicken or a “young bird” (105). The word originally described a young bird, then gradually, circa 1320, applied to a human offspring, sometimes as a term of endearment (OED, 105). In the 1920s, ‘chick’ became an American slang word for “a girl, a young woman” (OED, 105) as used in jive, for example “in Harlem”, then later in jitterbug (Flexner and Wentworth 1975, 98). In the 1930s, ‘chick’ applied to a girl or young woman, “especially if attractive, pert and lively; a hip girl or woman” (Flexner and Wentworth 1975, 98). The use of ‘chick’ as a noun shifted to usage as an adjective in the 1960s in the United States to connote “of interest to girls or women e.g. a chick movie” (Green 1998, 223). The Non-Sexist Word Finder: A Dictionary of Gender Free Usage, authored by Rosalie Maggio defines ‘chick’ as “referring to a woman”, however states that its usage should be “avoided” (Maggio 1988, 22).


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 This use of ‘chick’ by younger women recalls Mary Daly’s argument in Pure Lust (1984) that women should rearticulate nouns, such as ‘hag’ and ‘bitch’, which have been used within patriarchal society in demeaning and disempowering ways. For Daly, women should try to use such terms in ways that uncover their liberatory potential. However, Angela McRobbie (2009) provides a counterargument to the supposed reclamation of words such as “girl” and “nigga” as
Critics’ concern about the term ‘chick lit’ foreshadows deeper arguments about literary worth that circulate around the genre. In 1999, a furore erupted in relation to the Orange Prize for fiction, drawing attention to Helen Fielding’s novel Bridget Jones’s Diary in particular. During award proceedings, Lola Young, chairperson for the Orange Prize judging panel, remarked on the state of British women’s fiction.\(^\text{10}\) Disappointed by the small number of British authors vying for the prize (the shortlist comprised four writers from North America and one from Britain), media articles quoted Young as saying that British fiction by women tended towards the “piddling” and “parochial”.\(^\text{11}\) According to The Times’ Chris Dignan, Young stated that:

There is a cult of big advances going to photogenic young women to write about their own lives and who they had to dinner, as if that is all there is to life. These people may not be writing a novel because they have got something to say but because it is fashionable to write these sorts of novels. I would encourage them to think bigger.\(^\text{12}\)

The media quickly inferred that Young was alluding to the success of numerous chick novels\(^\text{13}\) including Bridget Jones’s Diary and broad media coverage of lucrative contracts signed by authors including Marian Keyes, Jane Green and Freya North.\(^\text{14}\) Young’s comments ignited arguments about women’s fiction generally and chick lit specifically.

\(^\text{10}\) Established in 1996 with the support of the Arts Council England, the Orange Prize for Fiction (now known as the Bailey’s Women’s Prize for Fiction) honours fiction including novels, short story collections and novellas written by women of any age or nationality and published in book form in the United Kingdom from year to year. See "Orange Prize for Fiction," www.orangeprize.co.uk/oanw05/index.html.

\(^\text{11}\) See Dignan (2009), Gibbons (2009), Blacker (2009) and Showalter (2009).

\(^\text{12}\) Dignan, "British Women Authors Urged to 'Think Bigger'.”

\(^\text{13}\) Young later claimed that the media had misquoted her. In an article by Jennie Bristow in August 1999, Young was “bemused” as to why the story made headlines, suggesting that it “made really good copy.”

\(^\text{14}\) In 1995, Marian Keyes published her first novel Watermelon with the Irish publisher Poolbeg. Watermelon went into publication in the United Kingdom in the same year and Keyes signed a three-book contract. British publishers were ‘excited’ by the sales of Keyes’s first two novels in Ireland, which later led to publishing deals reportedly worth more than 600,000 Euros. According to Jan Battles article in the United Kingdom’s Sunday Times in 1996: “Watermelon, for which Keyes received no advance, came out in August 1995 and sold 35,000 copies in Ireland. It was one of six books selected by WH Smith as part of its 1996 Fresh Talent promotion and sold 65,000 in Britain [...] Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married [...] spent nine weeks in the Irish bestseller list, and has sold 50,000 copies.” According to Freya North’s website (www.freyanorth.co.uk), she approached a literary agent in 1996, which led to five publishers fighting for the rights to her books. She received a three-book deal including her first novel Pip and a six-figure sum. Jane
In response, authors, critics and academics, sprung to the defence of women’s fiction. For example, The Guardian quoted Beryl Bainbridge as saying that, “It’s just nonsense to say our books have got stuffy, domestic or parochial. Who is this woman? She is professor of cultural studies. Well, that damn her...It is our piddling critics and judges which may be the problem”. Although Bainbridge defended women’s fiction, she criticised chick lit (defined in the article as “women’s genre fiction about the search for Mr Right”) as being “a froth sort of thing”. She reportedly stated, “As people spend so little time reading, it is a pity they perhaps can’t read something a bit deeper, a bit more profound, something with a bit of bite to it”. The same article drew others into the discussion including Doris Lessing. Concurring with Bainbridge, Lessing referred to chick lit as “instantly forgettable books”. Lessing referred to the verisimilitude of the novels, arguing that, “It would be better, perhaps, if they wrote books about their lives as they really saw them and not these helpless girls, drunken, worrying about their weight and so on”. Patricia Duncker, a novelist and academic, described her own impression of chick lit, “Mostly it is not terribly well written but worse than that it pushes the idea that relationships with men are the most important thing [and] that what you should be aiming for is to find ‘the one’”. The criticism focussed on chick lit’s relationship to reality, quality of writing and representation of women.

While these authors defended women’s fiction but criticised chick lit, others defended the genre. Writer Jeanette Winterson stated her affection for chick lit as entertainment: “Bridget Jones’s Diary? Love it, just great, and I feel completely easy with all that”. Novelist Pat Barker argued that novels such as Bridget Jones’s Diary performed an important function for readers: “Young people,
because they have an insecure sense of their own identity, love reading books that confirm that identity”. Barker suggested that reading popular women’s novels was a phase that many readers went through. Feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter commented on *Bridget Jones’s Diary* specifically, implying that the tall poppy syndrome had tarnished the book’s reception. She remarked that, “Helen Fielding’s success has overshadowed the excellence of her writing”. Fielding herself questioned people “getting their knickers in a twist about Bridget Jones being a disgrace to feminism” stating “it is good to represent women as they actually are in the age in which you are living”. The novel cannot be rejected simply as a “disgrace to feminism”; rather, it offers a complex engagement with contradictory ideas about feminism and represents one woman’s experience of contemporary life.

Arguments over chick lit’s worth, such as the 1999’s Orange Prize controversy, were not replicated in Australia in relation to local chick novels, possibly because Australian chick lit was just emerging. That is not to say that Australian chick authors were not thinking about the criticisms levelled at the wider genre. In 2005, Melanie La’Brooy, by then an author of two Australian chick novels *Love Struck* and *The Wish List*, published a defence of chick lit in nationally syndicated newspaper *The Australian*. La’Brooy argued that chick lit attracted unnecessary and nasty criticism, especially from newspaper book reviewers. Her article aimed to address three main criticisms. The first was that young women wrote ‘chick’ type novels just to be published, which she concluded was an attempt to link what is obviously a ‘feminine’ genre with notions of low worth and an anti-feminist impulse. She argued that such a suggestion was sexist and that critics never treated other popular genres so dismally. The second ‘chick lit crime’ La’Brooy defended was that the novels were inherently “vain” in their treatment of romantic relationships and female identity. La’Brooy found it almost laughable that heroines were derided because

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22 Ibid.
23 Showalter, "Written Off."
25 In 2000, three Australian chick lit novels were published: Maggie Alderson’s *Pants on Fire*, *Me Myself and I* by Pip Karmel and *Allmenarebastards.com* by Allison Rushby.
they pondered their romantic lives. She reflected on the implications of a romance novel that did not deal with such issues, asking:

[I]s the articulation of a desire for a loving relationship, within the pages of a novel, necessarily antithetical to the aims of feminism? Does romantic idealism immediately polarise a desire for political, professional and social equality?²⁶

She asserted that some critics deemed chick lit antifeminist because the heroines privileged their romantic lives and destinies. She pointed out that, “the suspicions arise that what is being promoted is the idea that no matter how professionally successful or happy in her platonic and familial relationships, a women is unfulfilled without a man”.²⁷ Countering this suggestion, she emphasised that the “the romantic ideal” was vital to the genre because many women and readers aspired to being part of a loving couple. La’Brooy noted that critics did not address this aspiration; instead, she argued that they criticised the genre because of its form. The third so called ‘chick lit crime’ centred on the genre’s main narrative tools, romance and humour, and the view that they were antifeminist. La’Brooy asked why romance in women’s fiction had to be tragic and why protagonists had to take themselves too seriously. Indeed, she noted:

[...W]hile the goals of feminism and literature are serious, the aims of entertainment and chick lit do not preclude women’s issues being treated with wit and insight. Perhaps chick lit’s greatest achievement is restoring humour to the contemporary love story.²⁸

La’Brooy’s article approaches the conflict between romance and feminism in chick lit from an author’s perspective. What is significant in her discussion is her rejection of the supposed incompatibility and mutually exclusive treatment of romance and feminism in the genre.

These debates about chick lit say much about perceptions of women’s literature, popular writing and romance. As Stephanie Harzewski, author of Chick Lit and Postfeminism (2011) has argued, criticisms of chick lit’s quality

²⁷ Ibid.
²⁸ Ibid.
relate directly to how the novel, alongside women’s writing more widely, has been perceived historically. For Harzewski, the criticism directed at chick lit reignites debates about the gendered nature of writing and publishing, subsequently signifying what she states is “another cycle of gendered antinovel discourse”. Harzewski’s reference to the “gendering” of writing alludes directly to Modernist demarcations between high and low culture, with high culture associated with an elite, educated and privileged readership versus “low” culture, of little worth and a mass audience. Caroline J. Smith argues that the debate about chick lit’s worth brought the genre “to the forefront of public consciousness”. However, as Smith asserts, drawing upon Jean Radford (author of The Progress of Romance), the debate was ultimately “reductive” because of the concern with “value”. For Smith, chick lit becomes an “easy target for the critics’ derision, relegated to both subordinated spaces—the popular and the female”. Smith appears unsurprised that criticisms directed towards chick lit resemble those directed at sentimental and romantic novels. In line with Smith and Harzewski’s arguments, I assert that many critics direct similar, if not the same, arguments towards chick lit that have been historically directed at women’s writing and romance. Attempts to graft historical arguments about women’s writing or romance onto chick lit miss the opportunity to provide a more complex and robust assessment of chick lit’s engagement with romance and, indeed, feminism.

Critics have been quick to equate chick lit with low culture, while differentiating it from Literature with a capital ‘L’. This assumption stems from simplified or stereotyped definitions of chick lit that subsequently make criticising the genre relatively easy. For example, in the Introduction to This is Not Chick Lit, Elizabeth Merrick offers the following definition:

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33 Ibid.
Chick lit is a genre, like the thriller, the sci-fi novel, or the fantasy epic. 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 step sister 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.34

Merrick complains that chick lit “obscures” and overshadows writing undertaken by talented women. Employing binary logic to compare chick lit with “Literature”, she remarks on the effects of novels in the genre:

Chick lit’s formula numbs our senses. Literature, by contrast, grants us access to countless new cultures, places, and inner lives. Where chick lit reduces the complexity of human experience, literature increases our awareness of other perspectives and paths. Literature employs carefully crafted language to expand our reality, instead of beating us over the head with clichés that promote a narrow worldview. Chick lit shuts down our consciousness. Literature expands our imaginations.35

Merrick claims that some writers included in her edited collection examine love, however do so “more expansively” than their chick lit counterparts. The exacting differentiation of stories found in This is Not Chick Lit from chick lit seems designed to tap directly into the chick lit market. If the stories in Merrick’s collection are so different to chick lit, then why not entitle the collection “Experimental Contemporary Women’s Writing”? The reason is simple: such a title would not attract readers. Rather, Merrick’s channelling of divisive logic reaffirms stereotypes about women’s fiction. Some readers will open Merrick’s book to defend chick lit; others will open it to see exactly what constitutes “not chick lit”. In This is Not Chick Lit, Merrick is guilty of what Pamela Regis, author of The Natural History of the Romance Novel, terms a “hasty generalization”: a statement that lacks persuasive evidence.36 This thesis responds to the critics’ chief complaints about chick lit, including those by Merrick. I argue that not all chick novels are about “white” girls; not all are set

35 Ibid., xi.
in the city and not all heroines “relentlessly pursue Money, a Makeover, and Mr Right”. While chick lit resoundingly reproduces the romance plot, as I demonstrate later through my application of Regis’s theory of the romance novel, not all chick novels deal with romance or finding love gratuitously or formulaically. Moreover, my examination of Australian chick lit demonstrates that the novels are similar to Merrick’s definition of Literature in that they “grant us access to countless new cultures, places, and inner lives”.

Imelda Whelehan and Stephanie Harzewski are forerunners in considering the representation of romance and feminism in chick lit. Whelehan in The Feminist Bestseller discusses a range of chick texts including Bridget Jones’s Diary and Sex and the City to explore chick lit’s relationship to feminist bestsellers, feminism and romance. Her analysis focuses on three subgenres of chick lit: singleton literature, urban sex and mummy lit. She argues that the term ‘feminist bestseller’ “comfortably” applies to novels discussed in three chapters of her book, however not the chapters that address chick lit. She implies that the term ‘feminist bestseller’ best suits books where the writer has “seen action in the Women’s Movement”37. Does this mean that feminist novels are only written by active feminists? Does this mean that feminist novels can only be written during an active women’s movement?38 Whelehan is reluctant to include chick lit as a form of feminist bestseller, admitting she “remain[s] in two minds” about the genre.39 She argues instead that chick novels are “in dialogue with feminism”.40 My findings support Whelehan’s point in that chick novels have postfeminist and feminist characters, values and themes thereby providing an opportunity for the author to explore ideas about women and feminism. Readers will then

38 While Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook has been heralded as a great work of feminist writing, Lessing herself claimed to not have intended it to be a feminist novel. In an obituary after her death on the 17th November 2013 (“A Literary Contrarian”), the obituary’s author claimed that “Lessing herself denied being a feminist and said she was not conscious of writing anything inflammatory when she produced The Golden Notebook.” As well, she “insisted in the Introduction for a 1993 reissue that The Golden Notebook was not a ‘trumpet for women’s liberation’”.
40 Ibid., 5.
engage with these from their socio-political position, experiencing satisfaction or dissatisfaction with the book, characters or plot.

Whelehan agrees with some criticisms of chick lit when she asserts that they are “souped up, sexed-up versions of the classic Mills & Boon romance”. She argues:

Chick lit provides a post-feminist narrative of heterosex and romance for those who feel that they’re too savvy to be duped by the most conventional romance narrative. It allows for the possibility of promiscuity, illicit sex, ordinariness, loss of dignity, and fallibility, along with all the aspirational features—whether it be clothing, interiors, or food.

She regards chick lit as celebrating romance “uneasily” while carrying some of the functions of the consciousness raising novel to “tell it like it is and to raise individual awareness of shared personal concerns through using observational humour and romantic situations”. However, she cautions that chick lit is “anxious” in its acknowledgement of the “failure of feminism” and its tendency to deploy romantic betrothals as a panacea for crises of the self. For Whelehan, chick lit asks some of the unanswered questions of Second Wave feminism, particularly those related to relationships, sexuality and romantic love. Compared to feminist bestsellers, Whelehan notes that chick lit omits blood (such as menstrual blood) and rage, thereby suggesting that any rage that chick heroines feel is masked by the novels’ apparent humour. For Whelehan, chick novels have a complex and contradictory relationship to romance and feminism.

Like Whelehan, Stephanie Harzewski examines romance and feminism in chick lit. Harzewski’s Chick Lit and Postfeminism examines chick lit as a type of ‘postfeminist’ novel. Drawing upon Diane Negra’s What a Girl Wants? Fantasising the Reclamation of the Self in Postfeminism (2009), Harzewski analyses the intersections between chick novels (such as Bridget Jones’s Diary

41 Ibid., 16.
42 Ibid., 186.
43 Ibid.
44 Ibid., 188-90.
45 Ibid., 205.
and *Sex and the City*) and femininity (particularly “late heterosexuality”), romance and the consumptive patterns of young women. She provides a detailed definition of chick lit, proposing that it is a strand of postfeminist fiction with aspects of postmodernism.\(^4^6\) She argues that chick lit reworks the romance, the novel of manners and the bildungsroman, subsequently offering “a lens through which to view gender relations in U.S. and British society since the late 1990s”.\(^4^7\) Although she argues that chick lit is a type of postfeminist fiction, she notes that it is not entirely ‘anti-feminist’. Rather, she proposes, it is “a selective, half-utopian amalgamation of earlier feminist tenets”.\(^4^8\) She aims to uncover a more detailed description of chick lit’s origin and the reasons for its success. Like Harzewski’s *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, I discuss romance and feminism in chick lit and consider chick lit’s commentary on contemporary gender relations. However, I focus on the narrative conventions of plot, characters and themes in Australian chick lit and most importantly the context in which these narratives occur.

In their analysis of twenty chick novels, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff (2006) ask whether the genre rewrites the romance and how the conventions and romantic formula intersect with feminism. Gill and Herdieckerhoff compare chick lit’s representation of five central themes (sexual behaviour, independence, working women, singleness, and the body and beauty norms) against that of ‘hard’ romance novels. They argue that chick lit heroines are different to romance heroines because they are “financially independent, working outside the home and sexually assertive”.\(^4^9\) Another difference they note is that thematically, chick lit differs from romance by introducing issues related to the body and beauty. They conclude that chick heroines resemble their romance forebears in three ways, firstly, needing to be “rescued” by a man; secondly, “regarding many other women as figures of mistrust and competition rather than sisterhood”; and, thirdly, in “defining themselves in

\(^{4^6}\) Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 11.
\(^{4^7}\) Ibid., 15.
\(^{4^8}\) Ibid., 181.
terms of their relationship to a man”.\(^{50}\) Gill and Herdieckerhoff use these characteristics to argue that the genre carries the postfeminist sensibility. This sensibility is evident in the ambivalence to feminism, the emphasis on “individual choice and empowerment” and the “sexual subjectification” of heroines. They conclude that chick lit is:

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\text{Indeed rewriting the romance, but not in ways that allow for complex analyses of power, subjectivity and desire, but rather in ways that suggest women’s salvation is to be found in the pleasures of a worked-on, worked-out body and the arms of a good man.}^{51}\]

Gill and Herdieckerhoff ultimately express their difficulty in deciding whether chick lit’s representation of femininity and heterosexual coupledom is progressive or regressive. I draw upon their discussion to analyse selected Australian novels in relation to romance and the postfeminist sensibility. My analysis differs from Gill and Herdieckerhoff in that they examine the postfeminist sensibility thematically, whereas I examine postfeminism through plot, characters and themes.

Jessica Lyn Van Slooten, Kyra Hunting and Stéphanie Genz defend chick texts by addressing the complex relationship between romance and feminism. Van Slooten (2006) examines the conflict between romance and feminism in the television show *Ally McBeal* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Drawing upon her own response to these texts, Van Slooten argues that both texts deal with the “crux of the conflict” for contemporary women: “developing a strong sense of self complete with a romantic relationship and continuing to desire a romantic relationship”.\(^{52}\) Van Slooten asserts that this conflict speaks to the contradictory messages women face including pursuing romantic relationships and career success alongside the limits of the body in terms of beauty, reproduction and age.\(^{53}\) Van Slooten identifies ways that *Ally McBeal* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary* directly engage with these conflicting and contradictory messages through dialogue between their characters. She regards the endings as directly related

\(^{50}\) Ibid.

\(^{51}\) Ibid.


\(^{53}\) Ibid., 47.
to the “feminist consciousness” of the texts. Endings where heroines “relinquish a key aspect of their independence” exemplify the choice between career success and love. However, for Van Slooten, neither text ends in marriage so that, “[w]hile both women desire marriage, it is not their ultimate goal, as they discover along the way”. Van Slooten attributes the focus on the search for love in these texts to being because “this quest proves most difficult”.

Genz (2010) and Hunting (2012) examine the conflicted representation of feminism in chick texts. Genz argues that chick texts, such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* are postfeminist and less about rejecting or decrying feminism and, similarly to Van Slooten, more about “[n]egotiating the conflicting demands of heterosexual romance and professional achievement, feminine embodiment and feminist agency”. For Genz, the singleton protagonist is contradictory and paradoxical rather than fixed or static as either feminine or feminist. Genz articulates an innovative understanding of postfeminism beyond anti-feminist rhetoric. The most useful aspect of her analysis is the emphasis on negotiation of identity and the rejection of either/or arguments about femininity and feminism. Likewise, Hunting’s (2012) analysis of “chick lit television”, including texts such as *Sex and the City*, resists applying fixed labels such as regressive or progressive, feminist or postfeminist. Instead, she advocates viewing texts as potentially simultaneous blends of feminism and postfeminism, the regressive and the progressive. For Hunting, the value of shows such as *Sex and the City* lies in their representation of womanhood(s) and women’s issues. Such shows, Hunting asserts, are “politically important” because of their “investment in multiplicity, dialogism, and intertextuality that invites ongoing discussion and debate about gender norms and performances”. Together, Van Slooten, Genz and Hunting reconsider the relationship between chick texts, feminism and romance, subsequently adding a new dimension to the debate about chick lit’s

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54 Ibid., 49.
55 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
value and problematising essentialist claims that chick lit is antifeminist or postfeminist.

This thesis is concerned with chick lit’s ‘value’, particularly whether the genre can be labelled as progressive or regressive. Gill and Herdieckerhoff’s argument that chick lit is romance and a carrier of the ‘postfeminist sensibility’ implies that chick lit’s faithfulness to romance is a weakness and its postfeminist sensibility means it takes feminism’s successes for granted without doing anything to progress the political or social goals towards women’s equality. While I appreciate Gill and Herdieckerhoff’s point and agree with them in relation to numerous chick lit texts, I follow Butler (1990), Dow (1996), Modleski (1998), Genz (2010) and Hunting (2012) to argue that popular culture texts, in this case Australian chick lit, are contrary and contradictory: chick lit is simultaneously progressive and regressive; prefeminist, feminist and postfeminist and they are romantic and feminist. At times chick lit is more romantic than feminist and vice versa. These two aspects, romantic and feminist, need not be antithetical. Indeed, terms such as ‘postfeminist’ and ‘progressive’ are labels that reflect various reading positions that scholars and readers alike occupy to understand, translate or critically analyse a text. Stuart Hall’s encoding and decoding model, Dick Hebdige’s ‘polysemy’ and Ann Brooks’s discussion of postfeminism have greatly influenced my approach. Both Hall and Hebdige assert that texts are open to various and multiple readings. I emphasise that different reading positions are just that: they are different and need not be hierarchical. I argue that the disagreement about chick lit’s literary value and fidelity to feminism stems from multiple and discordant readings of the same texts.

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60 The argument about chick lit’s value and whether or not it is “progressive” or “regressive”, particularly in relation to feminism, is a central concern of the related theory. I draw the notion of progressiveness and regressiveness from Tania Modleski’s Old Wives Tales (1998) where she states “[W]hat I have always maintained about popular culture [is] the importance of seeing both progressive and regressive elements in popular texts” (67).


This thesis addresses some of the gaps in research to date about chick lit’s relationship to romance and feminism. The first gap concerns the means of analysis. Most critical interrogations of chick lit, including Gill and Herdieckerhoff’s, employ standard textual analysis. Textual analysis only tells part of chick lit’s story because it allows the researcher to select examples from a text or texts to support a viewpoint or argument. While this method is common to much feminist media scholarship, it is not without shortcomings. Decontextualising examples from a wider narrative and disregarding the form, subsequently isolates those examples away from their context. This is inherently problematic because examples, when dislocated from a wider narrative, become hermetically sealed from any change or development that occurs through the ebb and flow of that same narrative. While it is impossible to discuss every detail of a text, I suggest the kind of text analysed and that text’s structural qualities (especially plot, character and theme) should be considered jointly. I thus undertake a three-pronged traditional literary analysis by considering feminism and romance in relation to the plot, character and themes that progress the story from beginning to end. I use this approach purposefully to identify harmony and disharmony at different levels of a text. A novel may have a romance plot but have a heroine who rejects love and romance. Alternatively, a novel may have a heroine who vocalises her rejection of feminism even though the plot demonstrates an engagement with feminist issues. In part, my focus on plot, character and theme is a search for contradiction. It is also a response to my own curiosity about what it means when a text has various registers of feminism and romance (sometimes contradictory) and the relationship between those registers.

Much previous research on chick lit focuses on English, Irish and North American novels; I expand upon previous research in the field by analysing Australian chick novels. Emma Anderson has undertaken research on Australian chick lit in her creative writing Master’s thesis (2006). However, her research differs from mine in three ways. Firstly, her research centres on the representation of female sexuality in the novels whereas I take a wider thematic focus. Secondly, Anderson discusses three Australian novels all set in Sydney.
(Melanie LaBrooy's *Love Struck*, Yasmin Boland's *All the Rage* and Maggie Alderson's *Pants on Fire*). Again, my focus is broader because I examine five sub-genres of Australian chick lit; three of those sub-genres are set beyond the city in the suburbs, the ‘rural’ and red dirt Australia. Thirdly, a large part of Anderson’s thesis is devoted to her creative writing component, the story “Reading Anaïs Nin on the Train”. Anderson’s thesis is a valuable contribution to the discussion of chick lit, particularly the sexual lives of its heroines.

This thesis explores the relationship between romance and feminism in Australian chick lit with a focus on narrative characteristics. I have selected novels that engage directly or indirectly with gender inequality and gender construction. Although these novels were not published during the peak of the women’s movement in the 1960s and 1970s and even if most do not mention the word ‘feminism’ or have authors who publicly label themselves ‘feminists’, analysis of their structural and narrative conventions reveal a relationship between romance and feminism. Writers need not have experienced the peak of a women’s movement to write fiction concerned with gender inequality or women’s rights. Novels discussed in this thesis see characters grapple with the legacy of the women’s movement, including its unfinished business, thus suggesting they exemplify Gayle Greene’s definition of feminist fiction:

> Feminist fiction is not the same as ‘women’s fiction’ or fiction by women: not all women writers are ‘women’s writers,’ and not all women’s writers are feminist writers, since to write about ‘women’s issues’ is not necessarily to address them from a feminist perspective. Nor are feminist writers necessarily so all the time [...] nor do they always identify themselves as feminists. Yet, whatever a writer’s relation to the women’s movement, we may term a novel ‘feminist’ for its analysis of gender as socially constructed and its sense that what has been constructed may be reconstructed—for its understanding that change is possible and that narrative can play a part in it.\(^{64}\)

Literary texts, even popular ones, published outside the peak of a women’s movement can consciousness raise about feminist issues and challenge

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\(^{63}\) Emma Anderson, “Representations of Female Sexuality in Australian Chick-Lit Texts and Reading Anaïs Nin on the Train” (Master of Arts by Research (Creative Writing), University of New South Wales, 2006).

stereotypical or limiting constructions of gender. This thesis engages with arguments by Whelehan, Harzewski, Ryan, Genz and Hunting about the relationship between chick lit and feminism as complex and contradictory to analyse Australian chick lit novels.65

The ‘Feminist Romance’

This thesis borrows Anne Cranny-Francis’s phrase ‘feminist romance’ to explore the inherent tensions and contradictions between romance and feminism in Australian chick lit. The term ‘feminist romance’ at first glance appears contentious, uniting what for many critics are two antithetical notions. This thesis deploys the term ‘feminist romance’ to ask questions about what a feminist romance novel is and what implications the term has for relevant theory. In Feminist Fiction (1990) Cranny-Francis considers the feminist revision of five kinds of genre fiction, including romance.66 She argues that genre fiction is revered for its “large” and “diverse” readership and ability to reach markets that it may not ordinarily have access to.67 Feminist genre fiction capitalises on this large readership to engage with issues including gender inequality and the way sexism is encoded directly into the structure of genre texts. Cranny-Francis thus defines feminist genre fiction as:

[T]he feminist appropriation of the generic ‘popular’ literary forms [...]
This is genre fiction written from a self-consciously feminist perspective, consciously encoding an ideology which is in direct opposition to the dominant gender ideology of Western society, patriarchal ideology.68

As Cranny-Francis cautions, feminist genre fiction does not simply insert female heroes into “masculinist generic fiction with female heroes telling stories of


66 The five kinds of genre fiction Cranny-Francis examines are Science Fiction, Fantasy, Utopias, Detective Fiction and Romance.


68 Ibid., 1.
oppression”. Rather, feminist genre fiction uses events, characters, conventions and narrative structure to work against patriarchy’s dominant ideology. Feminist appropriation of genre fiction has the advantage of introducing readers to feminist ideas that they may not have otherwise been familiar with. Additionally, this fiction, with its large readership, can be utilised by feminist writers as “a powerful tool for their own propagandist purposes”. Such fiction has the potential to increase awareness of feminist issues and encourage social change through its reading positions.

Drawing upon Louis Althusser, Cranny-Francis connects reading positions to subject positions. A feminist text is then, “one in which the reading position constructed by the text—the position from which the text is coherent and meaningful—corresponds with [the feminist subject constructed by feminist discourse]”. There is no one essential “feminist text”, “feminist reading position” or “feminist subject”; rather, as I argue in Chapter Three, contemporary feminism’s “overloaded” status means that multiple feminisms jostle for dominance in single texts or genres and readers will occupy one or more of a range of feminist reading positions. Cranny-Francis’s study examines how feminist scholars have rewritten and re-understood genre fiction. She argues that romance texts have the power to critique sexism and make it visible by providing reading positions aligned with feminist thinking.

In Feminist Fiction Cranny-Francis devotes a chapter (“Feminist Romance”) to feminist revisions of romance novels. Her discussion traces a brief history of romantic fiction including Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights and Margaret Atwood’s Lady Oracle. Cranny-Francis argues that genres such as detective fiction and science fiction are more easily rewritten from a feminist perspective than romance; romance, she concludes, is one of the hardest genres to rewrite from a feminist perspective. The main

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69 Ibid., 9.  
70 Ibid., 3.  
71 Ibid., 5.  
72 Ibid., 25.  
73 Ibid.  
74 Ibid., 178.
difficulty of rewriting romance from a feminist perspective is that the genre traditionally centralises love, relationships and gender construction within a patriarchal context.75 Feminist critics in particular, as I describe in Chapter Two, have historically derided the romance novel’s reproduction of unequal relationships between men and women.76 Cranny-Francis partly attributes the emphasis on unequal relationships in romances to the characterisation of protagonists. The men in romance, Cranny-Francis finds, are “heterosexual”, wealthy, older, white and “middle-or upper-class”.77 The heroines are “younger, less experienced, less established, less wealthy, and often from a poorer and less socially elevated background”.78 One of the driving forces of the romance for Cranny-Francis is therefore the heroine’s need to marry-up to secure her financial future.79 According to Cranny-Francis, romance, one of “the foremost propaganda tools of bourgeois ideology” purposely disguises this economic imperative in emotional terms.80 Thus, feminist revision of romance is problematic because “in these novels, more than in any other genre text, a woman’s achievement of individuality is represented as a specific negotiation of the patriarchal gender discourse, that is, as femininity”.81 Cranny-Francis concludes that, “[s]ubverting this genre seems an almost impossible task, given the discourses it encodes and its fetishisation of an unequal gender relationship”.82 Because of this difficulty with unequal power and the way gender inequality is structured into the romance plot, Cranny-Francis observes (at least before the 1990 publication of her book) that feminist writers had decided largely against rewriting the romance. Instead, she notes that they have focused on examining why women read romance, particularly questioning what women “find valuable” in such novels.83

75 Ibid.
76 See my summary of Greer, Firestone and Mitchell’s discussions of romance, love and romantic novels in Chapter Two.
78 Ibid.
79 Ibid., 183.
80 Ibid., 188.
81 Ibid., 190.
82 Ibid., 204.
83 Ibid., 191.
This thesis argues that chick lit’s emergence as a contemporary genre calls for a reappraisal of Cranny-Francis’s theory of feminist romance. Indeed, such a reappraisal needs to consider whether new protagonists, innovative plots and socially aware themes, provide evidence that feminist romances are alive and well and residing in the chick lit genre. Moreover, one must consider how the terms ‘feminism’ and ‘romance’ are understood and how they can best be applied in what feminist theorists including Tania Modleski and Emma Anderson claim is a ‘postfeminist’ age.84

Cranny-Francis published her analysis of genre fiction in 1990, five years before the emergence of chick lit.85 One can only speculate what Cranny-Francis would have made of this new genre. Her thought-provoking chapter on feminist romance and wider study of feminist genre fiction provides numerous lines of inquiry for chick lit. I argue that Cranny-Francis’s term ‘feminist romance’ is useful and relevant to chick lit; however, what constitutes a feminist romance needs reorienting to account for developments in approaches to romance and feminism. I undertake this task in Chapters Two, Three and Four to identify examples of feminist romance in selected Australian novels. These novels make sexism visible and/or re-present the romance plot in ways that challenge inherent gender inequality. Such novels are open to one or more feminist reading positions. I acknowledge that there is no one essential feminist romance, rather, feminism and romance manifest variably in chick lit. In some cases there is complexity and contradiction including slippage between romance and feminism.

My focus on plot, character and theme allows me to examine how selected Australian chick novels create meaning through the techniques and characteristics that are unique to the form. As Patricia Leavy has asserted, “[in]

84 Tania Modleski, Feminism without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Postfeminist Age (New York: Routledge, 1991); Anderson, "Representations of Female Sexuality in Australian Chick-Lit Texts and Reading Anais Nin on the Train", 10.

85 The first chick lit novels were published in 1995 and 1996. Marian Keyes Watermelon was published in 1995 while Helen Fielding's Bridget Jones's Diary and Candace Bushnell's Sex and the City were both published in 1996. Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary is widely regarded as the novel that launched the genre, mainly because of the debates it ignited and its sheer popularity.
fiction [...] it is impossible to separate form and content—they are inextricably bound".86 The construction of plot, character and theme are evident in texts from their start to finish and subsequently determine how that text is read, including how they might be read as feminist and/or romance.87 I argue that a focussed analysis of plot, character and theme offers insight into the entanglement of feminism and romance. Novels can reinforce romance through their plot while simultaneously rejecting romantic ideals through the interaction between their characters. Likewise, novels can represent issues relevant to feminism in positive and progressive ways while heroines may use their words or actions to take feminism “into account” or “reject” it. Thus, this thesis emphasises that there are numerous ways that feminism and romance can be read in chick lit. These readings include varying degrees of harmony and disharmony in the representation of romance and feminism.

**Situating Australian Chick Lit Within a Globalising Genre**

This thesis employs the word ‘genre’ to apply to a group of texts with similar textual conventions. I follow Rita Felski who, in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), explains genre’s role in understanding the relationship between texts and society. Felski suggests that ‘genre’ “provid[es] the cultural matrix against which the significance of the individual text can be measured”.88 In other words, texts within a genre prompt readerly expectations of individual texts. In chick lit’s case, *Bridget Jones’s Diary* is widely regarded as the genre’s first novel, the “ur-text” or “mother”.89 This is the text by which others appear to be measured. Yet, numerous English and Irish writers, including Marian Keyes, Jane Green (*Straight Talking, Jemima J, Mr Maybe, Bookends, Spellbound, Lifeswap*), Freya North, Cathy Kelly (*Always and Forever*), Amy Jenkins (*Honeymoon, Funny Valentine*), Kathleen Tessaro (*Elegance*), Cecelia Ahern (*PS, I Love You*) and Allison Pearson, were starting their writing careers at the same time Fielding’s novel was published. Several of these authors, including Fielding, continue to

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87 See Coward (1980) for an outline of ‘representational practices’ she identifies in literature.

While *Bridget Jones’s Diary* ushered in the chick lit genre in the United Kingdom, the novel *Sex and the City* and its HBO television adaptation did so in the United States in the late 1990s. Following the success of Bushnell’s novel, a number of new North American authors were signed by publishers and later their texts were sold in Australia. These included Laura Zigman’s offbeat comedy *Animal Husbandry* (later re-named *Someone Like You* for the motion picture production) and acclaimed novels *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (1999) and *The Wonder Spot* (2002) by Melissa Bank. The new millennium has seen many new authors writing chick lit from a North American perspective including Nicola Kraus and Emma McLaughlin’s *The Nanny Diaries* (2002), Jennifer Weiner’s *Good in Bed* (2001) and *In Her Shoes* (2003), Lauren Weisberger’s *The Devil Wears Prada* (2003), Plum Sykes’ *Bergdorf Blondes* (2004) and Kristen Gore’s *Sammy’s Hill* (2004). Bushnell has meanwhile written *Four Blondes* (2000), *Trading Up* (2003), *Lipstick Jungle* (2005) and a *Sex and the City* prequel, *The Carrie Diaries* (2010). Like their English and Irish counterparts, these novels have been bestsellers in North America and beyond.

English, Irish and United States chick lit have been popular in Australia, encouraging the publication of Australian authors and their own localised versions of the wider genre. Chick narratives written by Australian authors started to appear in bookshops in 2000 with Pip Karmel’s *Me, Myself and I,*

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90 Her popular novels include *Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married, Watermelon, Last Chance Salon, Sushi For Beginners, Angels, The Other Side of the Story, This Charming Man, The Brightest Star in the Sky.*

While Australian chick lit continues the representation of single urban women prominent in English, Irish and North American novels, there is also much diversity in the genre, particularly in their settings and themes. Anita Heiss’s four novels feature Indigenous heroines who are educated career women who...
travel and immerse themselves in the delights of big cosmopolitan cities. Heiss’s novels bring a unique combination of Indigenous issues and cosmopolitanism to the genre. Venturing away from big Australian cities, Rebecca Sparrow’s *The Girl Most Likely* (2003) and Catherine Jinks’ *Spinning Around* (2004) utilise suburban settings to explore post-happy ever after, domesticity and having it all. Another sub-genre of Australian chick lit is found in Monica McInerney’s novels with their multi-plots and combination of overseas travel, regional Australian settings and complex family relationships.94

A more recent Australian chick lit trend is the emergence of the rural and ‘red dirt’ romance. Both arguably form two distinct sub-genres. Like other chick novels, rural and red dirt novels feature an eighteen to forty-five year old heroine; however, they are set in contemporary country, bush or remote Australian settings.95 Rachael Treasure is the forerunning author of rural Australian romances with her novels *Jillaroo* (2004), *The Stockman* (2004), *The Rouseabout* (2008), *The Cattleman’s Daughter* (2009) and *The Farmer’s Wife* (2013). Other authors have now published rural romance including Fleur McDonald with *Red Dust* (2009) and *Blue Skies* (2010), Nicole Alexander’s *The Bark Cutters* (2010) and sequel *A Changing Land* (2011), Fiona Palmer’s *The Family Farm* (2009) and *Heart of Gold* (2011), and Karly Lane’s *North Star* (2011). These novels contain plucky contemporary heroines who are much like their urban counterparts; yet, the context places unique demands on them. Arguably in some rural and red dirt romances, the context is almost ‘prefeminist’ with its overt gender inequality and sexism. Because rural romance is unique to Australian chick lit, I devote Chapter Eight to Rachael Treasure’s *Jillaroo* and its sequel *The Farmer’s Wife*.


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94 McInerney’s novels *Those Faraday Girls*, *Lola’s Secret* and *The House of Memories* combine travel, family relationships and regional locations.
women working in the male-dominated contexts of Western Australia’s far north as engineers and safety officers. Like the rural romance, red dirt romances explore how heroines navigate male dominated and male controlled contexts and grapple with sexism and harassment. The deeply patriarchal environments of rural and red dirt romance offer a valuable opportunity for feminist analysis of romance and gender inequality. Furthermore, analysis of the shift from urban novels to the suburbs to rural and red-dirt settings enables an exploration of the role that setting plays in Australian chick lit.

As part of a so-called global genre, one must consider how Australian chick lit is similar and different to its counterparts. Does Australian chick lit merely replicate the motifs and generic conventions of novels from England, Ireland and the United States? Or does it offer something different? It is my contention that non-Indigenous Australian urban chick lit reproduces the central conventions of popular English, Irish and North American novels. They are generally romances that focus on the professional, romantic and personal lives of their heroines. However, Indigenous urban chick lit introduces issues often neglected by non-Indigenous chick lit such as inter-cultural relations, racism and colonial history. Moreover, as the setting shifts from urban to suburban, rural to remote, the romantic structure remains; yet, the invocation of feminist issues shifts and with it so too does the commentary on contemporary gender relations. This thesis therefore asks two primary research questions about Australian chick lit, firstly “what is the relationship between feminism and romance?” and secondly, “what role does setting play in the representation of feminism and romance?”. Both questions are asked with a focus on the narrative elements of plot, character and theme of selected chick novels explicitly to trace harmony and disharmony as well as contradictory representations of feminism and romance. Furthermore, analysis of plot, character and theme in relation to feminism and romance offer a way to assess the implications of shifts in setting from the urban to the remote. As I argue in my case study chapters, as the setting changes, so too does the representation of romance and feminism. The further chick lit moves from the city, the more profound the gender issues become.
This thesis is concerned with place or ‘geography’. Much previous research on chick lit, as I outline in Chapter Four, focuses on novels with urban settings. However, Australian chick lit includes settings outside Australian cities including suburbia, regional locations (small country towns), rural locations (farms) and the red dirt (mining and construction sites in Western Australia’s far north). Some novels move between one or more of these settings to compare and contrast the experiences of heroines.96

Feminist geographers including Laurie, Dwyer, Holloway and Smith (1999) have argued that gender, especially femininity, is constructed in numerous ways, including geographically.97 For feminist geographers, place or context is crucial in the construction of gender; in other words, masculinity and femininity are determined by context. Moreover, third wave feminists, as I explain in Chapter Three, view liberation for contemporary women as complicated partly because of location and access to resources.98 This thesis thus considers the importance of place in conjunction with romance and feminism in the selected novels. As discussed in Chapter Two, Regis (2003) posits eight essential elements of romance novels, one being the “society defined”, a description of the context/place where romance occurs with an emphasis on what impedes or oppresses the heroine. The “society defined” considered in conjunction with feminist theory has the potential to offer insight into what oppresses a heroine in relation to gender. In terms of feminism, as I argue in Chapter Three, discussions of postfeminism focus on the pleasures of urban women: shopping, dating, bodily modification and display, as well as notions of “retreatism” and “hometown return”. I argue that such postfeminist pleasures and notions of retreat and return are tied firmly to context and place. This thesis therefore considers how postfeminism and feminism are represented in non-urban settings. My case study chapters explore the role of place or geography in representing romance and feminism.

96 David Sibley’s (1995) chapter on ‘boundary crossing’ explores how boundaries can be exclusive or inclusive and engage with ideas about ‘otherness’.
97 Nina Laurie et al., Geographies of New Femininities (Essex: Longman, 1999), 4.
Women and The Australian Context

An understanding of Australia’s social, cultural and political context relating to women is vital to reading Australian chick lit. As this thesis argues, Australian chick lit clearly explores and engages with women’s circumstances in the twenty-first century. It must be remembered that these circumstances are bound up with the history of women’s activism and rights in Australia. This section therefore briefly outlines key moments in Australia’s history of women’s rights, including feminist activism, and the circumstances of women today.99 As Bulbeck (1997) shows, the recent history of women’s rights in Australia contains victories and defeats.100 Women have gained rights relating to voting, political participation, property ownership, divorce, contraception, legalised abortion, pay, employment conditions and domestic violence. However, today there remains a significant gender pay gap, unacceptable levels of violence towards women and high levels of workplace sexual discrimination. Women’s ability to fully participate in paid work is also curtailed by inadequate and expensive childcare. Thus, Australian women have made progress towards equality; however, that progress has been uneven benefitting some women more than others. Australian chick lit, as I argue in Chapters Five to Nine demonstrates some of the victories and unfinished business of women’s rights as well as the uneven impact of women’s rights depending on ethnicity, location and employment industry.

Women’s rights have changed dramatically since Australia was first colonised. Prior to federation, married women did not have property rights, could not enrol in university or sue another person in court.101 After Australian Federation in 1901, non-Indigenous women first gained the right to vote and participate as a candidate in Federal elections in 1902.102 Despite being permitted to be elected to government, only seven women held office in state politics before 1950 and were not successfully elected to Federal government

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99 See Bulbeck’s (1997) outline of the history of Australian feminist activism as a useful frame for her own research into the impact of women’s liberation on “ordinary” women’s experiences.
101 Ibid., 19.
102 Indigenous women were not given the vote until 1962.
until 1943.\textsuperscript{103} It is clear that political representation is vital to issues relevant to women being voiced and acted on through parliamentary reform and the law.

During the post-war period, many of Australia's gender inequities started to become apparent to the women who would later join the women's liberation movement. According to Gisela Kaplan, author of \textit{The Meagre Harvest} (1996), in the post-war period, many women were largely confined to the suburbs due to underdeveloped public transport networks and a lack of access to the family car.\textsuperscript{104} Men were relied on for economic security with banks still reluctant to provide loans to women. In relation to work, women continued to be confined to certain jobs and expected only to work until marriage.\textsuperscript{105} It was the women's liberation movement of the 1960s that coincided with the most profound changes to the daily life and public participation of Australian women. Bulbeck (1997) traces the emergence of the Women's Liberation Group to a meeting of Sydney women in summer 1969-70.\textsuperscript{106} Soon after, similar groups sprung up in cities and towns across Australia; they networked, consciousness-raised and spread pamphlets and newsletters. The 1960s and 1970s witnessed the introduction of the contraceptive pill, legalised abortion, no fault divorce\textsuperscript{107} and the criminalisation of rape within marriage.\textsuperscript{108}

Since the women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s in Australia, women have continued to make progress in terms of obtaining greater rights towards equality. Women now outnumber men in terms of obtaining tertiary university degrees.\textsuperscript{109} Before 1987, men outnumbered women enrolled in higher education however by 2011 out of more than one million higher education

\textsuperscript{103} Gisela Kaplan, \textit{The Meagre Harvest} (St Leonards: Allen and Unwin, 1996), 11.

\textsuperscript{104} The social norm of the time was that the man of the house or ‘breadwinner’ would use the family car to travel to work. Kaplan, \textit{The Meagre Harvest}, 7.

\textsuperscript{105} Kaplan (1996) explains that women who applied for jobs stereotypically associated with men were often rejected. She points to a dominant “male work culture” (22).


\textsuperscript{107} Australia's \textit{Family Law Act 1975} introduced the concept of 'no fault' divorce. This notion relates to the determination of who is at fault when a divorce is legally granted.

\textsuperscript{108} Caroline Brentall. \textit{Women: Their Rights in Australia over the Past 40 Years} (1972-2012), (2012), 3.

students, 57% were women.\textsuperscript{110} Alongside increasing education levels have been changes to the experience of family life for women in Australia. This is notable in statistical trends in marriage, divorce and births in recent years. While the number of registered marriages in Australia has been stable, the age when people married is increasing for men and women as are the number of couples in de facto relationships.\textsuperscript{111} Women now marry later and more commonly live with a partner before marriage. Yet, while the dynamics of marital relationships appear to be changing, the gender roles within the home have only changed slightly. The gender gap in childcare and daily household chores and maintenance continues. According to Easteal (2010), most unpaid household work is still undertaken by women.\textsuperscript{112}

Women’s ability to participate in public life, seek education and work directly impact the timing of motherhood and in turn, national fertility rates. The Australian Bureau of Statistics notes that the fertility rate has been declining since 1976 and is now below replacement level.\textsuperscript{113} In 2013, Australia’s fertility rate was 1.88 babies per woman, slightly lower than the 2012 rate of 1.93.\textsuperscript{114} The number of births to women in the 35-39 and 40-44 age groups continues to rise. In the mid-1950s more than 200 births were recorded per 1000 women in the 20-24 and 25-29 age groups compared with approximately 100 births for women aged 30-34, just over 50 births for women aged 35-39 and less than 25 for women aged 40-44.\textsuperscript{115} In 2013, approximately 125 births were reported for women aged 30-34 and just below 75 for women in the 35-39 age group.\textsuperscript{116} These statistics show an increase in the number of babies born to women over thirty years of age. It also appears that women are delaying having children possibly due to educational, professional or financial reasons and in some cases

\textsuperscript{113} Replacement level is defined as the number of children born to a woman in her lifetime that would replace her and her partner. Australian Bureau of Statistics. "Fertility Rates” (2014).
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
facilitated by widespread use of contraception.\textsuperscript{117} The increasing age of first time mothers brings with it risks and fertility realities. The natural decline in a woman’s ability to conceive over the age of 35 years means that many women are enlisting the help of assisted conception technologies. In Australia and New Zealand between 1990 and 1997, assisted conception pregnancies for women over 35 years of age increased from 29% to 41% of all assisted conception pregnancies.\textsuperscript{118} In the same period the number of assisted conceptions doubled.\textsuperscript{119} The increasing use of such technologies is clearly linked to the increasing age of first time mothers.

The Australian government has instituted measures designed to influence the reproductive choices of women. The government sought to redress decreasing fertile rates in Australia by introducing an initiative to encourage people to have children. In 2004, then Federal treasurer, Peter Costello introduced a “baby bonus” scheme where for every child born or adopted, parents received $3000.\textsuperscript{120} In selling the scheme to the Australian public, Costello encouraged couples to “have one for mum, one for dad and one for the country”. Subsequently, the scheme was found to have successfully increased the fertility rate.\textsuperscript{121} In 2013, then Treasurer Wayne Swan announced that the baby bonus would be discontinued from March 1, 2014. A more recent initiative related to family life and employment was the Federal Labor government’s paid parental leave scheme first introduced in 2010. The scheme provided up to 18 weeks of financial support while parents cared for newborn or adopted children. The Coalition government announced in 2013 that they would expand this scheme from 2015 to provide up to six months of paid parental leave comparable to a woman’s normal wage up to $150,000.\textsuperscript{122} The updated scheme is designed to expand the choices of women in terms of when they have children, maximise

\textsuperscript{118} Australian Bureau of Statistics. “Australian Social Trends 2001”.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} “The Coalition’s Policy for Paid Parental Leave” (2013).
productivity by keeping women connected to the workforce and increase family and infant health outcomes.\textsuperscript{123}

Since the mid-1990s, successive governments have introduced a raft of child care assistance measures to encourage increased labour force participation of parents, especially women. Australia currently has a dual benefit assistance system (comprising a Child Care Benefit and a Child Care Rebate) that provides financial support for women using childcare.\textsuperscript{124} While the promise of free universal twenty-four hour childcare sought by the women's movement of the 1970s has yet to eventuate, the dual assistance system provides some financial relief to families including a means-tested subsidy per hour of care under the Child Care Benefit and a 50 per cent rebate for all parents on a per child basis under the Child Care Rebate.\textsuperscript{125} The Commission of Audit however has noted shortcomings with this current system including that it is overly complex and requires parents to use “approved” childcare providers. Some families may not have access to approved providers (such as if they live in regional or rural locations) or if they do have access, they may face long waiting lists, difficulty placing siblings together in the same centre or restricted opening hours.\textsuperscript{126} Such shortcomings mean that the system benefits some women and their families, while neglecting the needs of others.

Women continue to face issues within the workplace that prevent their full participation. Women outnumber men in part-time work compared to full-time work. In 2014, 15.3 percent of the Australian workforce were women in part-time work while only 5.1 percent were part-time males; in other words women comprise 75.3 percent of the part-time workforce.\textsuperscript{127} Women in full-time work comprised 20.6 percent of the total Australian workforce compared with 37 percent full-time men.\textsuperscript{128} Women who spend more of their working lives

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid, 3-4.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{128} Ibid., 4
employed part-time or who are employed full-time but may suspend work for periods of time to care for children will ultimately have a lower lifetime income, less superannuation and potentially fewer opportunities for career development and progression.

Given the high number of women in part-time work and the reality of disrupted employment for full-time workers who have children, it is not surprising that women are underrepresented in management and executive positions within companies. According to the Workplace Gender Equality Agency Report 2014, women comprise only 26.1 percent of key management personnel and 17.3 percent of CEOs. Moreover, the disparity between men and women’s pays persists. The gender pay gap is currently 19.9 percent for full-time basic remuneration and 24.7 percent for total full-time remuneration.

Alongside disparities in wages, it is clear that the Australian workplace has highly gendered sectors. Occupations remain highly gendered with women working largely in so-called pink-collared jobs such as retail, clerical and care roles while men are overrepresented in trade, labour and technical positions. Australia’s Gender Equality Scorecard (2014) quantifies the gendered nature of work in its ratios of men to women in key sectors such as machinery operators and drivers (89:11), technicians and trades (88:12), labourers (72:28), sales (40:60), community and personal service (27:73) and clerical and administrative (24:76). What is clear is that certain sectors are clearly dominated by men or women. Australia’s Gender Equality Scorecard (2014) found that in terms of redressing these imbalances in the future by encouraging women into traditionally male dominated sectors, only 7.1 percent of employers had a specific gender equality strategy.

129 Caroline Brentall, “Women: Their Rights in Australia over the Past 40 Years (1972-2012)”.
131 Brentall, “Women: Their Rights in Australia over the Past 40 Years (1972-2012)”.
135 Ibid., 3.
Despite some positive signs, there are persistently high levels of sexual discrimination and harassment in Australian workplaces. A 2012 Australian report on sexual harassment revealed encouraging signs about changes to workplace culture.\(^{136}\) Increasingly when an employee formally complained about workplace sexual harassment it was addressed and resolved quickly while those who observed harassment were more readily making a report on behalf of colleagues.\(^{137}\) Furthermore, 96.1 percent of employers have a policy or strategy to prevent sexual harassment and discrimination including training for managers and a grievance process.\(^{138}\) However, the “Working Without Fear” report commissioned by the Australian Human Rights Commission described sexual harassment as a “persistent and pervasive problem in Australian workplaces” with low levels of “understanding and reporting”.\(^{139}\) A third of women have been sexually harassed since the age of fifteen.\(^{140}\) In terms of prevention and response, only one-fifth of those who had experienced sexual harassment had reported it.\(^{141}\) The report highlighted the increasing occurrence of negative consequences for those making complaints of sexual harassment such as complainants facing victimisation.\(^{142}\)

Outside the workplace women still face unacceptable levels of violence. The Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012 Personal Safety Survey which measures violence over women’s lifetime and in the twelve months preceding the report estimated that 41 percent of women over the age of eighteen had experienced physical violence since the age of fifteen while one in five had experienced sexual violence.\(^{143}\) The report estimated that 36 percent of all women had experienced violence by someone known to them; 15 percent experienced violence from a previous partner.\(^{144}\) According to the Australian Institute of


\(^{137}\) Ibid.


\(^{139}\) Australian Human Rights Commission, “Working without Fear: Results of the Sexual Harassment National Telephone Survey”, 3.

\(^{140}\) Ibid., 4.

\(^{141}\) Ibid., 5.

\(^{142}\) Ibid., 3.


\(^{144}\) Ibid.
Criminology (2013) between 2008 and 2010, 89 women were victims of intimate partner homicide; this equates to nearly one death per week.\(^{145}\) Higher levels of violence and injury are reported by Indigenous and Torres Strait Islander women.\(^{146}\)

Indigenous women experience a number of complex issues in contemporary Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics Report on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women (2007), Indigenous women are more likely to be unemployed, care for children other than their own, receive welfare, have finished school earlier than non-indigenous women and have experienced domestic violence.\(^{147}\) Indigenous women reporting fair or poor health were double that of non-Indigenous women.\(^{148}\) Indigenous women’s quality of life was reflected in the disparity of life expectancy, estimated to be seventeen years lower for Indigenous women compared to non-Indigenous women. Lower life expectancy may be explained by a number of health issues including that Indigenous women were approximately one and a half times as likely to be overweight or obese and were twice as likely to report high to very high levels of physiological distress.\(^{149}\) Education levels appear to be increasing amongst Indigenous Australians with young people increasingly completing a higher level of education than their parents.\(^{150}\) Home ownership by indigenous Australians has increased from 26% in 1994 to 32% in 2008.\(^{151}\)

As I argue in Chapters Five to Nine, Australian chick lit reflects the changing opportunities and progression of women towards equality in Australia. In Chapter Five, predominantly urban based heroines grapple with issues


\(^{148}\) Ibid.

\(^{149}\) Ibid.

\(^{150}\) Ibid., vii.

associated with work, motherhood and increased spending power. Urban
Australian chick lit shows heroines working in pink-coloured jobs in media or
the arts, yet only one heroine (Rosie in The Boy’s Club) is in a senior executive
position. A number of urban heroines experience problems with workplace
harassment or sexual discrimination. Chapter Six reframes urban chick lit to
explore the life of contemporary Indigenous women. Anita Heiss’s four heroines
are intimately aware of the social realities and stereotypes of Indigenous
Australians; such heroines face issues of discrimination and racism as they
journey to find love, happiness and professional success. Chapter Seven’s shift
to Australian suburbia raises issues of professional success, motherhood
domestic life for the heroines of The Girl Most Likely and Spinning Around.
Spinning Around’s heroine reflects on issues associated with childcare and
domestic life while The Girl Most Likely’s Rachel Hill considers her decision
against having children. The two rural chick lit novels examined in Chapter
Eight emphasise the discordant opportunities for regional or rural women
compared with their city counterparts. Rachael Treasure’s heroine, Rebecca
Saunders, illustrates the gendered nature of rural employment as she aspires to
work in traditionally male dominated spaces. Her story explores issues of
isolation and the difficulty accessing resources and support as well as intimate
partner violence. In Chapter Nine, red dirt romances provide a lens to view the
gendered nature of work on remote mining and construction sites. Loretta Hill’s
novels illustrate what happens when educated professional women enter
traditionally male dominated work spaces and how those women deal with
sexual harassment and discrimination. Overall, I argue that a textual focus on
plot, characters and themes reveal an interplay between the romance and their
commentary on the contemporary circumstances of Australian women. Indeed,
the unique circumstances of contemporary Australian women are played out in
chick lit novels from the urban to the red dirt.

Methodological Considerations
Niranjala Weerakkody defines methodology as a “strategy, plan of action,
process or design that shapes how we choose and use a given data collection
This thesis focuses on Australian chick novels that engage with romance and feminism in various ways. The novels were selected for analysis in ‘purposive’ or ‘judgemental’ ways. Baxter and Babbie (2003) describe purposive sampling as the selection of units of analysis "on the basis of your own knowledge of the population, its elements, and the nature of your research aims". The novels take interesting approaches to the romance plot and present protagonists, issues and themes in ways that resonate with my understanding of feminism, particularly postfeminism and third wave feminism. My purposive sampling is similar to social text analysis, where the researcher selects texts because of the rich information they offer. As Baxter and Babbie note, the selection of sample works is vital to the conclusions drawn from their analysis:

The analytic task of the qualitative researcher is not to persuade you that he or she has discovered the single ‘objective truth’ of what a given message or ‘work’ means. Instead, the task is to persuade the reader that the 'text' identified by the researcher is reasonable and insightful.

Because of this purposive approach my results are “not generalisable and the sample is not representative of the population under study”. Thus, my conclusions about the Australian chick lit analysed are not necessarily generalisable to all other Australian chick lit nor to all chick lit from elsewhere or to other chick forms (such as chick television or chick flicks).

The novels in this study were all published between 2000 and 2013. In that time, the genre has diversified to include subgenres including the rural romance and red dirt romance. For Chapter Five, I have selected urban based novels published between 2000 and 2013 for my discussion about postfeminist singleness and messy love in urban Australian chick lit. After that, all chapters except Chapter Seven focus on the novels of a single author. Chapter Seven

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154 Ibid., 349.
156 For discussions of chick flicks, see the edited collection by Ferriss and Young, *Chick Flicks*. Kyra Hunting discusses chick TV in "Women Talk: Chick Lit Television and the Dialogues of Feminism".
discusses two suburban novels, Rebecca Sparrow’s *The Girl Most Likely* and Catherine Jinks’ *Spinning Around*.

According to Pamela Regis, many romance studies have problematic methodological techniques; therefore, it is important to explain how I have undertaken my research.\(^{157}\) Primarily, my approach is a cultural studies style analysis. For Niranjala Weerakkody “cultural studies is interested in differences (such as the various ways in which we may ‘read’ the world or texts) and examines how it works and in what contexts”.\(^{158}\) I consider differences in chick lit through a close examination of representation, which Weerakkody, drawing upon John Fiske, states is “how meaning is given to things depicted in a text”.\(^{159}\) As well, according to Weerakkody, difference is about more than what is found within a text; it also relates to a text’s reception by audiences, particularly where some texts have wide appeal and can be read in different ways.\(^{160}\) Citing Stuart Hall, Weerakkody uses the term ‘polysemy’ to refer to the way texts can be read in multiple ways, particularly the three main categories of dominant (preferred), resistant (oppositional) and negotiated. In “Encoding and Decoding” (2003), Stuart Hall argues that media communication is complex; messages do not simply travel from a producer through a medium to a receiver; there is much more happening in this process so that how a text is ‘decoded’ is never a certainty.\(^{161}\) Media theorist and sociologist Dick Hebdige has theorised reading as a polysemic process where texts are read variably.\(^{162}\) Hebdige explains that while dominant ideologies infuse media texts, readers decide a text’s meaning. Thus, there is no single or correct meaning of a text, only different readings and different reading communities that may attribute different values to those readings. Readings and meanings are therefore a

\(^{157}\) See Regis’s critique (2003, 2011) of the methodologies and conclusions of a selection of studies of the romance novel.


\(^{159}\) Ibid.

\(^{160}\) Ibid.

\(^{161}\) Hall, "Encoding/Decoding."

\(^{162}\) Hebdige, "Subculture: The Meaning of Style."
process of negotiation as I demonstrate through my reading of Australian chick lit.\textsuperscript{163}

**Organization of the Thesis**

Chapters Two, Three and Four outline the main theory used for examining feminism and romance in Australian chick lit. Chapter Two examines theoretical discussions of the romance novel. I draw on Pamela Regis (2011) to consider the role of ethics in theorising romance novels.\textsuperscript{164} Regis’s discussion of the ethics of romance criticism is a useful frame for this chapter for two reasons: firstly, I wish to avoid committing the ethical lapses she has identified and secondly, I intend to identify ethical lapses in chick lit criticism. In this Chapter, I argue that feminist critiques have conflated love and romance to apply to romance novels. Feminists of the 1960s and 1970s such as Germaine Greer, Shulamith Firestone and Juliet Mitchell critiqued love and romance as institutions of patriarchy. I argue that chick lit provides a forum for continuing the debate about love and critiquing romantic ideals. I outline key critical engagements with romance novels in relation to plots, characters and themes especially Regis’s (2003) “essential elements” of romance. I argue that feminist scholars including Germaine Greer have treated narrative separately to meaning and in turn have occasionally made “hasty generalisations” to denigrate the romance form and its readers. Regis’s “essential elements” of romance defend the form from criticisms that it “enslaves and binds”. I apply Regis’s theory in my readings of Australian chick lit in Chapters Five through to Nine. In considering approaches to love and romance and the plots, characters and themes, I provide a foundation upon which to analyse romance and feminist responses to romance in chick lit.

\textsuperscript{163} My analysis is similar to the negotiated readings of innovative television shows from a third wave feminist theoretical perspective in Third Wave Feminism and Television (2007) edited by Meeri Lisa Johnson. In the collection, contributors undertake negotiated readings described as “an interpretive practice by which critical audiences of media texts negotiate for new meanings between the ‘encoding’ of media messages in the text and the ‘decoding’ of various audiences” (x).

\textsuperscript{164} Regis, "What Do Critics Owe the Romance? Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance."
Chapter Three provides an overview of contemporary feminist theory, particularly postfeminism, and its relevance to analysing chick lit. The starting point for this Chapter is Julia Kristeva’s argument in “Women’s Time” that rather than postfeminism “replacing” previous feminisms, the emergence of postfeminism “allows for” the “parallel existence of three feminisms [“liberal”, “radical” and “postfeminist”] in the same historical time”. Kristeva suggests that rather than a linear evolution of 1960s and 1970s feminism into postfeminism, these feminisms coexist. Kristeva argues that any theory of postfeminism needs to be considered alongside feminism. I outline the key arguments and tenets of postfeminism and third wave feminism that are useful for examining chick lit. I take up Genz and Brabon’s (2009) point that there is “slippage” between postfeminist and third wave feminist theory. This notion of “slippage” is useful when applied to chick narratives; plots, heroines and issues slip between different feminist positions.

In Chapter Four, I review theoretical inquiries into chick lit in relation to romance and feminism. Several writers have employed textual analysis to examine chick lit thematically. In relation to romance, most approaches examine love and romance as themes, rather than the narrative structure. Chick lit has been criticised for not reinventing or revolutionising the genre. In particular, analysts have observed that romance remains largely intact in the genre. Moreover, some criticise heroines for being “lovesick” or “desperate”. Others however see complexity and contradiction in the way heroines try to reconcile their desire for companionate love and an independent life with professional success. In relation to feminism and chick lit, theoretical inquiries take two main approaches. The first approach argues that the chick lit genre contains postfeminist texts that see feminism “undone”, “neglected” or “criticised”. However, recent appraisals of chick culture by Van Slooten (2006), Genz (2010) and Hunting (2012) posit a more complex understanding where different types of feminism, including postfeminism, coexist, sometimes in conflict or contradiction. In reviewing this literature, I find that to date, no

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166 For example Whelehan (2004) states that *Bridget Jones's Diary* "does not capitalise upon the opportunity to revolutionise the romance".
inquiry of chick lit has explicitly examined the narrative components of plot, character and theme in relation to both feminism and romance. In particular, Regis’s theory of the romance has not been applied to chick lit and Van Slooten, Genz and Hunting’s complex feminist critical frameworks have not been applied to Australian chick lit.

Chapters Five through to Nine present my case studies of feminism and romance in five sub-genres of Australian chick lit. In Chapter Five I examine a selection of urban Australian chick novels. I focus on the postfeminist singleton and messy love in these novels. I examine how selected novels engage with issues relevant to feminism in work, relationships, the beauty myth, consumerism and gender equality. I argue that although the novels faithfully reproduce the romance plot, this plot is often directly contradicted by the approach taken to themes of love and romance. In other words, while the narrative structure contains Regis’s essential elements of romance, the novels are cynical about love and question romantic ideals such as “happily ever after”. Romance and love is further complicated in these novels by the heroine’s frequent expression of independence and freedom and her candid realisation that there is a dearth of “decent” men. Subsequently, many heroines do not marry. In relation to contemporary feminism, I argue that the selected novels take various positions in regards to gender equality and identity formation. Indeed, some novels such as allmenarebastards.com slip between different kinds of feminism over the course of their narrative. Read through their narrative structure, characters and themes, these novels evidence contradiction and complexity in their relationship to feminism. Novels such as allmenarebastards.com and Miss Lonelyhearts introduce issues and themes relevant to feminism, yet “undo” feminism or “take feminism into account” by rejecting it partially or fully, or providing a corrective to radical or liberal feminism. The Boys Club however combining a romance plot with a feminist heroine offers a powerful critique of a sexist workplace, ultimately to reinforce feminism. Overall, these urban novels demonstrate a range of engagements with romance and feminism suggesting the coexistence of different examples of feminist romance.
Chapter Six examines the four novels of Anita Heiss, a Koori writer and academic. Sometimes referred to as ‘choc lit’ or ‘Koori lit’ because they focus on Koori heroines, Heiss’s novels are cosmopolitan in that they are set in the Australian cities of Canberra, Sydney and Melbourne or New York and Paris. Like the urban chick novels of Chapter Five, Heiss’s novels are faithful to the essential romantic elements culminating in heroines learning who their “Mr Right” is at the very end. Late romantic resolutions are the result of narratives focussing on heroines pursuing their careers, attending to family obligations or travelling. Heiss’s heroines are smart, educated, urban professionals who desire a companionate lover to share their lives. Like other chick lit, a number of male characters are presented in negative terms, emphasising the difficulty in finding companionate love. In these novels, Indigeneity is presented as a barrier to romance because some men are represented as not wanting to date Indigenous women or only wanting to date them as an “exotic other”. Heiss’s novels also strategically use the plot and characters to engage with Indigenous issues including Australian ‘history’, Aboriginal deaths in custody and racism. I follow Wenche Ommundsen’s argument that Heiss’s novels challenge significant cultural stereotypes about Indigenous Australians. Heiss’s novels slip between reinforcing the relevance of feminism and taking a postfeminist position.

Chapter Seven shifts focus and setting to the Australian suburbs in Rebecca Sparrow’s The Girl Most Likely and Catherine Jinks’ Spinning Around. Both novels offer a slice of suburban Australian life. The Girl Most Likely’s heroine Rachel Hill has just returned to live with her parents after a failed marriage to her American partner. Rachel is characterised as no longer the professional, independent career woman about town. The Girl Most Likely is the post-happily ever after gone wrong, while Spinning Around is post happily ever after when it works out (somewhat). Helen Muzzatti appears to have it all; she is married, a mother of two children and works part-time at the Equal Opportunity Board. Suddenly she finds ‘it all’ in jeopardy when she suspects her husband of having an affair. Both novels are romances in structure and theme. However, Rachel Hill has to admit her impending divorce to her family and friends before she can

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167 “Koori” refers to the Indigenous peoples from New South Wales and Victoria.
think about love again. Helen Muzzatti has to resolve her suspicions about her husband before she can rekindle her relationship with him. Both novels reflect on romantic relationships and probe issues surrounding motherhood, success and ‘having it all’. I argue that both novels use the predicaments of their heroines to question ‘having it all’.

Chapter Eight focuses on chick lit as rural romance in relation to two novels by the so-called queen of the genre, Rachael Treasure. I examine *Jillaroo* (2002) and its sequel *The Farmer’s Wife* (2013) in relation to romance and feminism by applying Regis’s elements of romance. *Jillaroo* uses the elements of romance in a traditional way to tell a story of love alongside family trauma and environmental catastrophe. *The Farmer’s Wife*, a post happily ever after story, takes the reader on a journey in which the protagonist grapples with the ruin of the farm and a husband who has morphed into a carbon copy of her patriarchal father. The heroine, Rebecca, is tough and stalwart which she demonstrates through her skill in farming and her negotiation of contexts traditionally dominated by men. She thereby challenges the expectations of women in this context and in a sense, causes ‘gender trouble’. The novels engage with a range of rural themes, particularly gender inequality, thereby offering a critique of patriarchy and hegemonic masculinity. This critique is undertaken through characterisation including the depiction of violent and oppressed male characters and the mechanisms by which they change. Moreover, read together, the two novels reinforce and question the romance plot.

Chapter Nine focuses specifically on the red dirt romance, contemporary women’s fiction set in Western Australia’s far north. Such novels centre on the experiences of plucky heroines living and working in male dominated industries of mining and construction. I examine Loretta Hill’s two red dirt romances, *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat* to consider how the plot, heroine and themes work together with the generic expectations of romance in a context where there are few women. Hill’s two heroines, Lena Todd and Wendy Hopkins, act ‘tough’ as they grapple with life in a remote mine site including confronting sexism, discrimination, remote living
and fly-in, fly-out culture. I argue that Loretta Hill’s novels contain a romantic structure which explores the developing relationship between heroines and their heroes. However, analysis of the romance plot reveals that sexism is encoded directly into key romantic elements. Thematically, the novels engage with key issues that prevent women’s full and equal participation in these male dominated industries as well as directly confronting some incidents of sexism. Thus, Hill’s novels demonstrate the slippage and contradiction in moving between feminist positions at different levels of narrative. The novels are feminist in representing women working in male dominated environments however eroticise sexism through the romantic elements and offer postfeminist solutions to gender inequality such as sexism and harassment.

The conclusion summarises my findings in regards to my two key research questions: “What is the relationship between feminism and romance in Australian chick lit?” and “What is the role of setting in the representation of feminism and romance in Australian chick lit?”. I outline the limitations of my study, possible future research in this area and the theoretical implications of my discussion.
Chapter Two: Retaining the Romance Plot, Questioning Love: Theorising Contemporary Romance

If women’s liberation movements are to accomplish anything at all, they will have to cope with phenomena like the million dollar Cartland Industry.

Germaine Greer

[What I have always maintained about popular culture] is the importance of seeing both progressive and regressive elements in popular texts.

Tania Modleski

Introduction

This Chapter describes key feminist theoretical approaches to romance and romance novels, asking how the romance novel has been theorised and how this theory is useful for examining chick lit. Historically, many feminist theorists have been hostile to romance and romantic love, seeing both as patriarchal constructions designed to enslave women to the home, marriage and child-rearing. George Eliot, Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir each voiced their own views of love and romance, and romantic fiction. A common theme in these works is the idea that social inequalities between men and women are replicated in romance and love. As noted by Stephanie Harzewski, George Eliot expressed a more practical concern and

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3 Mary Wollstonecraft in her *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1992) critiqued the societal limitations on women, especially those binding women to the home. She succinctly stated the aspirational and social divide between the sexes: “Men, in their youth, are prepared for professions, and marriage is not considered as the grand feature in their lives; whilst women, on the contrary, have no other scheme to sharpen their faculties” (151). In *The Second Sex* (2009) Simone de Beauvoir connected romantic love to women’s unequal position in society. In particular, she emphasized the way that one “becomes” a woman and part of that becoming is through relationships with men.
‘anxiety’ in her essay “Silly Novels by Lady Novelists” that women’s ability to write would be determined in totality by romance fiction. In second wave feminist theory by Germaine Greer, Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett and Juliet Mitchell, one finds some of the strongest critiques of romance, heterosexual love and romance novels. To these authors romance is a tool of patriarchy that seduces women with its dull promise of blissful relationships and equal roles between the sexes. For these authors, romance fiction is the chief disseminator of this ideology. It must be remembered that these critiques are largely products of the context in which they were written.

Feminist appraisals of romance, love and romance novels during the 1960s and 1970s were followed by a more sustained focus on the romance novel form. In the Introduction to New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction (2012), Eric Selinger and Sarah Frantz identify three contemporary “waves” of theory and inquiry into the romance novel. The first wave contained the foundational investigations by Janice Radway, Tania Modleski and Kay Mussell. The second wave, largely a response to the first, saw romance authors write back against criticisms of the genre. The third wave contains “two important transitions”, firstly, the publication in 2003 and 2004 of two defences of the romance, Juliet Flesch’s From Australia With Love and Pamela Regis’s A Natural History of the Romance Novel. Secondly, Frantz and Selinger note the investment in romance scholarship by the Romance Writers of America, including the 2005 establishment of an Academic Research Grant program. As Frantz and Selinger explain:

The RWA investment in romance scholarship would not have paid off so richly, however, were it not for another piece of collaborative infrastructure: the emergence of critically-sophisticated, exuberantly literate on-line romance communities in which scholars, authors and fans interact publicly, in real time, more or less as equals. 

6 Ibid., 9.
7 Ibid.
These three waves reveal an evolution of contemporary romance scholarship. The first wave was highly critical of the form, its writers and readers; the second largely defended the genre, and, the third focused on collaboration between writers, readers and theorists to explore the meaning, reception and new types of romances. As this thesis argues, some criticisms of romance and romance novels have been grafted directly on to chick lit. However, defences of romance fiction have not been fully utilised to defend chick lit from claims such as Germaine Greer’s, that novels like *Bridget Jones’s Diary* offer an “updated version[s] of the old Mills & Boon scenario where girl eats heart out over (not-so-rich) Mr Wrong until (extremely rich) Mr Right makes his play on the second last page”.8 Regis’s theory of the romance novel, which I discuss in detail in this Chapter, has not been applied to chick lit even though it is a complex narrative theory with a contemporary view of the romance heroine and ultimately a defence of the genre. This chapter outlines key feminist criticisms of romance to discuss criticisms of chick lit in Chapter Four.

**The Ethics of Romance Criticism**

Pamela Regis’s discussion of the ethics of romance novel criticism reminds scholars about best practice approaches to the genre. In 2011, at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance, Pamela Regis, author of *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, asked in her keynote address, "What Do Critics Owe the Romance?”. Regis examined the main critical explorations of romance novels to determine the extent of the “ethical lapses” underpinning such research. She asked whether critics had treated romance novels “fairly”.9 Regis analysed the underlying ethics of the most prominent inquiries into romance novels conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Such studies are still widely referenced in discussions around romance novels. Regis describes the four most cited and influential authors as the "Four Horsewomen of the Romance Apocalypse": Ann Barr Snitow, Tania Modleski, Kay Mussell and Janice Radway.10 The conclusions made by these

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9 Regis, “What Do Critics Owe the Romance? Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance.”
10 Ibid.
“Four Horsewomen of the Romance Apocalypse,” summed up by Regis, are respectively that romance is porn, readers are addicts, romances are fantasies and readers are patriarchy’s dupes. Regis compares these four authors to more recent investigations by “four millennial critics”. Her comparison shows that little has changed in theoretical approaches to romance; the only exceptions are her own inquiry into romance, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, and Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan’s Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches’ Guide to Romance Novels.

In “What Do Critics Owe the Romance?” Regis challenges criticisms levelled at romances, arguing that critics have failed to fully defend their claims that romance novels are simple. Moreover, they have made “hasty generalizations” about the romance genre based on a small sample of texts and failed to provide, “a just consideration of its happily-ever-after or happy-for-now ending”. Regis, in A Natural History of the Romance Novel and her keynote address, challenges traditional approaches to romance novels and asks scholars to reflect on how approaches to the genre could be bettered. She argues that analysis of the representation of romance in novels requires evidentiary support from a reasonable number of texts, an account of the complexity of those texts and a “just consideration” of their endings. As I argue in Chapter Four, chick lit critics including Merrick (2006) and Chen (2010) commit the ethical lapses identified by Regis: they do not defend their claims that the novels are simple, they make hasty generalizations based on few texts and do not consider the ending justly.

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
13 In Beyond Heaving Bosoms: The Smart Bitches Guide to Romance Novels (2009) Wendell and Tan seek to “celebrate” the genre (1). They defend the genre saying that “romance novels aren’t all inconsequential bits of fluff” and “many romance novels offer complex, nuanced stories” (7). However, they admit that “some romances are utter fucking crap” (7). Either way they argue that romance novels “should absolutely be subject to rigorous examination” (7).
14 Regis, “What Do Critics Owe the Romance? Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance.”
15 Ibid.
Radical Feminist Views on Love and Romance


To some second wave feminists, romantic love was a “socially constructed ideal that rewarded and appeased women for their economic, social, and emotional dependence upon men”. As Payne notes, because romantic love was such a personal experience for women, feminists were often torn about the role of romantic love in everyday life for women.

In “Love and Liberation”, Payne examines numerous responses to the “problem of romantic love” from within the second wave. She identifies varying responses including “experimentation” with non-traditional forms of romantic love such as “celibacy”, “same-sex unions” and “more egalitarian heterosexual relationships”. She notes a feminist commitment to finding ways towards “altering ideals of romantic love so that they meshed with feminist ideals”. Her thesis illustrates the “complexities, ambiguities, and challenges feminists faced in forging more egalitarian personal relationships” and offers a rebuttal to accusations that most second wave feminists were “anti-sex, anti-love, man-haters.”

She notes two main approaches taken to romantic love in the second wave: the radical and liberal. Liberal feminists, as Payne explains, “argued that it was important to work alongside men in the fight for gender equality and that women were entitled to pursue fulfilment both within and outside of romantic relationships”. Radical feminists “were more likely to identify traditional ideals of romantic love as a root cause of women’s oppression and often experimented with and embraced alternatives to those ideals as a way of putting feminist theories into practice”.

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17 Ibid., 1-2.
18 Ibid., 2.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid., 3.
23 Ibid., 15-16.
24 Ibid., 16.
In the 1970s and 1980s, Shulamith Firestone, Germaine Greer and Juliet Mitchell explicitly addressed the nature of inequality in relationships, often using examples of romance fiction to illustrate their arguments.\(^{25}\) Firestone’s foundational feminist text *The Dialectic of Sex* provides a two chapter discussion of love and “the culture of romance”. While Firestone does not single out romance novels, her arguments about love and romance, linked to her discussion of women’s oppression in relation to childbearing and family life, contribute to the feminist critique of romance. Firestone makes strong links between love and women’s liberation. She argues that, “a book on radical feminism that did not deal with love would be a political failure. For love, even more than child bearing is the pivot of women’s oppression”.\(^{26}\) She adds that romance is a “cultural tool of male power to keep women from knowing their conditions”.\(^{27}\) As part of her attempt to find a feminist position on love, Firestone, asks, “do we want to get rid of love?”\(^{28}\) If indeed she does, then it would certainly mean getting rid of romance and the romance novel.

For Firestone, romance is a site of women’s oppression because society is based on the unequal power between men and women; romance replicates that inequality.\(^{29}\) Firestone asserts that “when we talk about romantic love, we talk about love corrupted by its power context—the sex class system—into a diseased form of love that then in turn reinforces this sex class system”.\(^{30}\) Firestone concedes that some love relationships are successful. Yet, she cautions that these are rare because men and women experience love

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\(^{25}\) Ti-Grace Atkinson and Kate Millett also examined love as a powerful institution connected to women’s disempowerment in society. In an essay entitled “Radical Feminism and Love” (1974) Atkinson questioned why “do women, even feminists, consort with the enemy” (140). She suggested that love was a “deluded attempt to attain the human” or in other words an attempt by the “powerless” to empower themselves through forming an attachment with another who has power (141). Atkinson asked whether love is a kind of “hysteria” which is “mindless” and “painless” (141).


\(^{27}\) Ibid., 139.

\(^{28}\) Ibid., 121.

\(^{29}\) Anne Cranny-Francis (1990) takes Firestone’s point one step further in arguing that the unequal relationships between men and women in society are replicated in romantic relationships and then in representations of couples in romance fiction.

differently. “Love between equals would be an enrichment,” she states, however love built on an unequal power system is always destined to fail because it can only cause destruction, particularly to the individual. For Firestone, love should be a “mutual exchange” between two equals. Women, she fears, are harmed most because as long as women are unequal in society, love will be destructive to them. Firestone argues that because for a woman her “whole identity hangs in the balance of her love life [...] she is allowed to love herself only if a man finds her worthy of love”. Stevi Jackson notes that Firestone’s *The Dialectic of Sex* is best known for its argument that women need to be freed from their reproductive function to be freed from subordination. As Jackson cautions, this key argument has been widely critiqued for its “biological determinism”, essentialism and “preconceptions of universal human needs and emotions”, in turn explaining why Firestone has “rarely been taken up by other feminists”. However, as Jackson notes, “Firestone’s work deserves more serious consideration for it speaks to central feminist concerns and continues to provoke questions about aspects of social relations that often, even now, go unchallenged”. She asserts that Firestone provides “a potentially powerful critique of institutionalized heterosexuality”. As Jackson notes, “While seriously flawed, [Firestone’s] dissection of love as pivotal to women’s subordination still does, at some points, hit home and it would seem that love is still a troubling experience for heterosexual women”. Firestone’s discussion of romance and love, particularly her point that women are still not “equal” and there is no easy equality is useful in studying chick lit.

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31 Ibid., 138.
32 Ibid., 123.
33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Ibid., 126.
37 Ibid., 113.
38 Ibid., 114.
39 Ibid.
40 Ibid., 133.
Germaine Greer offers one of the most derisive criticisms of romance and romance novels during the women’s liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In her feminist manifesto, *The Female Eunuch* (1970), Greer includes two chapters (“Romance” and “The Middle Class Myth of Love and Marriage”) relevant to the study and understanding of romances. In “Romance”, Greer critiques key elements of romance found in books and magazines including the symbolism of “the kiss”, the hero’s characteristics, the representation of sex, the repetition of the story and the myth of romance versus the reality of marriage. Greer makes links between these aspects of novels and the producers and readers of romance to emphasise the disconnection between romances and real life. Of the romance hero, she argues, “the traits invented for him have been invented by women cherishing the chains of their bondage”.\(^{41}\) This hero, Greer observes, knows how to treat women well, however, she asserts, real men do not know about this female fantasy. Romance, including this perception of the hero, she argues, results in the deception and delusion of women, especially in marriage.\(^{42}\) Women, for Greer, read romance then develop a distorted perception of what married life should be like, including the idea that “wooing” will continue after the wedding ceremony.\(^{43}\) However, as Greer notes, this being rarely the case, women must face the reality of marriage as unromantic and hard work. Greer implies that romances fail to prepare women for the reality of marriage; instead they manufacture unrealistic expectations of men and relationships, which women are unable to deal with when they are unmet. Arguably, it is unrealistic to expect that romances can or should prepare women for the ‘reality’ of marriage and to assume that romances directly affect women in the way Greer suggests.

In her chapter “The Middle Class Myth of Love and Marriage”, Greer traces the development of understandings and representations of romance and love in literature, emphasising that love and marriage depicted in fiction is mythical yet that women rarely acknowledge this.\(^{44}\) While her point about the disconnection

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\(^{41}\) Greer, *The Female Eunuch*, 180.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 187.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 215.
between representation and reality is valid, to attribute women's unhappiness in marriage and love to the depiction of relationships in fiction is problematic. Greer offers little investigation or evidence into readers' perceptions or reading practices to support such claims.45 Her argument that romance does not prepare readers for the "reality" of marriage is challenged in my reading of chick lit. In Chapter Five and Seven, I discuss several novels that represent the "post happy ever after" in ways that demystify ideals of marriage including notions of "forever" and "happy ever after".46

One of the most interesting claims Greer makes is about the relationship between the women's liberation movement and the romance and love story industry. For Greer, the romance industry’s ability to cultivate unrealistic expectations and fantasies in women is so powerful that she regards the success of the women's liberation movement as depending on “coping with” the lucrative Barbara Cartland industry.47 She argues, “if female liberation is to happen, if the reservoir of real female love is to be tapped this servile self-deception must be counteracted”.48 To argue that the success or failure of a socio-political movement depends on “coping with” a publishing phenomenon or counteracting the perceived “self-deception” cultivated by media texts, is inherently problematic.49 Greer’s essentialism about readers and the effects of romance texts, particularly in relation to the characters and structure of romances, although problematic, have clearly influenced feminist approaches to romance novels as I discuss below. In Chapters Five, Seven and Nine, I examine chick lit’s use of the structural elements of romance to critique aspects of married life. Rather than manufacturing unrealistic expectations of marriage, I argue that chick lit uses romance to probe, question and demystify romantic relationships and married life.

45 Unlike Greer, Janice Radway (1984) asks the readers of romance to explain why they read such novels and to describe the situation where reading occurs.
46 I acknowledge the time difference between Greer's critique and my own.
47 Greer, The Female Eunuch.
48 Ibid., 188.
49 Joanne Hollows (2000) notes the tendency in critiques of romance readers to assume that they are hapless victims of the media’s powerful “hypodermic syringe” effects (73).
Juliet Mitchell in *Women: The Longest Revolution* builds on Greer and Firestone's criticisms about romance and patriarchy. Mitchell says she draws upon “literature for illustration” and “psychoanalysis for explanation”.50 She begins with summaries of Greer and Firestone's discussions of romantic love as a basis for her own thoughts about romance and romantic novels.51 For Mitchell, Greer offers a “sensitive and fascinating account” of romantic love.52 She interprets Greer’s argument as: “romantic love is a perversion of real love” and she, too, “sees it as false, stifled eroticism”.53 Mitchell summarises Firestone's position as “true erotic love is impossible in our society” and romanticism is a “pedestal treatment”.54 Mitchell focuses on romance novels through the articulation of three main points. Firstly, she examines the association of marriage and death. She draws upon Denis de Rougement's argument in *Love in the Western World* (1983) that “love and marriage do not go together like a horse and carriage. Quite the contrary. What seems to go together is not love and marriage but love and death”.55 Mitchell interprets de Rougement as arguing that romantic love and marriage are directly opposed. Romantic love does not propagate the species or lead to marriage as he suggests. Rather, it is an “ideal longing [...] expressed in what sounds [...] to be sexual terms”.56

Mitchell then uses arguments from Greer and Firestone as well as de Rougement as a basis for her own ideas on romantic love. For Mitchell, the most interesting point about romantic love lies in the way the subject has been constructed in romance fiction. She notes the shift from the “man” as “the subject of passion”:

> Instead, we have romantic fiction in which the woman is the object of the romantic tale itself. It is the object, not the male subject with whom the reader or listener is asked to identify.57

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51 Ibid., 105.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid., 104.
57 Ibid.
For Mitchell, neither men nor women are now the subject of romances, “the romance itself is the subject”.58 This shift concerns Mitchell because the heroine has to transform herself into a “suitable sexual object in order to win [her] man”.

Building upon Firestone’s association of romanticism with the beauty ideal, Mitchell asserts that the heroine pretties herself to attract a man who becomes a substitute for an absent father. Mitchell explains this process as follows:

[W]omen have to go back and use their narcissism to become attractive sexual objects. Boys go back to use it to strengthen their own subjecthood [...] Romantic love [...] is, for a man, a return to his earliest self, a search for the self-completion that, on entering the world of being only a man, was taken from him.60

For Mitchell, there has been a shift in the representation of characters and the expression of subjectivity in the romance novel. What was once “the poetic utterance of a free, aspiring subject” she argues is now the “opiate of a trapped sexual subject”.61 A new ideology of women and men as equals was established after the seventeenth century, where “the woman becomes the object of the tale” however she concludes “if women cannot be romantic lovers as subjects of their own search for self, then in any true sense men cannot be so either”.62

Romance for Mitchell negatively impacts men and women; it is about the submission of women and emasculation of men.63 As she suggests, “romantic fiction that makes women the sexual object, makes man the sexual object too—in new popular romance novels nobody is romantic subject. A false equality can only equalise downwards”.64 Mitchell draws attention to the interrelationship between representations of romance and the social reality in which they are created. Romance for Mitchell reflects cultural changes to ideals about romance and marriage. In light of Mitchell’s discussion, it is important to consider contemporary representations of romance and what they reveal about romantic relationships. In Chapter Five particularly, I argue that although Australian

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58 Ibid., 108.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 113.
61 Ibid., 108.
62 Ibid., 114.
63 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
chick lit utilises a romance structure, from within that structure it questions love, suggesting that contemporary love is messy and, at best, a risky endeavour.

These radical feminist approaches to love demonstrate two main points. Firstly, they show ambiguity, contradiction and disagreement about the meaning and effects of love and romance. There is no “one size fits all love or romance” within feminism. This point clearly impacts my second observation of this theory: that romance fiction, both canonical and popular has been deployed to evidence particular arguments about love and romance.

**Reconsidering Love**

More recently, a new interest in love and romance has emerged from within feminist philosophy. Such works include Luce Irigaray’s *The Way of Love* (2002), bell hooks’ trilogy on love (2000, 2002, 2005) and Lauren Berlant’s *Love/Desire* (2012). Cristina Bellodi, in a discussion of Irigaray’s *The Way of Love*, Alina Reyes’ *La Settima Notte* and Rosi Braidotti’s most recent work, argues that these texts serve as evidence of a “feminist ethics” that resists the radical feminist position towards heterosexuality as “sleeping with the enemy”.

Feminist philosopher and cultural critic bell hooks devotes three books to the study of love: *All About Love: New Visions* (2000), *Communion: The Female Search for Love* (2002) and *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love* (2005). Together, the trilogy offers a powerful vision of love, especially the notion that love needs to be reclaimed; she offers this vision in consideration of the patriarchal constructions of love and romance that have deleterious influences on relationships for men and women. For example, in *All About Love*

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hooks calls for "a return to love".68 She argues that men “theorize about love, but women are more love’s practitioners”.69 [H]ooks notes that the “romance novel remains the only place in which women speak about love with any degree of authority”.70 In a chapter on “Romance” hooks addresses the powerful myths of romance that promise a romantic partner; however, she cautions that for many women, “we wanted the lover to appear but most of us were not really clear about what we wanted to do with them—what the love was that we wanted to make and how we would make it”.71 She suggests that “finding a partner” has been privileged over “knowing love”.72 [H]ooks reminds her readers that “falling in love” is a myth while notions of “effortless union” are a fantasy that diminishes our “choice and will”.73 A better approach, she suggests, is that taken by Erich Fromm in *The Art of Loving* who argues that love is a choice: “to love somebody is not just a strong feeling—it is decision, it is a judgement, it is promise”.74 As hooks explains, when people have “disappointments” in love, they focus on romantic love, however, she says, “we fail at romantic love when we have not learned the art of loving”.75 Part of the “art of loving” for hooks is to struggle and change, as she states, “true love is unconditional, but to truly flourish it requires an ongoing commitment to constructive struggle and change”.76

In *Communion*, hooks analyses contemporary understandings of love, particularly within feminist critiques of patriarchy. She reminds readers that patriarchal masculinity “requires of men cruelty to women”.77 [H]ooks does not blame men for their behaviour towards women, arguing that patriarchy “wounds men in the place where they could be self-loving by imposing on them an identity that denies their wholeness; in order to know love, men must

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69 Ibid., xx.
70 Ibid., xxiii.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid., 173.
73 Ibid., 171.
76 Ibid., 185.
77 Ibid., 169.
challenge patriarchy”.

Hooks’ point, that patriarchy is the problem, not men, applies to my discussion of *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* in Chapter Eight. I argue that the central male characters of these novels enact “cruelty towards women” because they labour under patriarchal expectations of rural men and masculinity.

In *All About Love* hooks critiques romantic myths and suggests how love might be seen differently thereby re-visioning love from a feminist perspective. As I argue in my case study Chapters, aspects of hooks’ discussion resonate with concerns in Australian chick lit. In Chapter Five, single urban heroines succumb to backlash myths about being alone and unmarried suggesting that they desire a man rather than to know love. In Chapter Eight, I argue that readers confront men who are closed to love, have patriarchal attitudes and are violent towards women. These men struggle to know love.

**The “First Wave” of Romance Novel Theory**

The 1980s saw the emergence of feminist discussions devoted solely to the romance novel, especially its popular form. In their Introduction to *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction*, Frantz and Selinger regard the book length works of Janice Radway, Tania Modleski and Kay Mussell as foundational theoretical texts of the contemporary popular romance. In these texts, Frantz and Selinger argue, there is a shift in thinking about popular romance. This shift sees romance novels treated seriously for their “ideological complexity” and in “the act of reading”. Chick lit has similar plots to the popular paperback romance and canonical romance form; therefore it is useful to outline critiques of the romance plot and responses to them. I do so to consider how feminist theorists have approached the romance novel and how they envision they might be different.

Janice Radway is an influential contemporary theorist of the romance novel. In *Reading the Romance* (1984) an ethnographic study into the romance reading

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79 Ibid.
80 Frantz and Selinger, "Introduction: New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction," 3.
practices of a group of women from Smithton, Radway sought to find “what can a literary text be taken as evidence for?”.

Radway’s study contrasts to other critical studies of romance novels focused only on textual analysis. Radway employed a mixed research methods approach comprising analysis of the publishing industry, interviews, surveys and reader observations about their reading practices and their view of ‘ideal’ and ‘failed’ romances. Additionally, Radway undertook her own textual analysis of a selection of romance novels. Radway’s research aimed to understand better why women read romance and the context in which that reading occurred. It also outlined the main characteristics of novels and their meaning for readers. Joanne Hollows notes that Radway’s research fills a critical gap in knowledge because she “addresses the problem of the absent or abstract reader in studies of romance fiction.”

Radway’s study reminds researchers that they should not presume there is only one reading of a text. Rather, those who study fiction academically and those who read for leisure may have different readings. In Chapters Five to Nine, I point out different readings of Australian chick lit in relation to romance and feminism to show that multiple interpretations are possible.

The most insightful and controversial aspects of Radway’s research were readers’ understanding of the novels and their interpretation of the act of romance reading. For Radway’s interviewees, romance reading was about “pleasure” and “restoration” because novels provided “a utopian vision where female individuality and sense of self is compatible with nurturing and care by another”. Most readers valued romance for teaching them about the world and “faraway places” alongside the opportunity to take time out for themselves, often from busy domestic lives. The act of reading might therefore be understood as “a form of resistance to their social and material situation in

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81 Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature, 4.
82 Joanne Hollows observes that ethnographic research has become “increasingly popular” as a research method for cultural and media scholars. Hollows, Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture, 77.
83 Ibid.
84 Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature, 119.
85 Ibid., 55.
86 Ibid., 107.
patriarchy".\textsuperscript{87} The Smithton readers’ interpretation of the novels supports Radway’s finding. For Radway’s interviewees, romance novels were “chronicles of female triumph.”\textsuperscript{88} This reading is consistent with my findings in Australian chick lit. Novels such as \textit{Jillaroo} and \textit{The Boys’ Club} show heroines navigating gendered workplaces and fighting for their place. Both novels and other Australian chick lit can be read as stories of “female triumph”.

Radway uses feminist theory to critique readers’ explanations of what makes a good romance novel and how novels are useful to their own lives. Firstly, while the romance readers “interpret these stories as chronicles of female triumph”, Radway argues that the romance “underscores and shores up the very psychological structure that guarantees women’s continuing commitment to marriage and motherhood”.\textsuperscript{89} For Radway, the effort of these readers to defend their romance reading and recount the positive interpretations of the narrative’s effects, indicates they are ‘patriarchy's dupes’. Radway argues that the novels do not genuinely explore what it means to have ideal relationships between the sexes.\textsuperscript{90} For Radway, even the Smithton readers’ favourite romances advance the ideology of romantic love, “insisting thereby that marriage between a man and a woman is not an economic or social necessity or a purely sexual affiliation but an emotional bond freely forged”.\textsuperscript{91} The Smithton readers’ insistence on marriage is to Radway another sign of patriarchy’s work where these women want to believe that marriage and men “really do mean good things for women”.\textsuperscript{92} Thus, Radway concludes that romance reading is “a compensatory fiction”\textsuperscript{93} that “does nothing to alter a woman’s social situation”.\textsuperscript{94} Rather, for Radway it can have the opposite effect: romance reading can “potentially” disarm social change by justifying the conditions and responses which the activity of reading responded to in the first place.\textsuperscript{95} Chief

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{87}Original emphasis. Hollows, \textit{Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture}, 81.
  \item \textsuperscript{88}Radway, \textit{Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature}, 54.
  \item \textsuperscript{89}Ibid., 149.
  \item \textsuperscript{90}Ibid., 129.
  \item \textsuperscript{91}Ibid., 170.
  \item \textsuperscript{92}Ibid., 183.
  \item \textsuperscript{93}Ibid., 112.
  \item \textsuperscript{94}Ibid., 212.
  \item \textsuperscript{95}Ibid., 157.
\end{itemize}
among her criticisms is that reading romance novels make women’s present situation “more comfortable”; they do not offer a “structure to reorder everyday life”. She says, “Romance fails to pose other, more radical questions [...] leaving unchallenged male right to the public spheres of work, politics and power, because it refurbishes the institution of marriage”.\(^{96}\) Ann Margolis, in her defence of romance fiction, rejects Radway’s conclusion about romance readers:

The issue that is raised yet again is that women are incapable of being intelligent enough to discern what they read. The idea that women can be spoon-fed information and never question or comprehend what they read is more insulting to women’s intelligence than the idea that the patriarchal male society is producing the Romantic Fiction.\(^{97}\)

In Radway’s study, while the romance readers affirm the positive ways they engage with the novels, Radway seems intent on scrutinising their reading and interpretation of the texts. In my case study chapters, I consider how some novels are open to multiple readings and how they position readers to reflect on issues and themes critically. For example, in Chapter Five I discuss how Australian chick lit critically reflects notions of “the one” and “happy ever after”. Indeed some novels also reject marriage as a resolution to a plot. Australian urban chick lit novels portray love and romance as risky endeavours pose “radical questions” about contemporary society while challenging the “male right to public spheres”. For example, in Chapter Five, allmenarebastards.com asks how women can best express their dissatisfaction with romantic relationships while The Boy’s Club asks how women can address systemic workplace sexism and discrimination and keep their job. Chapter Six argues that the Koori Lit of Anita Heiss positions readers to critically reflect on Australian cultural politics including the historical treatment of Aboriginals.

In 1980, Tania Modleski completed her Master’s thesis on “Popular Feminine Narratives” in which she analysed romances, gothic novels and soap operas.\(^{98}\) She identified a need for work on contemporary fiction for women, particularly

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\(^{96}\) Ibid., 217.

\(^{97}\) Ann Margolis, "In Defence of Romance Fiction" (Masters Dissertation, Pace University, 2009), 14.

the literary value of texts usually dismissed as of little or no literary value. She found that these novels “keep alive a feminine ‘subculture’”. Modleski hypothesised that these novels partly attract readers because of their revenge fantasy in which heroines exert power, “bringing the man to his knees”. Furthermore, Modleski notes various problems with romance including the lack of critical distance between the heroine and reader (the protagonists’ fantasy becomes the reader’s fantasy) and that women are addicted to this type of formula fiction. Joanne Hollows regards Modleski’s work on romance novels as marking a shift towards “a greater sense of the complex and contradictory nature of these texts”.

Modleski’s *Old Wives Tales* (1998) builds upon her earlier work on feminine narratives. In *Old Wives Tales* she considers how women make meaning and tell their own stories, including in relation to romance. Modleski outlines her love for the romance novel, noting romance’s continued rigidity in its reproduction of the “courtship story”. For Modleski, feminist critics should be responsive to changes in stories as they may reveal shifts in what she describes as, “conscious and unconscious fantasies that wed us psychically to particular versions of reality”. Modleski’s chapter “My Life as a Romance Reader” provides a sensitive and moving reflection on her experiences of reading and studying romances. She reflects back on her earlier work, *Loving with a Vengeance* (1982) and the purpose of her research:

> [It] had been to show how the novels reinforce conservative notions of women’s place, but on the other hand […] had also wanted to ’redeem’ the readers from critical opprobrium, to challenge the double standard that reigned in popular culture criticism and to demonstrate that romances not only spoke meaningfully to women’s fears, desires and hopes but also continued elements of protest against female subjugation.

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99 Ibid., 10.
100 Ibid., 53.
101 Ibid.
102 Hollows, *Feminism, Femininity and Popular Culture*, 76.
103 It should be noted that Modleski devotes two chapters to the romance novel in *Old Wives Tales*: Chapter Three “My Life as a Romance Reader” and Chapter Four “My Life as a Romance Writer”. Modleski, *Old Wives’ Tales and Other Women’s Stories*, 47-65.
104 Ibid., 10.
105 Ibid., 7.
106 Modleski, *Old Wives’ Tales and Other Women’s Stories*, 55.
Indeed, Modleski’s reflection in *Old Wives Tales* demonstrates her understanding of romance readers, herself included. However, as she argues, she refuses to stay silent about what she sees as the “eroticisation of male dominance” and violence.\(^\text{107}\) Being a fan of romance, she argues that “even the most retrograde romances [should not be condemned] so much as ‘the conditions which have made them necessary’”.\(^\text{108}\) In her reading of romances, Modleski describes how she was drawn to empowered female figures that “reinforced her experience of reality”.\(^\text{109}\) Daphne Watson (1995) argues that Modleski and Radway do not go far enough in their critiques of romance.\(^\text{110}\) Watson accuses them of not being critical enough out of fear that they may offend romance readers. As well, Watson asserts that they give too much value to a text that has been made for “commercial purposes”.\(^\text{111}\)

Ann Barr Snitow’s “Mass Market Romance: Pornography for Women is Different” (1979) provides a “literary analysis” of Harlequin romances.\(^\text{112}\) She begins by cautioning against conflating conclusions about romance novels with their readers, imploring “I am not presuming to describe the sensibility of its readers”.\(^\text{113}\) Rather, she affirms that she is trying to “steer a careful course between critical extremes” where she does not prescribe to the view that “romance novels are dope for catatonic secretaries, nor claiming for them a rebellious core of psychological vitality”.\(^\text{114}\) Rather she says, “I see them as accurate descriptions of certain selected elements of female consciousness”.\(^\text{115}\) Snitow examines what she describes as the “romance formula” and what she sees as its unusual plot.\(^\text{116}\) Rather, Harlequin romances centre on the relationship between two people incapable of communicating clearly and

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 9.  
\(^{108}\) Ibid., 65.  
\(^{109}\) Ibid., 71.  
\(^{111}\) Ibid., 75.  
\(^{113}\) Ibid.: 142.  
\(^{114}\) Ibid.: 143.  
\(^{115}\) Original emphasis. Ibid.  
\(^{116}\) Ibid.
ultimately reinforce sex difference.\textsuperscript{117} She argues that Harlequin romances appeal to readers because they “fill a vacuum created by social conditions”\textsuperscript{118} and “reinforce the prevailing cultural code: pleasure for women is men”.\textsuperscript{119} For Snitow, in Harlequin romances “stereotyped female roles are charged with an unlikely glamor, and women’s daily routines are revitalized by the pretense that they hide an ongoing sexual drama”.\textsuperscript{120} Drawing upon Peter Parisi, she agrees that Harlequins offer “sexual release” while impressing “control”.\textsuperscript{121} Control is an important issue for Snitow; if a heroine cannot control her sexual behaviour then she risks losing “social face” and her “reputation”.\textsuperscript{122} In closing, Snitow notes the difference between literature and romance fiction whereby, “While most serious women novelists treat romance with irony and cynicism, most women do not [...] Harlequins eschew irony; they take love straight”.\textsuperscript{123} As I demonstrate in Chapters Five to Nine, chick lit differs from Snitow’s observations of Harlequin romances; chick lit is not solely focussed on “two people who cannot communicate”, nor does it represent “sex bathed in romance”; rather relationships are questioned and romance is treated with “irony and cynicism”.\textsuperscript{124}

Pamela Regis describes Kay Mussell as one of the “four horsewomen of the romance apocalypse” because of her criticism of romance.\textsuperscript{125} In doing this, Regis focuses on Mussell’s second book, \textit{Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formulas of Women’s Romance Fiction} (1984) which I return to below. Mussell’s first text on romance, \textit{Women’s Gothic and Romantic Fiction: A Reference Guide} (1981), provides a “reference guide” to the two forms of fiction in the book’s title including their history, useful reference works for understanding the

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid.: 149.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.: 150.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.: 151.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.: 152.
\textsuperscript{123} Original emphasis. Ibid.: 160.
\textsuperscript{124} Kay Mussell in \textit{Fantasy and Reconciliation} (1984) makes a similar point about formula romances, that they “use conventions straightforwardly, without irony” (7).
\textsuperscript{125} Regis, “What Do Critics Owe the Romance? Keynote Address at the Second Annual Conference of the International Association for the Study of Popular Romance.”
genres and their readers. Romance for Mussell is “simply a love story within a domestic drama” taking two forms: the journey from “courtship and marriage” or “the story of an already-achieved marriage with difficulties between husband and wife being resolved at the end”. She also discusses “antiromances” which she defines as “cautionary tales” where the heroine “cannot be rewarded with marriage in the end”. For Mussell, a woman’s desire for perfect marriage is presented as an “assumption, unquestioned and unexamined except in a few books”. Her emphasis in Women’s Gothic and Romance Fiction and in Fantasy and Reconciliation is that romance novels are deterministic in plot because they follow a narrow and formulaic structure. Her aim is not to defend the genre, though she “hope[s] it respects, understands, and thus defends those women who choose to read them”.

Mussell’s second book extends her work in Women’s Gothic and Romance Fiction. In the Preface to Fantasy and Reconciliation Mussell notes the incompatibility of romance and feminism:

Romances and feminist scholarship have little in common. Romances rarely challenge the social order and they do not urge women to recognize oppression or to revolt; instead they reinforce the value of traditional roles in a changing society.

Mussell admits that some romances have demonstrated an awareness of women’s changed experience of the world in career and sexual experience; however, she is baffled as to why “romance formulas” have not “faded or significantly altered”. She identifies a contradiction in the changing roles of women and the conservatism of romance texts. While many feminists are sceptical of romance, especially the representation of women’s domestic lives and relationships, Mussell notes, “most of us belong to families while we try to

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127 Ibid., xi.
128 Ibid., xii.
129 Ibid.
130 Mussell, Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formula’s of Women’s Romantic Fiction, xv.
131 Ibid., xi.
132 Ibid., xii.
work out our destinies as individuals”. Mussell exposes an important difference between political belief and lived reality; many women who espouse feminist views including arguments against heterosexuality, marriage, motherhood and domesticity, live within those traditional ‘patriarchal’ institutions.

Mussell discusses romantic relationships that “assert and reinforce a woman’s desire to identify and marry the one right man who will remain hers for the rest of her life”. Mussell devotes a chapter to examining hero types in romance including the “passionate romance figure with a past” and the “conventional, sensitive, mature and competent husband-lover” and their “opposites” “inappropriate men (villains and friends)”. For Mussell, there are many different heroes. As I argue, Australian chick lit presents a range of hero types and innumerable inappropriate men. Chick lit frequently emphasises heroines entering a relationship with ‘Mr Right Now’ rather than ‘Mr Forever’.

Mussell notes various tropes of romance which are also relevant to chick lit. These tropes include the “domestic test” where heroines conform to the roles of “wife, mother, and homemaker”, exhibit “nurturing” behaviour towards others, engage with the notion that “beauty isn’t everything”, show an aptitude for “homemaking”, compete with “other women” and experience the absence or uselessness of mothers to help them navigate the world. The phrase “domestic test” applies to Australian chick lit in that some heroines, particularly single women, such as Me, Myself and I’s Pamela Drury, fantasise about wifedom and motherhood. For readers, Mussell argues, “their adventures

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133 Ibid., xv.
134 Ibid., 11.
135 Ibid., 117-27.
136 This demystification of romantic certainty may reflect growing cynicism about the viability of romantic relationships and marriage to endure “forever”. Zygmunt Bauman (2003) uses the term “liquid love” to describe the fluidity of romantic relationships in a heavily networked society where, “connections are entered on demand, and can be broken at will” (xii).
137 Mussell, Fantasy and Reconciliation: Contemporary Formula’s of Women’s Romantic Fiction, 89.
138 Ibid., 97-98.
139 Ibid., 105-07.
140 Mussell notes that the domestic test changes over time and some aspects “speak to different readers”. Ibid., 114.
provide a safe escape that soothes and reassures rather than challenges, maintaining socialized reality by bringing various yearnings and experiences of women into temporary harmony”.<sup>141</sup> Mussell notes that romances do not appeal to all women, they deal only with some problems faced by women and offer limited solutions to dealing with those problems.<sup>142</sup> Novels discussed in Chapter Five, Seven and Nine contain heroines with conventional domestic expectations and those who question them.

Like Mussell, Jeanne Dubino argues that Harlequin romance novels have a formulaic structure. Dubino’s article “The Cinderella Complex: Romance fiction, Patriarchy and Capitalism” is premised on the huge popularity of romances which, despite the variety of sub-genres, she says share a common pattern: “The heroine gets rich through love”.<sup>143</sup> For Dubino romances are often “told from the heroine’s point of view”, the plot “centers around courtship”, the hero is “always older, taller and richer than the heroine”<sup>144</sup> and a heroine “starts off as a self-sufficient and independent woman, and in the end usually melts in a lifetime of dependency”.<sup>145</sup> Dubino discusses Fay Weldon’s *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* as a novel that opposes the typical romance formula.<sup>146</sup> Weldon’s novel explores the relationship between romance, capitalism and patriarchy through a metafictive narrative device where one of the protagonists becomes a romance writer.<sup>147</sup> Dubino suggests “we need to take romances as seriously as *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* does”.<sup>148</sup> Dubino’s statement here could be read in two ways. Firstly, Dubino may be implying that Weldon’s novel parodies romance and treats it comically. Subsequently, she infers “we” should not take romances seriously. Alternatively, Dubino may be suggesting that “we” treat romances seriously because romance is actually a vital part of *The Life and Loves of a She-Devil* in terms of plot and characterisation. Dubino’s statement

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 164.
<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 165.
<sup>144</sup> Ibid.
<sup>145</sup> Ibid.: 110.
<sup>147</sup> Gayle Greene (1991) defines metafiction as “fiction that includes within itself commentary on its own narrative conventions” (1).
<sup>148</sup> Dubino, "The Cinderella Complex: Romance Fiction, Patriarchy and Capitalism."
alludes to the doubleness often found in romance novels and in readings of them.

As I outlined in the Chapter One, Anne Cranny-Francis has considered the possibility of rewriting the romance from a feminist perspective. A key aim of the romance, Cranny-Francis insists is “the romance and marriage between [the hero] and heroine”\textsuperscript{149} which prioritises “economic, rather than gender, issues”.\textsuperscript{150} In assessing the feminist evaluation of romance, Cranny-Francis determines that there has been a shift from “reject[ing] readers of romantic fiction as fools” to seeing that “these texts are more complex than that response allows”.\textsuperscript{151} Cranny-Francis lists seven “interesting and provocative propositions” to emerge from this theory. In regards to the ending of the novels, she echoes the observations of Radway and Modleski when she states that “the ending of the romance is a utopian projection which expresses a critical evaluation of the contemporary patriarchal order”.\textsuperscript{152} What is important in Cranny-Francis’s theory is her articulation of the way that sexism is encoded directly into the structure of genre texts, particularly romance with its emphasis on the heroine’s negotiation of femininity and the unequal relationship between a hero and heroine. As I argue, some Australian chick novels expose these traditional traits and offer alternatives to unequal relationships and hypergamy.\textsuperscript{153} In Chapter Nine, I argue that both novels discussed see sexism encoded directly into the essential elements of romance.

Gayle Greene in \textit{Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition} critiques the endings of romance novels. As she argues, “The critique of the romance is a critique of the ending, for the love story allows woman one end: her ‘end,’ both in the sense of ‘goal’ and ‘conclusion’ is a man”.\textsuperscript{154} She asserts that marriage appears to be one of the only “ends” available to women; feminist writers have

\textsuperscript{149} Cranny-Francis, \textit{Feminist Fiction: Feminist Uses of Generic Fiction}, 178.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 184.
\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 191.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{153} Susan Maushart (2011) uses the anthropological term “hypergamy” to refer to "marrying up" or marrying someone with access to more resources or money.
challenged this “end” by producing alternatives. Greene notes that “some contemporary women writers do write beyond the end, beyond the telos of romance” to “somewhere else” however this “‘somewhere else’ is not so easy to imagine”.155 “Open ends” are one possible alternative to “old plots” while “circles”, where past and present are intermixed, are another possibility. Greene however cautions against “vicious circles” where heroines are trapped, perhaps going round and round aimlessly.156 Romance novels are repeatedly criticised for their happy endings, especially those that appear to “enslave” and “bind”. Rachel Blau Du Plessis, in Writing Beyond the Ending associates narrative conventions with ideology; to call narrative norms into question, as Greene explores in her analysis of feminist fiction, is therefore to challenge ideology.157 Although chick lit is often dismissed as just another kind of romance, I argue that Australian chick novels work between and across the expectations of romance and feminist fiction by offering “other ends” to heroines. In Chapter Eight, the romantic ending of Jillaroo which emphasises romantic certainty is thrown into doubt by its sequel The Farmer’s Wife which concludes with an “open end”. Me, Myself and I uses a multiplot structure to engage with two different life trajectories for its heroine. Ultimately, Me, Myself and I’s heroine is given an open end including romantic possibility rather than romantic certainty.

**Defending the Romance**

Sarah Frantz and Eric Selinger describe the second wave of romance novel theory as a response to what they state was “the ideological focus of that first generation of scholars [with their] updated, feminist version of a very old, patently moralizing question: ‘Are these books good or bad for their readers?’”158 Frantz and Selinger point to Dangerous Men and Adventurous Women (1996), edited by Jayne Krentz, as a foundational text in this “wave” of

155 Ibid., 13.
156 Like Greene, Molly Hite examines the usefulness of “open ends” that serve to avoid enclosing heroines within familiar plots or endings. Charlotte Bronte, for example, “modified or withheld a narrative closure that her novels revealed inevitably to be an enclosure, ultimately entrapping the heroine.” Original emphasis. Molly Hite, The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), 5.
158 Frantz and Selinger, "Introduction: New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction," 5.
romance theory. The collection contains twenty-one essays that challenge assertions and generalisations of the romance genre. For example, K. Seidel’s essay “Judge Me by the Joy I Bring” defends romances and romance writers by providing a romance novel writer’s view of the genre’s conventions. She emphasises the importance of the fantasy aspect of popular fiction and romance stories in particular where, “fantasy is the power that drives the reading and writing of romance”.159 For Seidel, fantasy, including the escape from reality, is the chief reason for the writing, reading and enjoyment of romance. Fantasies, Seidel impresses are not the same as goals:

The plot of a romance novel—especially its happy ending—sets up fantasies about the way the world ought to work. A happy ending is necessary, inevitable. The heroine is guaranteed a husband, a home, and financial security.160

Her argument about the fantasy aspect of the novels counters Greer’s claim that romance novels do not prepare readers for reality, particularly relationships or marriage. For Seidel, preparing readers for reality is not the purpose of romance novels. Seidel highlights the notion that readers gravitate to these novels for their fantasy dimension, as she asserts, “when they pick up a romance they are choosing not to read about life’s darkest possibilities”.161 Ann Jensen (1984) makes a similar point that romances reveal “the fantasies of millions of women”.162 Moreover, Seidel argues that her readers are intelligent women who know the difference between fantasy and reality.163 She disagrees with Kay Mussell’s claim that romance reading provides, “an escape from powerlessness, from meaningless, and from lack of self-esteem and identity”.164 Seidel rejects Mussell’s description of her life “in these terms” and explains the reasons for rejecting Mussell’s argument: “I have my moments of dissatisfaction

160 Ibid.
161 Original emphasis. Ibid., 161.
163 Seidel refers to the pressure on writers to include references to birth control in romance novel sex scenes by “overzealous feminist editors” in the 1980s. Seidel responded to such editorial direction by arguing, “it may be irresponsible not to practice birth control, but mentioning it in a work of fantasy read by adults is not a necessary duty. My readers know where babies come from.” Original emphasis. Seidel, "Judge Me by the Joy I Bring," 174.
164 Original emphasis in Mussell, as cited in Ibid.
[...] but I have power and meaning”.\textsuperscript{165} Furthermore, Seidel disputes any suggestion that she bears a ‘false consciousness’. Juliet Flesch, in her discussion of Australian romance novels, suggests of Mussell and Radway’s position on romance novels that it:

\textquote{[M]ight be tenable if they applied it to all light reading [...]}; it could be suggested that problems of powerlessness and meaninglessness are human problems affecting all of us and escape in the sense of distraction is a popular response from both men and women.\textsuperscript{166}

Seidel responds to authors such as Mussell and Modleski who criticise the endings of romances by saying a well written ending is “a satisfying, convincing, imaginatively realized fantasy”.\textsuperscript{167} Here, Seidel makes a clever point about the misstep critics make in disconnecting the ending of romances from the rest of a narrative. For Seidel, the ending must be contextualised within a larger narrative progression.

From the mid-1980s through to the present several critics have explored new areas of interest while challenging stereotypes and generalisations of the genre. Margaret Ann Jensen’s \textit{Love’s Sweet Return} (1984) and Ann Rosalind Jones’ “Mills and Boon Meets Feminism” were published in the same era as Radway, Modleski and Mussell’s canonical studies of romance.\textsuperscript{168} Though referenced less than her contemporaries, Jensen charts changes to Harlequin romances in the wake of changes to women’s lives since World War Two.\textsuperscript{169} She argues that Harlequins perform a “delicate balancing act” between “the conflicting psychological needs for excitement and security and the tension between traditional and ‘liberated’ notions of women’s roles”.\textsuperscript{170} For example, she cites the “double message” that category romances send where heroines are becoming “increasingly competent, sexual human beings” yet the novels are

\textsuperscript{165} Ibid., 175.
\textsuperscript{166} Juliet Flesch, \textit{From Australia with Love: A History of Modern Australian Popular Romance Novels} (Fremantle: Curtin University Press, 2004), 16.
\textsuperscript{167} The importance of fiction to offer women a space to fantasise has been explored in relation to chick lit by writers such as Van Slooten (2006). Seidel, "Judge Me by the Joy I Bring," 176.
\textsuperscript{168} \textit{Love’s Sweet Return} (1984) was based on Jensen’s doctoral thesis.
\textsuperscript{169} Jensen notes the main changes to women’s lives as “the influx of women into the labor force, the ‘sexual revolution’ and the women’s movement”. Ibid., 18.
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
“still glamorising traditional values”. Jensen’s study offers insight into the
doubleness of romance with its progressive and retrogressive aspects that
coexist in single texts as well as within the wider genre.

Ann Rosalind Jones examines the relationship between sixteen Mills and Boon
novels published between 1983 and 1984 and feminism. Her analysis is
premised on the notion that there is an “ideological turmoil” where “interesting
theoretical questions [...] arise when formula writing confronts a changing
social context”. She admits that she finds it “[so] difficult to assess any of
these novels as regressive or progressive in its totality that I’ve concluded such
judgements aren’t the point”. Rather, Jones argues that romance and
feminism coexist and/or are in conflict. Jones notes that the representation of
feminism in Mills and Boon is “problematic” because:

What happens is that certain positions put forward by feminism are
taken for granted, along with the economic and ideological benefits it has
brought many women, while the movement itself is perceived as alien,
threatening, excessive.

For example, Jones observes that some heroines are the beneficiaries of
feminist political activism and “work, travel and cope on their own”. As Jones
notes though, the same heroines undercut those benefits, notably through their
conversations with other characters. Jones reads such rhetorical manoeuvres
as Mills and Boon using “feminism in mocking or antithetical ways, to initiate a
counter-movement”. However, she admits that the novels reflect changes
inspired by the successes of the women’s movement including, “work outside
the household, the critique of male supremacy in the office and the bedroom
[and] some notion that masculine and feminine desire may not be light years
apart”. Together, these progressive and regressive aspects reveal three kinds
of contradictions for Jones: “narrative discontinuity, irreconcilable settings, and

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171 Ibid., 73.
173 Ibid., 214.
174 Ibid., 201.
175 Ibid.
176 Ibid., 202.
177 Ibid., 216.
inconsistency in realist dialogue”.178 In considering the complexity and contradiction discovered in Mills and Boon, Jones ponders whether “a hybrid novel” is possible, one “combining feminist depth of analysis with a plausibly positive ending”.179 Jones’s discussion anticipates criticisms of chick lit as postfeminist such as those by McRobbie (2004b) and Gill (2007) which I outline in Chapter Four as well as the complex readings of chick texts undertaken by Genz (2010), Hunting (2012) and Van Slooten (2006). As I argue, chick novels such as Chapter Five’s Me, Myself and I and The Boy’s Club, Chapter Seven’s The Girl Most Likely and Chapter Eight’s Jillaroo and The Farmer’s Wife go beyond Mills and Boon plot scenarios and experiment with the “hybrid” novel that Jones anticipates.

Mariam Darce-Frenier in Good-Bye Heathcliff (1988) arrives at similar conclusions to Jones in her study of category romance heroes and heroines. She notes that heroines became more sexually expressive (“lusting, though virginal”) and needed “ever more brutal, protective heroes”. The 1980s saw the emergence of “egalitarian and tender heroes” where heroines became “increasingly dominant in the bedroom” and retained their careers after marriage.180 For Darce-Frenier, the rise of the increasingly liberated heroine and more egalitarian relationships raises important questions about the romance form: Were romances becoming “unromantic” by becoming “soft porn for women”, “too realistic” in describing childrearing and, most importantly, usurping romance by depicting heroines who “exert overt power”?181 Darce-Frenier’s questions tap into the doubleness of romance and the tension in representing supposedly feminist values within the romance form. This thesis argues that this tension intensifies in chick lit.

Since 2000, a new found interest in the study of popular romance has emerged offering innovative engagements and complex evaluations of the genre. Book

178 Ibid., 204.
179 Ibid., 215.
181 Ibid., 102-03.
length contributions include Pamela Regis’s *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), Juliet Flesch’s *From Australia With Love* (2004), Sarah Wendell and Candy Tan’s *Beyond Heaving Bosoms* (2009), the anthology *New Approaches to Popular Romance Fiction: Critical Essays* (2012) and Hsu-Ming Teo’s *Desert Passions* (2012). These sit alongside other texts such as Laura Vivanco’s “Feminism and Harlequin Mills and Boon” and the prolific online publishing of the *Journal of Popular Romance Studies*. Such publications suggest a vibrant field of study that is sensitive to changes within the genre. Of particular note in relation to the feminist appraisal of romance is Regis’s study, including her definition and key elements of the romance novel, which I outline in the next section.

**Pamela Regis and the Essential Elements of Romance**

Pamela Regis, in her ground-breaking study, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel* (2003), takes a different approach to many feminist critiques of romance and previous theoretical approaches. Regis provides an expansive theory of the narrative structure of romances. Like Jensen, Darce-Frenier, Seidel and Margolis, Regis defends the romance genre. Regis’s detailed narrative analysis of the romance novel chronologically examines literary fiction texts from 1740 to the 1990s, from *Pamela* to Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* to novels by Georgette Heyer to the contemporary works of Jayne Ann Krentz and Nora Roberts. Her aim is to defend the genre and “define the modern romance novel written in English and trace its development”. She focuses primarily on the narrative structure of canonical women’s fiction that adhere to her definition of romance and that help her defend the genre against the argument that romances “enslave and bind” the heroine and reader. In both her book length study and keynote address on the ethics of “reading the romance”, Regis argues


\[185\] Regis does not investigate the culture or methods used by publishing houses in the same way as Radway, Flesch and Dudovitz. Nor does she examine the reception or use of novels by readers.
that traditional criticisms of romance become problematic when the focus of analysis shifts to the narrative structure.

Some claims that Regis makes about the ethical lapses in the study of romance that I referred to earlier in this chapter are drawn directly from her longer analysis of the romance genre *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*. Her chief criticism is that critics make generalised claims about the whole genre, often based on a small selection of representative texts.\(^{186}\) In response, Regis argues that such accusations are based on faulty reasoning where only a small number of texts or a small slice of the romance novel genre is used to make generalisations about women’s reading processes such as Radway’s *Reading the Romance* or Tania Modleski’s claims about “narrative pleasures for women”. Regis traces these errors to what she sees as an insufficient definition of the romance novel and a presumption that the genre is “formulaic”. She adds that these errors also stem from a misunderstanding of the genre’s history.\(^ {187}\) Others, Regis argues, have an “incomplete knowledge of the form itself”. As she explains, “[t]hey focus on the ending to the exclusion of all other narrative events present in the romance novel”.\(^ {188}\) This second mistake added to the “hasty generalisation” means that “they attack the romance for its happy ending in marriage”.\(^ {189}\) Regis investigates this claim primarily because the way the ending is treated lies at the heart of critics’ assertions that “marriage enslaves the heroine, and, by extension, the reader”.\(^ {190}\) Regis describes Radway and DuPlessis’s arguments that the ending destroys the heroine’s quest and her history, and secondly that the heroine’s adventure and quest are at odds with the union with the hero.\(^ {191}\) As Regis states, her whole book is “a refutation of this claim”.\(^ {192}\)

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\(^ {186}\) Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, xii.

\(^ {187}\) Ibid., 6-7.

\(^ {188}\) Ibid., xii-xiii.

\(^ {189}\) Ibid., 7.

\(^ {190}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^ {191}\) DuPlessis, *Writing Beyond the Ending: Narrative Strategies of Twentieth-Century Women Writers*.

Regis uses her definition and essential romantic elements to counter critics who base their arguments on hasty generalisations or an unnecessary preoccupation with the ending. Romance writers including Seidel and even Radway’s readers see victory in the novel’s endings. 193 Heroines such as Samuel Richardson’s Pamela, as Regis argues, “become more powerful and active after her marriage”.194 While “victory” and “triumph” offer alternative readings to the critic’s interpretation of romance novels, Regis makes another more insightful observation: critical complaints about the ending equate to a complaint about endings generally and not about the romance novel ending in particular. Regis argues, “narratives end [...] novels end, including romance novels. We imagine that heroines go on, even if we do not see them do so”.195 Here, Regis describes the physical limits of narrative texts. Texts cannot go on forever; they can only provide limited detail about a character’s life. There must be an end, if not a narrative end, then at least a last page. Regis asserts that the impossibility of an eternal narrative or one that includes every detail means that it is unfair to place an overt emphasis on the type of ending given. Moreover, Regis counters Greer’s claim that the ending of romance in marriage “reconciles the reader to marriage”.196 Such a claim presumes that novels affect readers in significant ways. Greer’s argument is inherently problematic and may even be counterintuitive in attributing a power to romance novels that they do not have.

Another claim that Regis addresses is that made by critics such as Mussell, Cohn,197 Dubino and Cranny-Francis who “reduce romance readers to a state of child like helplessness, and the novels themselves to the sort of books that such children read”.198 Regis asserts that:

[T]he romance contains serious ideas. The genre is not about women’s bondage, as the literary critics would have it. The romance novel is, to the contrary, about women’s freedom. The genre is popular because it conveys the pain, uplift, and joy that freedom brings.199

193 Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, 54.
194 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 12.
195 Ibid.
196 Ibid.
198 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 5.
199 Ibid., xiii.
She counters claims about the endings, effects on readers and ethical lapses made by critics armed with her definition and essential romantic elements to ultimately argue for the freedom of heroines.

Romance novels, according to Regis have “virtues”, Regis provides a basic definition of romance as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines”. She focuses on the essential narrative elements of ‘courtship’ and ‘betrothal’ with particular emphasis on the heroine. She argues for eight essential romantic elements:

[A] definition of society, always corrupt, that the romance novel will reform; the meeting between the heroine and hero; an account of their attraction for each other; the barrier between them; the point of ritual death; the recognition that fells the barrier; the declaration of heroine and hero that they love each other; and their betrothal.

For Regis these elements take “a heroine in a romance novel from encumbered to free” that sees her life “restored to her”. Subsequently, readers “rejoice”. The significance of the elements working towards the heroine’s freedom counters criticism of romance plots that “extinguish the heroine” and “bind readers to marriage”. Regis's expanded definition and essential elements improve upon previous work undertaken in relation to romances.

Regis accounts for her definitional difference by stating:

This shift from a statement of theme (“love relationship”) to a designation of narrative elements makes the identification of romance novels straightforward. If the narrative elements are present, a given work is a romance novel.

This definition is useful in analysing the romance elements, especially in chick lit. The definition enables comparison of works from different periods and settings. As Regis makes clear, her definition and elements “direct[s] the focus

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200 Ibid.
201 Ibid., 19.
202 Original emphasis. Ibid., 14.
203 Ibid., 30.
204 Ibid., 16.
205 Ibid., 11.
206 See Regis (2003) Chapter Two, where she defends the romance novel against critics.
207 Such work includes that of Janice Radway (1984) and Tania Modleski (1982, 1998) who undertake textual analysis with a focus on the central relationship that drives the plot.
208 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 22.
of that comparison to the meaning of the action that makes a romance novel a *romance* novel*. Her theory allows for the uses of the romance narrative, such as in chick lit, to be analysed, whereby innovative or creative uses can be identified and discussed. Regis also identifies three accidental elements of romance: “a scapegoat exiled”, “bad characters converted” to good, and a “wedding, dance, or fete”. The essential and accidental elements can be ordered in many ways; they can be doubled or trebled across a work or in one scene, and as Regis states, “a single action can accomplish the narrative purpose of two or more elements”. Elements can be ‘diminished’ where “it is merely reported after it happens”. Thus, romantic elements can be fashioned variously: “doubled, amplified, diminished, echoed, made as comic or serious as the context requires”.

Regis’s first element, “a definition of society,” usually appears early in a novel primarily to describe the society where the courtship occurs. Although the portrayal of society differs between novels, for Regis, the crucial aspect is that the society is “flawed”, “it may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt”. The “society defined” directly affects heroines and their romance. Regis argues that a couple’s eventual union signifies the hope that society can and will change, even if the heroine’s freedom is only “provisional”. Regis’s second element, the ‘meeting’ between a heroine and hero, also usually occurs early in a novel. It can occur in flashback and may indicate the conflict that will typify a relationship. Together or separate from the meeting is the ‘attraction’ between a hero and heroine:

A scene or a series of scenes scattered throughout the novel [which] establishes for the reader the reason that this couple must marry. The attraction keeps the heroine and hero involved long enough to surmount the barrier.

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209 Original emphasis. Ibid.
210 Ibid., 38-39.
211 Ibid., 30.
212 Ibid.
213 Ibid., 205.
214 Ibid., 31.
215 Ibid.
216 Ibid., 16.
217 Ibid., 31-32.
218 Ibid., 33.
Attraction occurs because of “sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals or feelings, society’s expectations, and economic issues”. Once a couple meets and feels mutual attraction, they may declare their love. For Regis, this element can occur anywhere:

Their variable placement helps create the variety of plots within the set of possibilities open to the romance novel. Move the declaration scene up, coincident with the meeting scene, and the novel presents a love-at-first-sight situation. [...] Move the declaration to the very end of the novel, and the heroine and hero declare their love for each other after the novel’s barrier has been surmounted; often enough, the barrier was their inability or unwillingness to declare for each other, and the declaration scene marks the end of this barrier.

Though there may be attraction and even a declaration, barriers often prevent the hero and heroine’s union. Regis notes that barriers are either internal (circumstances inside the hero or heroine’s mind) or external (circumstances outside the hero or heroine’s mind). Internal barriers include, “attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs held by heroine and hero that prevent the union”. For Regis, the barrier “drives the romance novel” and may be:

Literally any psychological vice, virtue, or problem, any circumstance of life, whether economic, geographical, or familial can be made a part of the barrier and investigated at whatever length the writer sees fit.

According to Regis, overcoming barriers enables couples to consummate their romance because, freed from the barriers, heroines obtain freedom, “choose their hero” and readers experience joy, where:

In overcoming the barrier, the heroine moves from a state of bondage or constraint to a state of freedom. The heroine is not extinguished and the reader is not bound. Quite the contrary. The heroine is freed and the reader rejoices.

Romance novels always reach a point when the barriers seem insurmountable. Regis draws upon Northrop Frye’s term, “the point of ritual death”, to describe this as:

219 Ibid.
220 Ibid., 34.
221 Ibid., 32.
222 Ibid.
223 Ibid.
224 Ibid.
225 Ibid., 15.
The moment [...] when the union between heroine and hero, the hoped-for resolution, seems absolutely impossible, when it seems that the barrier will remain, more substantial than ever. The happy ending is most in jeopardy at this point.\textsuperscript{226}

According to Regis, the heroine is “targeted” for ritual death and “beneath [the heroine’s] very real trials in the narrative is the myth of death and rebirth”.\textsuperscript{227} A real death or event equal to death often marks this scene. Yet, as Regis stresses, the heroine’s actual death does not usually occur. If she did die, the outcomes linked to her union, such as society reformed and community renewed, would be impossible. Rather, the heroine, “is freed from [death’s] presence, and this freedom is the mythic counterpart of the freedom that results from the lifting of the barrier”.\textsuperscript{228} In overcoming “death”, readers subsequently experience joy.\textsuperscript{229} Romance novels always reveal ways to surmount barriers in a recognition scene. Regis explains, “the heroine is at the centre of the recognition scene, where any number of things can be ‘recognized’”,\textsuperscript{230} depending on whether barriers are internal or external.\textsuperscript{231} External barriers may be “removed or disregarded”.\textsuperscript{232} Internal barriers may be resolved when a heroine understands “her own psyche better”.\textsuperscript{233} As Regis notes, “what is recognized and when it is recognized vary enormously”.\textsuperscript{234} Importantly, protagonists are “recognized for who he or she truly is, and this recognition fells the barrier and permits the betrothal to go forward”.\textsuperscript{235}

Romance narratives usually culminate in a couple’s ‘betrothal’, Regis’s eighth and final romantic element. It represents overcoming the barriers and escaping symbolic or actual death; these together signify a heroine’s freedom. Once the heroine is free, she can “choose her hero”. The betrothal occurs in, “a scene or scenes [where] the hero asks the heroine to marry him and she accepts; or the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 35.
\item \textsuperscript{227} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{228} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{229} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{230} Ibid., 36.
\item \textsuperscript{231} Ibid., 32.
\item \textsuperscript{232} Ibid., 36.
\item \textsuperscript{233} Ibid., 37.
\item \textsuperscript{234} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{235} Ibid., 36.
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heroine asks the hero, and he accepts”. Because the understanding of marriage has changed, Regis notes that although contemporary couples may not marry, readers should be certain they “end up together”. According to Regis, betrothal scenes always indicate a union based upon a heroine’s newfound freedom. In Chapters Five to Ten, I apply Regis’s definition and elements of romance to Australian chick novels. While most chick novels are romances by Regis’s definition, some are, ‘near miss’ romances, where one or more vital elements are excluded. Novels that exclude romantic elements affect the heroine and reader. Heroines cannot obtain freedom and therefore readers cannot experience true joy. Regis’s definition of the essential elements helps to analyse chick lit. True chick romances can be identified through their organisation of the elements. Like their romantic counterparts, chick novels vary the order, strength and number of times each romantic element is used.

Regis’s Romance Heroines

Regis outlines key characteristics of the romance heroine. The first characteristic lies in romance’s relationship to the comedy genre. Regis argues that romances are a sub-genre of comedies and romance “in the larger sense”. The central comedic protagonist is usually a male while women are objects of desire and central to the plot. Regis focuses on comedies that shifted to a female protagonist. The comedic hero is usually in conflict with his father or a similar figure that prevents the hero taking power or ruling. Quite different forces hinder the female romantic heroine who “must overcome the laws, dangers, and limitations imposed upon them by the state, the church, or society, including the family”. Regis argues that these restrictions occur simply because the heroine is female. These constraints, as explored through the heroine, mean that, “the romance novel’s focus on the heroine, then, is a focus

236 Ibid., 37.
237 Ibid., 38.
238 Regis suggests that some readers will argue that a novel is romance because they have filled in “missing romance elements.” Two novels regularly read as romances, but Regis argues are not are Rebecca, which contains fragments of romance and Gone with the Wind in which the barrier between Rhett and Scarlett remains. See Regis’s chapter on “The Genre’s Limits”. Ibid., 47-50.
239 Ibid., 28.
240 Ibid., 29.
on women's problems". The constraints a heroine experiences can tell critics much about how the narrator views the context in which the story is set.

Like comedies, romances progress towards the heroine's freedom. The male comedic hero experiences what Regis notes is nearly an absolute freedom. Firstly, he overcomes a character, such as his father, who blocks his claim to power. Secondly, he enters a union with a heroine that promises marriage and children, signifying the “ascension of the next generation to rule”. Alternatively, comic heroines only experience a “provisional” freedom according to Regis. The heroine has “her life […] restored to her, symbolically or actually” by surmounting the point of ritual death. She also achieves freedom from the barriers preventing her relationship with the hero. However, state imposed restrictions prevent her absolute freedom. Hence, a male hero ideally runs the state before a comedy ends. While a heroine obtains some freedom, she may still experience constraint by the “new society at the end of the work”. Despite freedom being provisional, as Regis argues, it is nevertheless freedom; the heroine has freedom to choose and enter a relationship with the hero. As well, the heroine “rejects various encumbrances imposed by the old society to arrive at a place where society stops hindering her”. This emphasis on the heroine’s progression to freedom refocuses the romance plot and offers a way to read a heroine’s social impediments and the journey taken to reject them. Regis’s theory in relation to the heroine emphasises two predominant ideas. Firstly, an analysis of the romance heroine offers a glimpse into women's problems generally. Secondly, the heroine's journey through romance focuses on her freedom.

The romance heroine, according to Regis, is shaped by shifts and changes relating to three dominant social trends: the “rise of affective individualism”, “companionate marriage” and love and “property rights for women”. Regis

241 Ibid.
242 Ibid., 16.
243 Ibid.
244 Ibid.
245 Ibid., 30.
argues that these three trends “meet and clash on the pages of the romance novel”. These trends are framed by the “fact of female life” that most women marry. Drawing on Lawrence Stone’s work, Regis defines affective individualism as the “advent of the idea that the individual’s fulfilment is the end of life itself”. Affective individualism relates to the changed expectation of the individual whose needs began to transcend those of the state or family. Regis argues that the romance, with its focus on freedom, offers an excellent way to express and examine this trend.

Romance also expresses the second social trend: the way companionate marriage was influencing understandings of courtship. Regis defines companionate marriage as one where union is based on “mutual comfort and support, including love, between spouses”. Regis suggests that this belief was the main reason for marriage as the romance novel emerged as a significant literary form.

The third trend relates to the “status of wives under English law”, particularly relating to property rights, or as Regis notes, their “lack thereof”. In the eighteenth century, marriage led to a woman’s property legally becoming her husband’s so she had “absolute dependence” on him. Regis identifies possible restrictions and abuses by husbands against their wives because he controlled the finances and property which made the courtship period imperative for women. The choice of a husband determined her living circumstances and that of any children. Thus, Regis describes courtship as a time of “conflicting goals” where, “the goal of individual self-fulfilment had to be measured against the need for financial support and the desire for love”. Much early romance novel writing played an important role in representing this time of “conflicting goals”.

246 Ibid., 55.
247 Ibid., 56.
248 Ibid.
249 Ibid.
250 Ibid., 57.
251 Ibid.
252 Ibid.
253 Ibid.
254 Ibid., 58.
Together, the three social trends suggest the changing role of women, evolving laws in relation to marriage and property and shifting cultural expectations. In sum, Regis asserts:

> Heroines in twentieth-century romance novels are not wispy, ephemeral girls sitting around waiting for the hero so that their lives can begin. They are intelligent and strong. They have to be. They have to tame the hero. They have to heal him. Or they have to do both.\(^{255}\)

Their legacy continues through in contemporary forms such as chick lit. For Regis, how these three social trends are represented in romance narratives is important. While the trends indicate much about the power of the form, the tone of romance novels often betrays the importance of its social message. The romance is a site where heroines “strive for, and win, affective individualism, property rights, and, above all, companionate marriage”.\(^{256}\) Despite the struggles that heroines and heroes endure in their pursuit of such freedoms, Regis emphasises that the tone of such novels is “often lighthearted”.\(^{257}\) Like Darce-Frenier and Jensen, Regis alludes to the doubleness of romances, or as she phrases it, their “two toned” nature where endings can be light-hearted, expressing a heroine’s freedom and joy while simultaneously referring to ‘serious issues’.

For Regis, the romantic elements culminate in “two great liberations”\(^{258}\) that ultimately free the heroine.\(^{259}\) Regis asserts that the emphasis on freedom accounts for readers’ enthusiasm for romances and counters the main criticisms of the genre. As Regis argues:

> This state of freedom is the opposite of the bondage that feminists claim is the result of reading romance novels—both for heroine and reader. Here is the reason that readers react to the happy ending with enthusiasm—with joy. Each of the other elements of the romance novel offers other delights to the reader, but the barrier and the point of ritual death answer the critics’ chief complaint most directly: heroines are not extinguished, they are freed. Readers are not bound by the form; they rejoice because they are in love with freedom.\(^{260}\)

\(^{255}\) Ibid., 206.
\(^{256}\) Ibid., 205.
\(^{257}\) Ibid., 206.
\(^{258}\) Ibid., 15.
\(^{259}\) Ibid., 30.
\(^{260}\) Ibid., 15-16.
Regis cautions however that a heroine’s freedom although “provisional” is still “a victory”. 261 The importance of the ending cannot be overstated:

[The heroine] is freed from the immediate encumbrances that prevent her union with the hero. When the heroine achieves freedom, she chooses the hero. The happy ending celebrates this. 262

Obtaining freedom is a vital aspect of a heroine’s wider quest and indeed what makes romantic novel reading enjoyable for readers.

Regis’s elements enable an analysis of chick heroines relating to how they attain freedom; a freedom that readers enjoy. Chapters Five to Nine consider the romantic elements in chick lit. I argue that chick lit echoes Jeanne Dubino’s observation that romances, “seem to respond to a need in women that patriarchal capitalism fails to address”. 263 By applying the romantic elements, chick lit’s engagement with romance can be assessed, as can their representation of women’s freedom.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has outlined the approaches, defences and criticisms of romance novels as a framework for analysing chick lit. I have reviewed relevant literature on romance and romantic love and concluded that there is a strong relationship between the most powerful criticisms of the romance novel and the unresolved “problem of romantic love” within the women’s movement. Because of the complexity, ambiguity and disagreement over how to reform romance and love in women’s personal relationships, it is no surprise that romance novels have been attacked because they appear to add to the problem rather than offer practical ways to unite political views with personal life. A recent reconsideration of love and the notion of romance from feminist philosophers suggest a move to understand how love, and potentially romance, can be productive and even politicised for women. I have summarised the main arguments from the “three waves” of theory about the romance novel, the foundational investigations by Radway, Modleski, Mussell and Snitow, the

261 Ibid., 16.
262 Ibid.
defences of the genre, particularly by romance writers, and the more recent investigations that explore the complexity and contradictory nature of romance novels. In light of her study into Mills and Boon romances in 1986, Ann Jones contemplated a “hybrid” novel that combined “feminist depth of analysis” with a “plausibly positive ending”. In Chapters Five to Nine, I discuss selected Australian chick novels to support my argument that the genre offers potential incarnations of the “hybrid” that Jones anticipated. Moreover, Regis’s definition of romance and eight essential elements suggests that romances can reveal much about the society presented including the progression of their heroines to “freedom”. As I argue in Chapter Four, chick lit has been viewed as the most recent example in the evolution of the romance.

The next chapter outlines the feminist theory I draw on to analyse Australian chick lit. I differentiate second wave feminism from postfeminism and third wave feminism and apply this theory in my case study chapters.
Chapter Three: Slippage Between the Seams: Theorising Contemporary Feminism

The adoption of a binary logic to conceptualise the relationship between third wave feminism and postfeminism is misleading in many cases as it does not account for the slippage between the two terms and often rests on an overly simplistic view of postfeminism as defeatism.

Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon

What is positive in the ethics of affirmation is the belief that negative effects can be transformed. This implies a dynamic view of all affects, even those that freeze us in pain, horror or mourning.

Rosi Braidotti

Introduction

In 2011, Rosalind Gill and Angela McRobbie published separate articles outlining their views of contemporary feminism and its detractors. In “Sexism Reloaded, or, it’s Time to Get Angry Again”, Gill argued that feminist media scholars needed to reclaim the word ‘sexism’ and be braver in identifying it, particularly in the media industries, in postfeminist culture, in relation to sexualisation, the psychosocial (defined as sexism positioned as ideology and “common sense”) and what she described as the “conjunctural”, where sexism intersects with and relates to “racism, ageism, classism, homophobia, (dis)ablist and [...] transnational(ism)”. Gill noted that contemporary sexism is defined by its “unspeakability” where: “a key way in which sexism operates in contemporary media workplaces is precisely through the invalidation and

1 Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon, Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 156.
annihilation of any language for talking about structural inequalities".\(^4\) She implored feminist media scholars to “get angry again” particularly about the media’s role in neoliberalism and the “continued acceptance of the injustices of global capitalism”.\(^5\)

Echoing similar concerns, Angela McRobbie’s article in *Public Policy Research* reflected on “the climate of anti-feminism” in a “post-feminist” popular and political culture over the last twenty years. McRobbie described the anti-feminism of this period as “sophisticated” because it “upholds the principles of gender equality while denigrating the figure of the feminist”.\(^6\) McRobbie referred specifically to the “individualisation” of young women alongside “competition, ambition, meritocracy, self-help, and the rise of the ‘alpha girl’” which, she asserted, had replaced the feminist collective and group concerns.\(^7\) Young women’s individualisation, McRobbie insisted, is tied to a “new form of consumer citizenship”.\(^8\) Without an active women’s movement, McRobbie fears that women’s rights, particularly relating to sexual violence and reproductive freedom, will be scaled back.\(^9\) Like Gill, McRobbie calls for new modes of engagement and feminist thinking in response to retrogressive policies such as those designed to scale back “women’s reproductive freedoms”.\(^10\)

Gill and McRobbie’s articles form a clarion call for increased discussion about women’s rights and feminism, particularly by feminist media scholars.\(^11\) Both articles emphasise that structural inequalities and sexism remain; the aims of

\(^4\) Gill, “Sexism Reloaded, or, It’s Time to Get Angry Again!,” 63. Authors such as McRobbie (2009), Lazar (2009) and Woodward and Woodward (2009) also discuss the difficulty of critique within a postfeminist media age.
\(^5\) Gill, "Sexism Reloaded, or, It’s Time to Get Angry Again!,” 68.
\(^7\) Ibid.: 181.
\(^8\) Ibid.: 182.
\(^9\) Ibid.: 184.
\(^10\) Ibid.
\(^11\) Imelda Whelehan and Andrea Press have reflected on the current media age dominated by postfeminism. Press (2011) has suggested that a “more holisic analysis” of postfeminist media contexts is necessary if feminism is to retain its critical perspective (108). In particular, Press suggests that feminist media scholars investigate the reception and interpretation of media texts by viewers, especially their understanding of feminism (112). Whelehan (2010) has noted the way that postfeminist critical analysis can be “nothing short of disheartening and sometimes frankly boring” (159) because of the repetitious nature of the criticism.
the 1960s and 1970s women’s movement have not been completely realised
and, indeed, for McRobbie, there is the ever-present threat of those gains being
rescinded. Such calls to arms beg the question of how best to approach media
representations of women’s contemporary social reality. Texts, such as chick lit,
with their contemporary settings represent a world transformed by women’s
rights and as Stephanie Harzewski notes, offers “a lens” to view contemporary
gender relations. At the same time, feminist media studies scholars face a
complex theoretical field of multiple competing and sometimes contradictory
feminisms. For Whelehan (2010), postfeminism has become “an empty
signifier” because it has become “overburdened with meanings” while its main
audience fails to “recognise the feminist rhetoric that it is parasitic upon”.

This Chapter critically examines key approaches to the complex and, at times,
highly contradictory field of contemporary feminism, one commonly designated
as “postfeminist”. I outline key approaches to defining and understanding
postfeminism including Chris Holmlund’s formulation of postfeminism’s “three
feminine faces” (“Academic”, “Chick” and “Grrrl”). Holmlund defines academic
feminism as a theoretical approach reflective of the “post-ing” of feminism,
“steeped in French, British, and American postmodern, postcolonial,
postructural, queer (etc.), theory”. Chick postfeminism, at its most basic, is
defined as a backlash against feminism, while “Grrrl” postfeminism refers to
feminism’s third wave. I argue that demarcating boundaries between these
three postfeminisms, particularly “chick” and “grrrl”, so that individually they
can be deployed as useful theoretical tools is difficult, if not impossible. I agree
with Genz and Brabon’s (2009) insightful observation that there is “slippage”
between the two terms and argue that there is also slippage between their main
discursive threads. I make this point about “slippage” because when applying
contemporary feminist theory to chick lit narratives, this slippage becomes

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13 Whelehan, “Remaking Feminism: Or Why Is Postfeminism So Boring?,” 159.
   for discussions of the current epoch of feminism as postfeminist.
16 Ibid.
17 Genz and Brabon, *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories*, 156.
apparent and important. The theoretical “slippage” between different feminisms makes it difficult to simply apply postfeminism to media texts; as I argue in my case study chapters, chick lit, especially their characters and themes can be read through multiple feminisms. This chapter argues that the slippage between different feminisms, especially postfeminism and third wave feminism, supports Angela McRobbie’s observation that feminism and postfeminism are entangled (what she calls a “double entanglement”). I do not adhere to a bleak picture of contemporary feminism; rather, I see the interconnection and slippage between feminisms as potentially positive in the style of Rosi Braidotti’s “affirmative ethics”.

**Defining Contemporary Feminism: Limits and Opportunities**

Any analysis of feminism and romance requires a statement of what one means by ‘feminism’. As I outlined in Chapter One, Cranny-Francis emphasises the importance of genre texts being written from a “self-consciously feminist perspective” to create a reading position that corresponds to the “feminist subject constructed by feminist discourse”. There is no single definition of feminism, just as there is no obvious single “feminist subject”, “feminist reading position” and therefore no single “feminist fiction”. Rather, a multitude of voices and theoretical perspectives compete; many are devoted to discussions of postfeminism and third wave feminism. This section outlines key approaches to contemporary feminism (particularly postfeminism and third wave feminism) that inform my reading of chick lit.

How contemporary feminism is approached, understood and applied determines what one finds. A common construction of contemporary feminism is the “wave” metaphor, articulating a deterministic feminist history through

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18 McRobbie (2004b) defines “double entanglement” as “the co-existence of neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life [...] with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations”.
19 Braidotti, “On Putting the Active Back into Activism.”
21 Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City*, 15. Rosemarie Tong (1989) outlined different threads of feminism including “Liberal” and “Radical” feminism. Imelda Whelehan in *The Feminist Bestseller’s* Introduction notes that “definitions of feminist fiction are so tricky that one has to accept there is no agreement on what this might be” (15).
three main waves. The first wave began at the 1848 Seneca Falls, New York, women's rights convention, which aimed at “gaining a legal identity for women that included the right to own property, to sue, to form contracts, and to vote”.22 The second wave, peaking in the 1960s and 1970s, as summarised by Dicker and Piepmeier, was “spurred by the civil rights movement, countercultural protests, and the publication of crucial texts, including Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1962)*.23 This wave aimed at “gaining full human rights for women” including equality in the workplace and education opportunities, access to reproductive health care including contraception and safe abortion, no fault divorce, access to child care, and an end to violence against women.24 The third wave partly emerges out of and in response to second wave feminism. Dicker and Piepmeier state that the third wave “insist[s] on women’s diversity”, takes into account the changed global context where women’s rights are “shaped by—and—respond to a world of global capitalism and information technology, postmodernism and postcolonialism, and environmental degradation”.25 Third wave feminism, in name and approach, therefore fits into what Deborah Siegel describes as “the oceanography of feminism”.26 The appropriation of the “wave” terminology suggests identification with previous aims and goals as well as the activist impulse of the women’s movement.

Postfeminism’s relationship to feminism is much more complicated. As Genz and Brabon assert, “the relationship between feminist and postfeminist discourses are multiple and varied”.27 They explain:

Confusion rules as postfeminism is variously identified or associated with an anti-feminist backlash, pro-feminist third wave, Girl Power dismissive of feminist politics, trendy me-first power feminism and academic postmodern feminism.28

25 Ibid., 10.
28 Ibid.
Their observation indicates that postfeminism exists within, between and outside the ‘oceanography’ of the women’s movement. Arguably, the emergence of postfeminism(s) exposes the limits of the wave metaphor to describe the history of the women’s movement. For Jonathon Dean, while the initial use of the wave metaphor:

[W]as originally called upon to inject a degree of openness, diversity and internationalism into feminism [it] risks [...] reinscribing the hegemony of a specifically Anglo-American reading of feminist history, which [...] may have limited applicability to other contexts.29

Moreover for Dean, “the generational wave paradigm perhaps undoes that which is most radical and threatening about feminism”. While Dean fears the use of “waves” may obfuscate feminism’s “radical potential”, Angela McRobbie argues that a “critical debate” about the limits of the “waves model” is “long overdue”.30 For McRobbie, the wave model simplifies feminist history into a kind of deterministic timeline of starts and finishes and is “tied to simplistic ideas and Western-dominated kinship metaphors about mothers and daughters”.31 Furthermore, McRobbie sees the “idea of waves” as “a hindrance to discussions about change and the impact of new concepts and ideas to existing practices”.32 Thus, the wave lexicon should be viewed critically. My reference to “waves” of feminism, particularly the “third wave”, like McRobbie, is “with caution” and primarily “on the basis of this being a self-description of often web-based activism and writing”.33

A slightly different version of the wave metaphor sees postfeminism as part of a linear history of feminism. In this version, postfeminism comes ‘after’ feminism, interpreting the ‘post’ literally as ‘following’ feminism. Jane Kalbfleisch outlines three possible relationships between feminism and postfeminism. The first relationship is in “opposition”. She attests that “many contemporary feminists engage in a rhetoric of opposition that assumes feminism and postfeminism are

30 McRobbie, The Aftermath of Feminism: Gender, Culture and Social Change, 156.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid., 156-57.
33 Ibid., 157.
fully distinguishable and, at least for the time being, distinct”. Kalbfleisch asserts that even those who “advocate postfeminist positions often employ the same rhetoric”. For example, Julia Kristeva’s “Women’s Time” posits three generations of feminisms: “liberal”, “radical” and “postfeminist”. As Kalbfleisch notes, while being “pro-postfeminist”, Kristeva employs binary logic to comment on the differences between liberal, radical and post-feminism where, the “new generation [...] appears to speak from somewhere outside and above the body of feminist theory” and “speaking after liberal and radical feminists, postfeminists reap the benefits of a myth of linear progress by claiming some temporal edge over previous generations”. Kalbfleisch however rejects a linearity of feminist time, instead positing “the parallel existence of all three in the same historical time, or even that they be interwoven one with the other”. As Kalbfleisch concludes, “the new generation does not replace the other two [...] although all three generations are currently speaking, however, the postfeminist voice is the newest one, the latest trend”. Genz and Brabon interpret this oppositional relationship as double coded as, on one hand, freeing from historical constraints or on the other as a “deplorable regression and a loss of traditional values and certainties”.

Kalbfleisch’s second rhetorical position is one of “inclusion” whereby the “binary logic of exclusion” is rejected to “tolerate and even celebrate difference, it persists in stifling anxiety by simply displacing polarizations from within (post)feminism to the relationship between (post)feminism and some Other”. Kalbfleisch critiques Toril Moi’s “move from the first rhetoric to the second” in particular, noting how Moi “reconceives the relationship between liberal,

35 Ibid.
36 Kalbfleisch (1997) notes that in “Women’s Time” Kristeva does not use these specific phrasings of different generations of feminists. The delineation of “liberal”, “radical” and “postfeminist” is Toril Moi’s (1985) interpretation of Kristeva’s discussion.
40 Genz and Brabon, Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories, 13.
radical, and postfeminism”. Moi explains the new “inclusive” position as one where “feminists”:

Have to hold all three positions simultaneously [...] We must, then at once live out the contradiction of all three feminisms and agonistically take sides: simply sitting on the fence will never demolish patriarchy. As feminists we will have to make hard and often unpalatable political choices in the full knowledge of what we are giving up. Since every choice is an act of exclusion, to take up a political position means accepting the pain of loss, sacrifice, and closure, even if our choice entails following the free-wheeling paths of Derridean deconstruction.

Kalbfleisch reads Moi’s theoretical shift as indicating that postfeminism is “just one of three diverse but united minds equipped to master the body of patriarchy”. Kalbfleisch sees the rhetoric of opposition and the rhetoric of inclusion as attempts to “eradicate the anxiety-producing difference between feminism and postfeminism and within feminists and postfeminists”. However, she sees value in a “rhetoric of anxiety” that would “foreground the conflict, contradiction, and ambiguity both between and within us”.

Kalbfleisch’s discussion anticipates a number of new formulations of postfeminist theory. For authors such as Sarah Projansky, Rosalind Gill, Chris Holmlund and Genz and Brabon, postfeminism manifests in different and complex ways. Sarah Projansky in Watching Rape: Film and Television in a Postfeminist Culture, for example, posits five “interrelated categories of postfeminist discourses”: “linear postfeminism”, “backlash postfeminism”, “equality and choice postfeminism”, “(hetero)sex-positive postfeminism” and “men can be feminists too”. Similar to the discussion above of the waves or historically located generations of feminism, Projansky defines “linear postfeminism” as “the representation of a historical trajectory from prefeminism through to feminism and then on to the end point of

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postfeminism”. Unlike Kristeva and Moi who contemplated the coexistence of different versions of feminism, Projansky’s “linear postfeminism” sees feminism and postfeminism’s coexistence as “impossible” where “since postfeminism always supplants feminism, feminism logically no longer exists”. “Backlash postfeminism”, according to Projansky, is defined as one that “rather than simply declaring feminism over [...] aggressively lash[es] back at feminism”. Backlash postfeminism “lashes back” by offering new and improved forms of feminism “as a corrective for a previous problematic ‘victim’ feminism” or offers a “new traditionalist postfeminism” that “appeals to a nostalgia for a prefeminist past as an ideal that feminism has supposedly destroyed”. “Equality and choice postfeminism” is defined by Projansky as “narratives about feminism’s ‘success’ in achieving gender ‘equity’ and having given women ‘choice,’ particularly with regard to labor and family”. While this type of postfeminism acknowledges the gains and successes of feminism, it assumes that women no longer need to fight for their rights and thus have no need for feminism. The fourth category, (hetero)sex-positive postfeminism “defines feminism as antisex and then offers itself as a current, more positive, alternative [...] that embraces a feminism focused on individuality and independence”. Projansky’s fifth and final category, “men can be feminists too”, evidences the supposed success of feminism to make women “equal”. In this category, men “take over women’s roles as feminine subjects, feminists, or both”, sometimes outperforming women. As Projansky notes of these categories of postfeminism, “most versions [...] can function as either a condemnation or a celebration of women and feminism”.

Another formulation of postfeminist theory is posited by Chris Holmlund who subsumes three “faces” of postfeminism under the meta-discourse of

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48 Ibid., 67.
49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid.
53 Ibid.
54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., 68.
56 Ibid., 85.
57 Ibid., 86.
“postfeminism”. In 2004, *Cinema Journal* dedicated an issue to examining postfeminism in contemporary media studies. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra’s Introduction emphasised the importance of defining and extending the knowledge of postfeminism within media studies. For Tasker and Negra, this comes in an age, where, as they argue, “feminist critiques are in real danger of irrelevance”.

Chris Holmlund’s essay, one of four in the issue, identifies and applies three main postfeminisms to recent films. Holmlund’s “three distinctly feminine faces” of postfeminism (A or “Academic postfeminism”, C or “Chick postfeminism” and G or “Grrrl postfeminism”) intersect and co-exist.

‘Academic postfeminism’, according to Holmlund, is a ‘smaller’ group of postfeminists than the ‘C’ and ‘G’s’, “steeped in French, British, and American postmodern, postcolonial, poststructural, queer, (etc.), theory”. They positively employ the term ‘postfeminism’ to indicate a theoretical stance linked to postmodernism and poststructuralism. Chick postfeminism, the second postfeminism discussed by Holmlund relates to aspects of popular culture and specifically chick romance. According to Holmlund, “chick” postfeminism is:

Promoted in magazines, debated on talk shows and paraded in newspapers [...It] entails a backlash against or dismissal of the desirability for equality between women and men, in the workforce and in the family. ‘Chick’ postfeminists are generally young; a few are middle-aged; none seem old (Botox helps). Many are hostile to the goals and gains of second-wave feminism; others simply take these gains and goals for granted. Some like to party, dress up, and step out, taking breaks from work to date or shop; others stay home, tending hearth, hubby, and kids.

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61 Holmlund, “Postfeminism from A to G,” 116.
62 Under the ‘C’ postfeminist name, Holmlund draws together three of the postfeminisms suggested by Sarah Projansky (2001) in *Watching Rape*: backlash postfeminism, equality and choice postfeminism and hetero(sex)-positive postfeminism.
64 Holmlund, “Postfeminism from A to G.”
Holmlund connects postfeminism to the media created “backlash” myths and the emphasis on the freedoms and choices of chick postfeminists who can “party” or “dress up”. She suggests that freedom and choice, gained by this generally “young” group of women, is expressed through choices relating to the body, sexuality, consumption, home and work. Some chick postfeminists try to reconcile the two domains of home and work or “choose” to work or “stay home”.65

In comparison to ‘C’ postfeminists, ‘G’ postfeminism for Holmlund refers to a “wilder bunch” of primarily American “riot grrrls” or third wave feminists.66 These postfeminists are:

Politically engaged yet playful. They are happy to acknowledge the diversity among women that ‘chick’ postfeminism ignores, and they are eager to carry on first- and second-wave feminist struggles.67

Holmlund applies these three “feminine faces” of postfeminism to two films, Out of Sight and Real Women Have Curves concluding the former is “primarily postfeminist” and the latter is “feminist”.68 Despite outlining three “faces” of postfeminism initially, Holmlund’s analysis reverts back to an oppositional feminist-postfeminist approach where “chick postfeminism” is rebadged as “postfeminism” and “grrrl postfeminism” becomes “feminism”. Holmlund’s delineation of three postfeminisms is useful for my study of chick lit in that “Academic postfeminism” accords with the theoretical approach taken to examining contemporary media texts, whereas “Chick postfeminism” equates to the dominant discussions of postfeminism while “Grrrl postfeminism” equates to a third wave feminist position.

These models of contemporary feminism raise a number of questions in relation to their applicability as analytical tools. For example, how does a theorist describe the appearance of elements of “chick postfeminism” and “third

66 The Riot Grrrls are a women’s punk rock movement that began in the United States in the early 1990s as a response to the sexism inherent in the punk music scene. They utilize fan-based zines as a way to address issues such as rape and body image, infused with a feminist sentiment. See Kristen Schilt, “‘A Little Too Ironic’: The Appropriation and Packaging of Riot Grrrl Politics by Mainstream Female Musicians,” Popular Music and Society 26, no. 1 (2003).
68 Ibid.: 119.
wave feminism” in a single text? What are the benefits of describing a text or texts as either “chick postfeminist” or “third wave feminist”? Are aspects of feminism “invoked” simply so that feminism can be “taken into account”, “undone” or rejected, as critics of postfeminism argue? Kristeva and Moi’s discussion about the “coexistence” of feminisms is useful in this instance. Kristeva suggests that “radical”, “liberal” and “postfeminist” generations exist in “parallel” while Moi expanded on this to argue that feminists had to “hold” the three positions (“radical”, “liberal” and “postfeminist”) together “simultaneously”. Therefore, do Kristeva and Moi’s arguments suggest that literary or media texts contain these three positions simultaneously and if so, how does a theorist best explain the presence of these positions?

Genz and Brabon address the underlying concerns raised in these questions about postfeminism by adopting Kalbfleisch’s “rhetoric of anxiety” with its emphasis on “conflict, contradiction and ambiguity”. Genz and Brabon “introduce a contextual approach that highlights postfeminism’s multiplicity and intersections”. However, they emphasise that they do not want to “establish and fix the meaning of postfeminism” but rather “explore the postfeminist ‘frontier’ and the ongoing struggle over its contents”. For them, postfeminism offers:

A different conceptual model to understand political and critical practice—it is not so much a depoliticisation or trivialisation of feminism as an active reinterpretation of contemporary forms of critique and politics that take into account the diverse agency positions of individuals today.

Their approach partly seeks to investigate the intersectionality of postfeminism with culture and politics. As they note:

Instead of conceiving postfeminism merely in terms of an exclusionist and exclusive viewpoint—appealing only to cliché-loving, privileged women—we contend that its individualism highlights the plurality and contradictions of contemporary female (and male) experience. We

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71 Genz and Brabon, Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories, 17.
72 Ibid., 18.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid., 33.
suggest that postfeminism gives rise to a contradictory and potentially problematic stance that is doubly coded in political terms—being able to act in both conservative and subversive ways, while also repudiating ‘traditional’ activist strategies and communal demonstrations.\textsuperscript{75}

In a chapter on “Third Wave Feminism”, Genz and Brabon reject the use of “binary logic” to “conceptualise the relationship between third wave feminism and postfeminism”.\textsuperscript{76} They argue that a binary distinction between postfeminism and third wave feminism is “misleading […] as it does not account for the slippage between the two terms and often rests on an overly simplistic view of postfeminism as defeatism”.\textsuperscript{77} This observation is useful for analysing chick lit. Although Genz and Brabon note the tendency for “slippage” to occur between the terms “postfeminism” and “third wave feminism”, as I argue in Chapters Five to Nine, within the context of a literary narrative there is “slippage” between dominant discourses associated with postfeminism and third wave feminism. For example, depending on the context, heroines exhibit and move between “postfeminist” and/or “third wave” characteristics. As I describe below, I have interpreted third wave feminism as continuing the feminist critique of patriarchy and gender inequality, while postfeminism at its most extreme ignores, forgets or “lashes back” at second wave feminism.

**Dominant Themes in Contemporary Feminism: An Introduction**

This section outlines dominant themes that emerge in theoretical discussions of postfeminism and third wave feminism. These themes are the relationships with others (including with feminism), the body, consumption and display, work and home, and men/masculinity. In following the work of Braidotti, McRobbie and Gill, notions of freedom, choice, individualism and neoliberalism circulate through these key themes.\textsuperscript{78} While I treat postfeminism and third wave feminism separately in this section, I only do so as a way of organising these dominant themes. I map these key themes to firstly identify differences

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 39.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 156.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid.
between postfeminism and third wave feminism and secondly to note possible sites of slippage.

(Chick) Postfeminism

Post-feminist neo-liberalism is a variation on the theme of historical amnesia in that it expresses the rejection of the sense of a common connection to other women.79

The women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s presented itself as vibrant and politically active. Postfeminism however appears to relish the hard-fought gains of the women’s movement, turning a blind eye to ongoing sexism, misogyny and sexual discrimination; indeed postfeminism assumes all the work towards sexual equality is done. Holmlund’s basic definition of “chick postfeminism” is that it “entails a backlash against or a dismissal of the desirability for equality between women and men, in the workforce and in the family”.80 Even in the most basic definition, postfeminism’s relationship with feminism is a central concern, one widely discussed in the theoretical field.81 Postfeminism’s relationship with feminism is complex in that it ranges from positive through to a complete rejection of feminism sometimes expressed through metaphors of “live burial” and even “live autopsy”.82 Although uses of the term ‘postfeminism’ pre-date the 1980s, it was during the supposed ‘backlash’ against feminism that the term gained currency.83

80 Holmlund, “Postfeminism from A to G.”
83 The backlash’s reaction to and against feminism and women’s rights is not a new occurrence (see Faludi 66-95 for a discussion of the backlash past and present). Although the 1980s appear as the backlash’s origin, the term ‘postfeminism’ pre-dates the 1980s, as do negative responses to feminism (Projansky, 88). Camille Nurka quoting Lynne Alice suggests that, “postfeminism (usually written as ‘postfeminism’) was coined […] between the achievement of women’s suffrage in the US and the rise of ‘second-wave’ feminism during the 1960s” (Rapp as cited in Nurka, 183). Nurka also refers to Rayna Rapp who questions the relationship between first wave feminists and postfeminism, suggesting, “first wave feminists debated analogous incorporations, revisions, and depoliticizations as their organized movement became disorganized” (Rapp as cited in Nurka, 183). Nurka’s reading of Rapp and Alice concludes that although first and second wave feminists used the term ‘postfeminism’, it did not form a movement between the waves, however, “It then leapt into the 1980s where it began to re-establish itself as a critical force to be reckoned with, accumulating popularity along the way” (Nurka, 184). See also Lotz (2001), Vavrus (2000) and Projansky (2001).
Susan Faludi’s *Backlash* outlines the 1980s media attack on the gains of the women’s movement. According to Faludi, the media’s “endless feedback loop”84 portrayed supposedly “free” and “equal” professional women as suffering “burn out”, “succumbing to an ‘infertility epidemic’” and “grieving from a ‘man shortage’”.85 For Faludi, the media suggested that feminism had contributed to women’s misery through its promotion of the dual pursuit of work and family life.86 At the same time, the women’s movement was portrayed as devoid of fun, cosmetics, men and fashion.87 Faludi countered such allegations by arguing that the media was untruthfully representing women88 while masking the continued inequality in women’s social conditions.89 Moreover, Faludi argued that women’s rights were in danger of being taken away.90 The backlash’s aim, as Faludi observed, was to “divide and isolate women at a crucial moment in the struggle for equality, independence and autonomy”.91 Angela McRobbie in her own discussions of postfeminism has remarked on the backlash’s evolution, arguing that the 1990s saw a “decisive shift” that she described as a “complexification of the backlash”. This “complexification” refers to the “common sense” agreement that “feminism had gone too far” or “backfired”.92 Arguably, interest in postfeminism suggests that Faludi’s premonition has been realised: women have been divided and isolated while confusion about feminism reigns.

Within postfeminist texts, feminism and feminists are problematised, rejected or associated with death. Problematising or rejecting feminism links to Sarah

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87 See Faludi (1991) and Nurka (2002) for further discussion.
89 She used examples from the United States and United Kingdom including women not earning equal pay, women still occupying the majority of a number of “women’s” jobs (cleaners, hairdressers, clerical workers) and experiencing inadequate childcare and maternity leave.
90 Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*, 12.
Projansky’s definition of “backlash postfeminism” as violently “lashing back” at feminism.\textsuperscript{93} Even the slightly more positive view of feminist success as no longer needed allows it, as Angela McRobbie argues, to be “taken into account”.\textsuperscript{94} For McRobbie, claims for feminist success encourage the “dismantling” of feminist politics and stave off any calls for renewal.\textsuperscript{95} Feminism, as a success, leads to the postfeminist discourse that Projansky terms, “equality and choice postfeminism” that take for granted feminism’s gain, especially the expanded choices women now have in public and private life.\textsuperscript{96} While this type of postfeminism celebrates feminist success, it assumes that feminism is no longer required.\textsuperscript{97} For Angela McRobbie any claims that equality has been achieved equates to “an illusion of equality”,\textsuperscript{98} applies predominantly to those groups of women who have benefitted most from the successes of the women’s movement. The phrase ‘postfeminist privilege’ is useful for describing these women\textsuperscript{99} as opposed to large groups of women, many living in pre-feminist contexts, that are yet to benefit from structural changes to society that address gender inequality. Mary Vavrus (2000) uses “postfeminist solipsism” to refer to “discursive patterns that constitute a solipsistic perspective on women: generalizing about women using particular women’s voices and concerns to the exclusion of others”.\textsuperscript{100} Postfeminist media discourse, particularly screen discourses, construct white western heterosexual women as its ideal subject. In Chapters Five to Nine, I examine the representation of feminism (both literal and metaphorical) and argue that Australian chick lit does not present an entirely solipsistic view of women; protagonists are diverse, including Indigenous women and those living in rural communities.

\textsuperscript{93} Projansky, \textit{Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture}, 67.
\textsuperscript{94} McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 255.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.: 256.
\textsuperscript{96} Projansky, \textit{Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture}, 67.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{98} \textit{Social Science Bites}, "Angela McRobbie on the Illusion of Equality for Women."
\textsuperscript{99} I use the phrase ‘postfeminist privilege’ in a similar way to Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) ‘white privilege’. In ‘white privilege’, McIntosh uses the phrase the ‘invisible backpack’ to describe “an invisible package of unearned assets which I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious”. In postfeminist privilege particular groups of women reap the benefits of ‘unearned’ assets such as education, reproductive health, employment and the vote without realizing they are ‘overprivileged’.
\textsuperscript{100} Mary Douglas Vavrus, "Putting Ally on Trial: Contesting Postfeminism in Popular Culture," \textit{Women’s Studies In Communication} 23, no. 3 (2000): 413.
In the place of collective feminist politics, postfeminism valorises individualism. In activist feminist politics, women united together in what Braidotti describes as “egalitarian principles of interconnection, solidarity and teamwork” in the pursuit of structural change towards women’s equality. Postfeminism disidentifies with the women’s movement by emphasising individual choice as though individual women were the only ones doing so; such choices are not seen as connecting to wider systems of power, domination or oppression. For Braidotti, this kind of individualist behaviour denies the “history of women’s struggles” and fosters “a new sense of isolation among women, and hence new forms of vulnerability”. Angela McRobbie uses the concept “postfeminist individualisation” to register the shift from “emancipatory politics” to “life politics”. Like Braidotti’s emphasis on the isolation of women, McRobbie suggests that many contemporary women find themselves “dis-embedded” from communities where gender roles were fixed and “increasingly called upon to invent their own structures”. She cites numerous “self-monitoring practices” utilised for this process of self-invention (such as the diary or life plan). The notion of postfeminist individualism takes Regis’s ‘affective individualism’ to its most extreme. While Regis’s affective individual marks the shift in women’s freedom to make choices for their own happiness rather than in line with family or even religious expectations, the postfeminist individual makes choices purely for herself.

Postfeminist culture, with its rejection of second wave feminism as “anti-men, anti-cosmetic and anti-fun” and its focus on the individual, reinscribes the importance of women’s expressions of femininity. A number of scholars, including Rosalind Gill, have explored postfeminist femininity in relation to the

102 Ibid.
104 Ibid.
105 Part of the need to invent their own structures comes from the way consumer culture, as what McRobbie describes as a “regime of truth”, has overtaken others such as education, family and community. Ibid. See also Angela McRobbie, "Young Women and Consumer-Citizenship: The Danger of Too Much Pleasure," http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/media-communications/staff/mcrobbie.php.
body. Gill’s “postfeminist sensibility” (2007) is founded on the notion that postfeminist discourses are “contradictory” while comprising “entangled” feminist and anti-feminist themes. The “stable features” of the postfeminist sensibility as described by Gill are:

The notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.

According to Gill, these features “coexist with and are structured by stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to ‘race’ and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability—as well as gender”. The first of Gill’s features of postfeminism, “femininity as a body property” refers to “postfeminist media culture” and its “obsessional preoccupation with the body”. In this theme, notions of femininity manifest in the body rather than resulting from "social structures" or “psychology”. The media presents the “sexy body” as “women's key [...] source of identity”. Within the postfeminist sensibility, Gill notes the body's double register as a “source of power” and then “unruly and requiring constant monitoring, surveillance, discipline and remodelling (and consumer spending)”. Surveillance is vital in postfeminist femininity where “women's bodies are evaluated, scrutinised and dissected [...] and are always at risk of ‘failing’”. Thus, the right body (usually a sexy body) determines one's ‘success’.

Camille Nurka’s discussion of postfeminism asserts that power underlies postfeminist representations of the body, where the ‘right’ postfeminist body (usually sexy and thin) is constructed in contrast with the

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108 Gill, “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility.”
109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Ibid.
115 Camille Nurka (2002) argues that postfeminism emphasises particular bodily and sexual expressions that respond to myths of feminism including that it was/is “anti-sex” and populated by “man-hating, dungaree-wearing, hairy armpitted, butch dykes and ‘Plain Janes’ angry at the world because they can’t get a man” (185).
“dowdy and menopausal” “feminist body”. The postfeminist individual expresses her own self-mastery and control over her body, simultaneously exerting power over others by displaying her body publicly at “the shopping centre, mall, sex shop, and lingerie outlet”. Having the “right body” and displaying it publicly suggests that the postfeminist relishes being an object and subject simultaneously.

The hyper-surveillance of the body is connected to postfeminist sexual and relationship practices. Within Gill’s postfeminist sensibility is the “pervasive sexualisation of contemporary culture” where magazines pitch sex for young women as “something requiring constant attention, discipline, self-surveillance and emotional labour”. The body is a site for policing identity and modifying it to be one’s best physical self at the same time postfeminist subjects are responsible for their sexual expression and behaviours, especially in their romantic relationships. In an analysis of postfeminism and intimacy in contemporary women’s magazine Glamour, Gill (2009) notes the importance of “self-surveillance”, particularly in its neoliberal form, as both “intense” and “extensive” in its regulation of “life and intimate conduct”. She identifies a new discourse that is emerging where women must emotionally and psychologically self-monitor including their “own feelings, desires and attitudes and those of a partner or potential partner”. For example, Gill cites the evolution of contemporary romance heroines who must now be skilful in “sexual behaviours and practices” and psychologically skilled in terms of the “intimate self”.

Transformations of the self, including the bodily and psychological self within postfeminism, connect to consumption and consumer culture within a neoliberal context. The postfeminist subject is ideally one who consumes,
particularly luxury goods, as part of her self-transformation, efforts at self-mastery and ideal self-projection. Arthurs (2003), McRobbie (2008) and Lazar (2009) have examined the relationship between postfeminism and consumer culture. Jane Arthurs for instance argues that *Sex and the City* represents a conflicted representation of women’s everyday life where both the “costs” and “benefits of living in a postfeminist consumer culture” can be questioned.\(^{122}\) For Arthurs, the show encourages viewers to emulate the luxurious commodity filled lifestyle of the heroines while simultaneously offering the opportunity “for interrogation of our own complicity in the processes of commodification—women’s narcissistic relation to the self, the production of fetishistic and alienated sexual relations”.\(^{123}\) While Arthurs offers a somewhat optimistic reading of the conflicted messages about consumption in postfeminist culture, Lazar (2009) in her analysis of beauty advertisements finds feminine entitlement “is really an entitlement to consume”.\(^{124}\) Moreover, for Lazar, the advertisements she analysed presented a particular version of femininity that assumes all women can consume equally while emphasising the postfeminist values of heteronormativity and youthfulness. Lazar finds the ads highly ambivalent in being “feminist and non-feminist”, “transgressive and reclamatory yet superficial and normative” and “progressive and regressive”.\(^{125}\) For Lazar, these contradictions can be “potentially liberating” but also can “numb resistance and deflect critique”.\(^{126}\)

The relationship between home and work is a primary site of struggle and contradiction within postfeminism. This concern is a response to the 1980s ‘superwoman’\(^{127}\) who was both mother and professional, and catchphrases such


\(^{123}\) Ibid.


\(^{125}\) Ibid.: 396.

\(^{126}\) Ibid.: 398.

\(^{127}\) Amanda Lotz outlines the popular representation of ‘superwoman’ on television in the 1980s and 1990s. She notes that “although second-wave feminists neither created nor perpetuated the idea of the superwoman as a female ideal, the superwoman character provided a response to conservatives’ critiques of feminism as anti-family.” Lotz, "Postfeminist Television Criticism: Rehabilitating Critical Terms and Identifying Postfeminist Attributes," 108.
as Helen Gurley Brown's 'having it all' and Harriet Braiker's 'Type E Woman'.

In another rhetorical move designed to distance postfeminism from feminism, rather than seeking to be a superwoman, postfeminist discourse asserts that women have 'choices' to work or stay at home. In “New Traditionalism and Post-Feminism: TV Does the Home”, Elspeth Probyn describes the notion of choice in what she terms a “post feminist ontology”:

The world's a crazy place and you have to fight for yourself but at the end of the day you can always go home. In television terms, this means that you can be a top corporate lawyer and be pregnant (L.A. Law); a hot-shot current affairs anchor and consider single parenthood (Murphy Brown); or you can just choose to stay home, and indeed be home (thirtysomething).

The two principles that you have to “fight for yourself” but you can “always go home” literally mean that women have to fight for where they are in the world, however if the fight becomes too hard, they can always ”opt out”. Probyn argues that the line between home and career is no longer clearly defined and other options, at least in popular culture, are emerging. Within this postfeminist ontology, part of taking advantage of the gains of the women's movement is choosing how to navigate home and work life. Some chick postfeminists, stay home like Probyn's 'New Traditionalist,' or enjoy working and playing (dating, shopping, dressing up). ‘New Traditionalism’ (a “reaffirmation of family values unmatched in recent history”) is apparent at the intersection of work and family and the public and private, articulating what Probyn describes as a new age of ‘choiceoisie’. “Choiceoisie”, Probyn argues, “operates not on choice but as a reaffirmation of what has supposedly always been there, always already there for the right woman [...] new traditionalism hawks the home as

128 “Having it all” is also the title of Helen Gurley Brown's 1982 how-to manual, Having It All: Love, Success, Sex, Money Even if You're Starting with Nothing. Harriet B. Braiker (1986) coined the phrase the “Type E Woman” for the woman who tries to be “everything to everybody”. Braiker critiqued the notion of “having it all” as privileging quantity over quality, where “having it all” suggested career and marriage but did not include any indication of the “quality” of the said career or marriage (168).
132 Ibid.
the ‘natural choice’—which means...no choice”.\textsuperscript{133} The articulation of choice particularly bothers Probyn who argues that although supporters of new traditionalism and postfeminism ‘choose’, such choices are “freed of the necessity of thinking about the political and social ramifications of the act of choosing”.\textsuperscript{134} One could interpret Probyn as implying the women’s movement catchphrase “the personal is political” within postfeminism results in a depoliticisation of the personal. Within this postfeminist discourse, women make choices from a select and predetermined set of options, often deciding upon the “natural choice”, such as staying home.

The choice within postfeminist discourse to work or stay home potentially limits women’s opportunities in the world. In \textit{Material Girls}, Suzanne Danuta Walters notes that “the major postfeminist paradigm has precisely been this work/family duality, which condemns feminism for helping to create the double-day/second shift syndrome, yet completely overlooks a more radical critique of either work or family”\textsuperscript{135} Walters describes postfeminist “female angst” that results from (as she quotes from a \textit{New York Times Editorial}) women going off to work to find they “were cheating home and family” or women going off to work “only to discover that work wasn’t so great after all”\textsuperscript{136} Walters regards the polarisation of work and home as “the crucial” postfeminist issue.

For Diane Negra, popular culture reflects a conservative view that “pathologises single femininity”, encourages women to “retreat” from the workforce and embrace “family values”\textsuperscript{137} Negra explores the theme of “retreatism” and the emphasis in popular culture on romance, marriage and domesticity as being imperative to women’s lives while expressive of their “family values”\textsuperscript{138} She observes the shift away from representations of “ideal femininity” associated with professionalism towards domesticity and “fantasies of hometown

\begin{enumerate}
\item \textsuperscript{133} Ibid., 131.
\item \textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 134.
\item \textsuperscript{135} Walters, \textit{Material Girls: Making Sense of Feminist Cultural Theory}, 122.
\item \textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{137} Diane Negra, “’Quality Postfeminism?’ Sex and the Single Girl on HBO,” Genders Online Journal, http://www.genders.org/g39/g39_negra.html.
\item \textsuperscript{138} Ibid.
\end{enumerate}
return”. Negra, retreatism “brings mothers and daughters back together (even after death), restores hometown sociality and intimacy, and grants its protagonists the putative freedom to be fully individualistic” while it is “frequently presented as a pathway to the recovery of the self”. Negra argues that contemporary representations of women in traditional feminine roles clearly results from the wider socio-political context that “idealize[s] mothering [...] while registering concerns about the compatibility of the ‘female personality’ and corporate workplace”. Negra critiques retreatism, particularly if it is romanticised, as a pervasive threat to women’s rights. Negra especially focuses on representations that encourage women, especially privileged women, out of the workforce. In a similar discussion to Negra, Moseley and Read examine the notion of “having it all” in relation to the television show Ally McBeal. They argue that popular texts such as Ally McBeal, navigate the relationship between home and work, often suggesting that professional success and personal happiness, feminism and femininity are “mutually exclusive”. While protagonists such as Ally McBeal attempt to reconcile work and home and feminism and femininity, they repeatedly encounter difficulties that often result in them choosing one.

The constructions of men and masculinity within a postfeminist frame are as contradictory as those relating to women. Sarah Projansky, Bonnie Dow and Rosalind Gill have outlined some of these contradictions. Projansky, for example, offers three postfeminist approaches to men and masculinity. Firstly, she argues that in postfeminist discourse, the gaze is turned on men. Whereas in the second wave of feminism, scholars such as Laura Mulvey argued that the male gaze turned women into objects, postfeminist discourse often refocuses the gaze back on men. For Projansky, postfeminism claims power by inverting the rules of representation so that men sometimes become objects of

139 Ibid.
141 Negra, "Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO."
142 Moseley and Read, "Having It Ally": Popular Television (Post-) Feminism," 231.
143 See also Dow (2006) on the representation of "Postfeminist Masculinity" in three films.
144 Laura Mulvey, Visual and Other Pleasures (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).
desire or villains on the peripheries of a text. Secondly, Projansky argues the postfeminist discourse on men marks a shift from women’s oppression to men’s oppression. In this postfeminist discourse, feminist success is evident in changing representations of men and masculinity; however, such changes are not necessarily positive. Projansky cites columnist Curt Suplee who argues that the result of women “defining masculinity” is the disastrous “Post-Feminist Male” who is too passive, a “Mr Right” who “turn[ed] out so wrong”.\textsuperscript{145} According to Projansky, in this discourse:

> Feminism (and by default women in general) produces miserable and unappealing men; as a result, men must (re)take centre stage and return to their traditional roles as “manly” saviours in order to fix what women/feminists unwittingly have made inoperable.\textsuperscript{146}

The postfeminist discourse on men emphasises the development of the men’s movement which “redefines the postfeminist man as an agent on a path to self-discovery”.\textsuperscript{147} The third postfeminist discourse on men sees them “take over women’s roles as feminine subjects, feminists, or both”.\textsuperscript{148} These discourses are highly contradictory in that men are objectified, attempting to seize back power or seen as more effective feminists than women. In Chapter Nine on ‘red dirt romance’, men, particularly those in power, are presented as better feminists than women. Faced with sexism and discrimination, the women want to deal with it in their “own way” while the men in power suggest formal complaints procedures.

Dow (2006) and Gill (2009a) have also examined the complex and contradictory representations of postfeminist masculinity and men. Dow finds similar men to Projanksy including those depicted as “truly supportive of the feminist project” who allow women to blame themselves if they experience problems and Sensitive New Age Guys who support the career ambitions of seemingly “feminist” female characters.\textsuperscript{149} Dow notes that some representations of men on screen in the 1980s show that they have “learned the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Projansky, \textit{Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture}, 84.
\item Ibid., 85.
\item Ibid., 84.
\item Ibid., 85.
\item Dow, "The Traffic in Men and the Fatal Attraction of Postfeminist Masculinity," 122.
\end{enumerate}
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lessons of feminism; it was women who found them difficult". Importantly, Dow argues that postfeminism impacts representations of men and women where, “representations of postfeminist women require particular representations of postfeminist men”. In her examination of postfeminism in twenty lad lit novels, Gill (2009a) explores the postfeminist male in detail. Like Projansky and Dow, Gill finds numerous incarnations of postfeminist masculinity, however, the predominant male protagonist is “flawed, fallible and self-deprecating” in contrast to “cool, assured and powerful” females. The postfeminist message of these novels for Gill was that women have benefitted from feminism while men have been left confused and disadvantaged, appropriating feminist ideas while simultaneously being sexist towards women. Gill points out that contradictions such as this neutralise the opportunity for feminist critique. Gill (2009b) also explores the contradictory nature of men and masculinity in postfeminist discourse in an analysis of sex and relationship advice in women’s magazine Glamour. Similarly to her assessment of lad lit, Gill finds diverse constructions of masculinity from those men who are “benign and lovable”, those who are highly “ judgemental ” towards women and others who are “frail and vulnerable”. Gill concludes that such contradictory constructions of masculinity in the magazine’s relationship advice “produce a radical gender asymmetry in relation to power and emotional labour”. For Gill, women become responsible for planning, initiating and maintaining intimacy as well as catering to men’s needs and desires. Together these discussions of postfeminist masculinity and men suggest various engagements with feminism and male privilege. Clearly, any analysis of female protagonists in chick lit must be considered in relation to male characters.

In conclusion, I have outlined key themes in postfeminist theory: its relationship with feminism, the body, consumer culture, home and work and

150 Ibid.
151 Ibid.: 127.
153 Ibid.
154 Gill, "Mediated Intimacy and Postfeminism: A Discourse Analytic Examination of Sex and Relationships Advice in a Women’s Magazine," 363-64.
155 Ibid.: 364.
men and masculinity. I have done so as a foundation towards my case study Chapters Five to Nine. I have argued that the relationship between postfeminism and feminism is largely negative whereby the postfeminist sensibility seeks to distance, reject or ignore feminism, particularly seeking to disidentify with it through the vacuousness of body transformation, consumer culture and making ‘free’ choices in work and home life. In the postfeminist sensibility, the individual is privileged above the group and the self is privileged over helping others including other women.

**Third Wave Feminism**

Third-wave feminism is alive and well and has become highly articulate about its philosophical and methodological claims.

Rosi Braidotti

Rosi Braidotti (2005) argues that there has been a “return of masters’ narratives” while offering a powerful critique of “postfeminist neoliberalism”. She emphasises the growth and complexity of feminist theory, particularly that which:

\[\text{[E]mphasised the structural inequalities that emerge in the age of globalisation [...]}\text{ and the need to safeguard women’s interests, dignity and well-being amidst the dissemination of hybrid and fast-changing ethnic, racial, national and religious identities.}\]

In contemporary feminist theory, she observes numerous signs of a “new generation of scholars who are re-setting the theoretical agenda” including emphasising the "the need to overcome the binary—nature—culture—and, more specifically, to undo the obsolete opposition—essentialism—constructivism". Braidotti outlines a positive and seemingly hopeful view of the so-called third wave as one that is politically active and responsive to a context where globalisation and neoliberalism dominate. This section provides a brief background to third wave feminism, including its relationship

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157 Ibid.: 171-73.
158 Ibid.: 177.
159 Ibid.: 178.
160 Woodward and Woodward (2009) are also optimistic about third wave feminism’s activist potential.
to second wave feminism, before outlining key contemporary third wave feminist themes.

Discourses about the third wave of feminism are largely North American in origin however their focus on feminism within a globalised neoliberal world has wider applicability, particularly in relation to postfeminism. According to Ealasaid Munro, the publication of bell hooks’ *Ain’t I a Woman* led to a reconsideration of the white, middle-class orientation of the women’s movement. Munro regards hooks as “pivotal in the development of the third wave of feminism, as [her book] drew attention to the need for multiple feminisms”.¹⁶¹ Rebecca Walker, daughter of writer Alice Walker, is credited with coining the phrase ‘third wave’ in the mid-1990s to refer to an emerging group of young women feminists.¹⁶² Third wave texts include edited collections *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism* (1995), Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards’ *Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (2000), *Turbo Chicks: Talking Young Feminisms* (2001) and *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* (2003). Dicker and Piepmeier in *Catching a Wave*, state that contemporary social and cultural conditions influence third wave feminism, especially as part of a globalising, capitalist world. This emerging movement examines issues affecting the individual through to an awareness and critique of larger structural forces.

In books such as *The Women’s Movement Today: An Encyclopedia of Third-Wave Feminism* (2006) and *Third Wave Feminism: A Critical Exploration* (2004) the third wave is presented as a vibrant fledgling movement informed and concerned with complex global issues. This movement is multi-faceted in its approach, respecting difference, showing a willingness to bring together binaries and recognizing hybridity between and within women.¹⁶³ As Dicker and Piepmeier note, the third wave values “paradox, conflict, multiplicity, and

messiness...informed by postmodern, poststructuralist theories of identity”.

Part of this “messiness” is the awareness that globalisation has created a world where, as Jodi Dean states:

[Arguments and authorities that might be persuasive in one context may have no weight in another one, [and] the identity we perform in one setting might have little to do with the one we perform in another].

Thus, the third wave embraces terms such as difference, diversity and hybridity, tacitly acknowledging that there is no single solution to any issue or problem where what may oppress one woman may be the source of another’s liberation. Laura Finley and Emily Reynolds Stringer (2010) observe that some third wave feminists “instinctively” use standpoint theory “to highlight the importance of lived experiences and reflexivity”. Lauren Amaro states that, “Third wave feminists often embrace behaviours and images that their second wave mothers rejected, but also cling to the essential tenets of feminism such as the need for equality, eminent values, and self-determination”. For example, third wave feminists extend what it means to be politically active through their embrace of popular culture. Popular culture is used in creative and expressive ways to address social justice issues. The third wave therefore centralises an “insistence on women’s diversity” as indicated by a concern with a range of women’s issues (it does not have a “single-issue

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164 Dicker and Piepmeier, "Introduction," 16.
166 Scholz (2010) argues that the third wave embraces what she calls “radical multiplicity” which “rejects an essentialist notion of self identity” (108). Thus, individuals and groups have multiple identities. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) extend this idea to explain that contemporary women’s liberation is complex. It is complex because of this approach to identity as well as the “locatedness of individuals” where domination and power impacts individual women in different ways.
167 Laura Finley and Emily Reynolds Stringer, Beyond Burning Bras: Feminist Activism for Everyone (Santa Barbara, California: Praeger, 2010), 36.
171 Dicker and Piepmeier, eds., Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century, 10.
agenda”\textsuperscript{172}) and examines a “broad range of interlocking topics”.\textsuperscript{173} Third wave feminists attempt to include and encourage men’s support and participation in women’s rights, while concerning themselves with environmental issues, and, facilitating the formation of communities focused on social justice.\textsuperscript{174}

Third wave feminism continues the activist work of the second wave with an emphasis on appreciating the differences between women. It appears to build on feminism with a “difference”\textsuperscript{175} or as Rory Dicker and Alison Piepmeier explain, “[b]y taking much that is good from the second wave, listening to critiques of earlier feminism’s lack of diversity, and responding to a changing world, the third wave has the potential to become the second wave’s better self”.\textsuperscript{176} Amanda Lotz, in her examination of third wave feminism, sums up the central differences between the third and second wave as:

Where the second-wave liberal and cultural approaches sought to unify diverse women by appealing to a universal sisterhood, third wave activists recognize the racist, heterosexist, classist and other implications of the erasure of difference [...and] seeks strategies that reconceptualizes activism as independent from the idea of a common womanhood.\textsuperscript{177}

Third wave feminism is for women who grew up with the presence of feminism and builds on elements of that feminism. It also asks, as Lotz suggests, for flexibility in the way activism occurs because of the complexity of injustices in the contemporary world. As scholars such as Woodward and Woodward have noted, feminist activism is vital in a world with persistent gender inequalities including pay inequality, “the abuse against women’s bodies”, gender based violence and “persistent misogynistic representation”.\textsuperscript{178} While it may be argued that the third wave disidentifies with the second wave in a similar

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{172} "Introduction," xx.
\item \textsuperscript{173} -
\item \textsuperscript{174} "Introduction."
\item \textsuperscript{175} Ibid., xv.
\item \textsuperscript{176} -
\item \textsuperscript{177} "Introduction," 20. Dicker and Piepmeier are conscious of the divisional aspects of ‘wave’ rhetoric.
\item \textsuperscript{178} Woodward and Woodward make the point that some “misogynistic representations” are presented ironically, however "ironic misogyny is still misogyny". Woodward and Woodward, \textit{Why Feminism Matters}, 161-62.
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manner to postfeminism, by all accounts, the third wave appears to have a closer relationship to second wave feminism than postfeminism. Where the postfeminist sensibility enjoys the critique of the second wave including rejecting and blaming feminism, the third wave works to continue the fight for women’s rights in a contemporary globalising world where injustices persist and new injustices emerge. For many women with third wave values, although they may not call themselves ‘feminists’, they are aware of the goals and aims of feminism. As Baumgardner and Richards explain: “For our generation, feminism is like fluoride. We scarcely notice that we have it—it’s simply in the water”.179

The third wave has a strong focus on and vision for inclusiveness. Naomi Zack in Inclusive Feminism attempts to navigate the impasse on the category of ‘women’ to propose and develop what she says is a “new theory in third wave feminism that will be inclusive”.180 This inclusiveness aims to develop relationships between women and between women and men. As Leslie Heywood notes, the sense of inclusion is one, “that respects not only differences between women based on race, ethnicity, religion, and economic standing but also makes allowance for different identities within a single person”.181 The aim of inclusiveness is to unite women to further encourage women’s equality. Yu (2011) interprets the notion of inclusion in the following way, “Rather than constituting a unified, coherent, feminist community, [third wavers] argue for the construction of a diverse community that includes women with different, and even contradictory, relations to positions of power”.182 Scholz however notes that the aim of the third wave is “not to establish a group but rather to bring about social change”.183 The third wave’s engagement with ‘inclusiveness,’ therefore takes into account that the process of individualisation occurs within

179 Baumgardner and Richards, Manifesta: Young Women, Feminism, and the Future, 17. I argue that this is the case in novels like Jillaroo, novels by Monica McInerney such as Family Baggage and novels by Marian Keyes.
a social context. Nielsen’s (2004) research into modernity and young contemporary Scandinavian women reveals that women can be individuals who also have strong connections, respect and social responsibility for others. Nielsen argues that many young women “work through gender”, which means that rather than “openly challenging the gender structures as the adult feminists did in various historical periods, the young women have indulged in gender”.\textsuperscript{184} For Nielsen they desire and see the body as a “project” as part of the “individualization” of individuals who wish to “find themselves”.\textsuperscript{185} Most interesting in Nielsen’s research is her discovery that “to be true to yourself” does not exclude collective engagement and interest in others”.\textsuperscript{186} Rather, there is a combination of “new individualism” with “relational and responsible attitudes”\textsuperscript{187} including life and financial planning as well as political awareness. Nielsen sums up her findings as:

[A] collective discourse on morality is back in the youngest generation [in her study], but in a changed form. The point of departure is not your duty to others, but your responsibility towards yourself, including your relations to others and to the world at large.\textsuperscript{188}

Nielsen’s research articulates third wave feminist concerns, including that women should be individuals who are aware and respect their relationships with others and the world, including the environment.\textsuperscript{189} This “relational” individualism stands in contrast to the postfeminism “all about me” individualism.

In comparison to postfeminism’s emphasis on bodily sexiness and transformation, the third wave is suspicious about images of women that promote anxiety and reduce confidence, especially in young women. Wendy A. Burns-Ardolino writes that third wave feminism “focuses on the power

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{185} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.: 23.
\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.: 24-25.
\textsuperscript{189} This interconnectivity of self, others and world is a key theme in the contemporary philosophy of Michel Foucault in \textit{The Hermeneutics of the Subject} (2005), Jan Patočka in \textit{Body, Community, Language World} (1998) and Félix Guattari in \textit{The Three Ecologies} (2000). Rosi Braidotti similarly discusses interrelatedness and inter-connection between self and others in her argument for what she terms “an affirmative ethics” (6).
\end{footnotesize}
relationships that stigmatise and devalue the female body”. In particular, she argues that third wave feminists:

[C]onfront the notion of ‘the perfect body’ and celebrate the body in its diverse abilities, shapes, sizes, races, ethnicities, sexualities, genders, and classes. There is an expansion of ways to discuss the body. Third-wave feminism focuses on what the body can do and mean in the context of women’s daily lives.

The third wave critique of ‘perfect’ bodies is important in the current postfeminist media context where female audiences are bombarded with representations of thinness and beauty that frequently emphasise appearance over other aspects of identity or as Joan Brumberg describes it, “appearance” dominating over “internal character”. Ardolino-Burns argues that the media’s perpetuation of ‘ideal’ and ‘perfect’ bodies encourages women to scrutinise and objectify themselves and others in relation to these images. Women imagine themselves as potentially being able to make themselves “better” or “more desirable” by moulding their bodies to suit the ideal. Third wave feminism is concerned with the representation of these images including the way women engage with them and as a result, critique the “production and consumption of the ‘ideal’ or ‘perfect’ body”. This feminism also articulates the need for alternative images of women, aiming to provoke women into thinking about who they are and ask questions about the effects of constructions of ‘ideal bodies’. As Burns-Ardolino argues:

Third-wave feminism calls for empowering subversive images of women so as to change the vision of our culture. Women need alternative body

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191 Ibid.
194 Burns-Ardolino, "Body," 42.
images to stop measuring their own bodies against idealized body images.195

Third wave texts, often using reflection and personal experience, critique unrealistic body ideals.196 Ophira Edut for example outlines her understanding of her body within feminism and femininity including wanting to “take care of herself” but not “sell out”:

I want to be fit, energetic and healthy. But I also want to be a body outlaw who coolly rejects the beauty standard and marches to the beat of her own chunky, funky beat. I haven’t quite mastered that integration.197

Odut articulates the complex navigation of embodied femininity; that is, navigating potentially destructive messages about the body in the media and society such as the “cult of thinness” against feminist ideas about bodies. Rubin and Nemeroff in their study of young women, which included data collected from focus groups, essays and personal experience, describe this problem as follows: “many young women have perceived and are struggling with a normalized view of the “good feminist”—the woman who refuses to discipline her body and has learned to love her body and herself”.198 These texts attempt to cultivate self-acceptance and self-esteem in women through frank discussions about bodies.

Within a neoliberal culture, third wave feminists also address concerns about consumer culture. Consumerism is more than just shopping. Rather, as Shira Tarrant describes, it is a set of practices that include:

[S]hopping, advertising, and production practices that exist within economic systems based on global capitalism. Consumerism describes what people buy, how advertisers convince consumers to buy their goods and services, and the practices of major corporations worldwide.

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195 Ibid., 44.


that produce these consumer goods [...It] is also part of the ways people form identities through the things they buy[...]."\(^{199}\)

According to Heywood and Drake, while some feminists are able to “reject consumer culture”, third wavers are aware that consumerism for most people is an inevitable and inescapable part of life. As Heywood and Drake recognise in their discussion of the third wave and women's material conditions most people are treated by advertisers and marketers as “potential consumers” rather than being valued for themselves.\(^{200}\) The third wave is aware that consumer choices significantly affect the self, others and the environment. Angela McRobbie sums up the deleterious effect of what she terms “consumer citizenship” for young women:

> This style of consumer culture is but one arm of a political ethos based on neoliberal economics, which only serves the values of the marketplace and which in this instance mobilises children to an ethic of gendered individualisation lacking in compassion, in care for others, in sensitivity to the plight of the less fortunate others.\(^{201}\)

Importantly in McRobbie’s argument is “gendered individualisation” that lacks “compassion”, “care for others” and “sensitivity to the plight of the less fortunate”. This suggests that femininity is mediated through a selfish consumer culture ignorant of who made products, where they came from or the way they were made.

This argument links to third wave environmental perspectives such as Betty Glass’s observation that the third wave is generally sceptical of “worldviews that condone the rapid spread of materialistic consumerism at the expense of earth’s biosphere and non-Western cultures”.\(^{202}\) Within the third wave, there are conflicting views of consumerism. Consumption can provide pleasure, fun and, as Tarrant suggests, it can be useful in forming and expressing individual

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\(^{200}\) Heywood and Drake, "'It's All About the Benjamins': Economic Determinants of Third Wave Feminism in the United States," 20.

\(^{201}\) McRobbie, "Young Women and Consumer-Citizenship: The Danger of Too Much Pleasure."

or collective identities. Alternatively, as Tarrant concedes, consumerism from a feminist view can also demonstrate “false consciousness” where, “shopping and buying recreates the sexism, classism, heterosexism, racism and imperialism that third-wave feminism struggles against”. This notion of consumer “false consciousness” reflects the postfeminist relationship to products and shopping in which little thought is given to the production and availability of particular goods or services. In this case, consumption by some invariably contributes to and encourages the subordination and oppression of others. Examples include purchasing luxury goods produced by multinational companies using overseas sweatshops or buying clothing made from cotton grown on land where old growth forests have been illegally cleared. Third wavers critique consumption as a complex set of practices that have progressive and regressive aspects.

In response to the force of globalised consumptive patterns, third wavers have developed strategies for navigating and “reconstructing or changing” the complex consumer centred world. They ask questions about the origin of goods and the reasons behind making particular purchases. According to Tarrant, some third wavers also “reduce, reuse, recycle”:

Instead of buying new things at large corporate chains [...] third-wavers might buy from independently owned and operated stores, from second-hand thrift stores, or from other resale shops. They might also reuse what they have by mending and repairing broken items, or they might simply buy less in the first place.

Tarrant suggests that this “different kind” of shopping includes purchasing earth-friendly, cruelty-free, non-sweatshop, fair trade or do-it-yourself products. Without dismissing consumption outright, Tarrant notes that third-wavers may purchase goods via “alternative patterns of consumption” and then display them in ways that appear ironic such as the placement of mass-market items along with tattoos and piercings. While the postfeminist sensibility

203 Tarrant, "Consumerism," 67.
204 Ibid.
205 Ibid., 68.
206 Ibid.
207 Ibid.
208 Ibid., 68.
appears to accept and embrace materialistic consumptive patterns, the third wave appears more sceptical, by reflecting on the implications of consumptive choices.

While the postfeminist discourse on men and masculinity oppresses or objectifies men or sees them as “better feminists than women”, the third wave feminist approach attempts to actively engage with men and masculinity. Third wave writing, such as that of bell hooks, acknowledges that men are often products of a “system they had not put into place”.  


-Bell hooks, for example, in The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity and Love (2005) investigates the construction of masculinity and suggests that women “should play a role in ending men’s investment in the patriarchal power structure and vice versa”.  

-Hooks advocates the rejection of ‘traditional’ hypermasculinity and violence associated with masculinity as well as breaking conventional social scripts, especially those supported by women. Like hooks, Rebecca Walker (2004) argues that third wave thinking and activism should include men and engage with issues surrounding masculinity. For Walker:

  In envisioning the Third Wave as a space/movement/paradigm which fully recognizes the importance of psychologically integrated and emotionally healthy men to the overall well being of women, families, and the world at large, it is my belief that men’s liberation, and the role women play in it, is critical Third Wave domain.  

-Walker discusses what she sees as the “war” waged on boys, one against “vulnerability, creativity, individuality and the mysterious unknown…against tenderness, empathy, grief, fear, longing, and feeling itself....against wholeness

209 hooks, Communion: The Female Search for Love, 34.  
210 Ibid., 216.  
211 Ibid., 215.  
212 Ibid.  
and psychological integration”. She observes that more men are “interrogat[ing] limiting concepts of masculinity, and...break[ing] away from conventional social scripts”. She argues that women must also contribute to reconstructing patriarchal notions of masculinity and should “reflect” on how they participate in “maintaining the male charade” by saying we “want a man who can talk about his feelings only to marry the strong, silent type who happens to be a good provider”. Inclusion of men and consideration of masculinity are therefore vital to third wave thinking.

This section has outlined third wave feminism in relation to postfeminism. In particular, I have considered the third wave relation to feminism as largely productive and positive. Third wave writing examines issues related to the body, consumerism and men and masculinity. While some theorists conflate the third wave and postfeminism, a reconsideration of the field suggests that the third wave offers intersections with postfeminism while being oppositional in relation to particular issues.

**Conclusion: A Third Wave “Affirmative Ethics”?**

I conclude this Chapter by considering Rosi Braidotti’s notion of an “affirmative ethics”. In “On Putting the Active Back into Activism” Braidotti proposes what she calls an “affirmative ethics” where one “does critical theory” but purposely and strategically to produce “social horizons of hope”. Her case for “affirmative ethics” partly reconsiders the role of “oppositional consciousness”, especially where critique veers into negativity. For Braidotti, “there is an implicit assumption that political subjectivity or agency is about resistance and that resistance means the negation of the negativity of the present”. However, she argues, “a positive is supposed to be engendered by this double negative”. For Braidotti, the purpose of critical theory is to critique and to offer positive alternatives. As Braidotti suggests of her affirmative position:

214 Ibid., 485.
215 Ibid., 486.
216 Ibid.
217 Braidotti, “On Putting the Active Back into Activism,” 42.
218 Ibid.: 44.
219 Ibid.
[I]t actively works towards the creation of alternatives by working actively through the negative instance by cultivating the relations that are conducive to the transmutation of values.\footnote{Ibid.: 45.}

Such alternatives include “the possibility of thinking sustainable futures” that simultaneously emphasise the inter-relationships between humans, with other beings (human and non-human) and the world-at-large. The underlying assumption of this ethical position is what Braidotti describes as the “belief that negative affects can be transformed”.\footnote{Ibid.: 50.} Braidotti’s affirmative ethics offers a line of flight out of the postfeminist theoretical morass while reinforcing the importance of critique as a basis for the innovation of positive alternatives. In light of Braidotti’s discussion, I believe emerging third wave feminist theory, as I have described above, offers critical tools and positive alternatives to the postfeminist sensibility.

In this Chapter I have critically examined theories of contemporary feminism, especially postfeminism and third wave feminism. I have described approaches to positioning postfeminism and third wave feminism within feminist history. I have drawn upon Kristeva, Kalbfleisch and Moi to explore the interconnectivity and interdependence of contemporary postfeminism and feminism. I agree with Kalbfleisch that there is a tendency to try to smooth the relationship between postfeminism and feminism. In line with the thinking of Genz and Brabon, I acknowledge that far more interesting potentials emerge when a “rhetoric of anxiety” between postfeminism and feminism is maintained. I agree with Genz and Brabon that within contemporary feminist theory there are dual tendencies to conflate postfeminism and third wave feminism or keep them apart. However, as they note, slippage between the two throws up interesting possibilities. Indeed, in outlining dominant themes in postfeminism and third wave feminism, it is obvious that sometimes what appears liberating to the postfeminist is oppressive to the third wave feminist and vice versa. I have argued that third wave feminism takes oppositional views on issues such as its relationship to feminism, consumption, the body and men and masculinity,
offering what I see as a counter discourse to the postfeminist sensibility. However, it must be remembered that postfeminism and third wave feminism exist in relation to each other. As well, I have drawn upon Rosi Braidotti’s notion of “affirmative ethics” as a reminder that the role of critical theory is not just to undertake negative ‘critique’ which a number of applications of postfeminist theory undertake. Rather, the aim of critical theory for Braidotti is to offer positive alternatives and in her words, “social horizons of hope”.

The next chapter provides an overview of the literature on chick lit, especially in relation to romance and feminism. I argue that a number of scholars have explored chick lit’s reproduction of the central aspects of romance. However, a number of criticisms of chick lit’s deployment of the romance plot replicate the criticism of feminist critics of the romance novel. I argue that some commit Regis’s ethical lapses that I identified in Chapter Two that treat the novels as simple and refuse to seriously consider their endings. The next chapter also outlines key feminist critiques of chick lit including the claims that chick lit transmits the postfeminist sensibility and offers retrogressive representations of women.
Chapter Four: Romance, Feminism and Chick Lit

Introduction

In this chapter, I provide an overview of the main theory and arguments about chick lit in relation to romance and feminism. The chapter is divided into three parts. Firstly, I provide an overview of the literature on chick lit. While theorists such as Whelehan (2005) and Anderson (2006) have previously remarked on the sparseness of research in this area, a significant corpus of journal articles, book length discussions and research now consider chick lit from numerous theoretical angles including romance and feminism. In the second section, I examine the main arguments about chick lit in relation to romance, including the relationship between chick lit and the prose and paperback romance, the construction of characters including the heroine and hero and the adherence to and deviation from the happy ending. In the third section, I examine the main approaches to chick lit in relation to feminism. I argue that these approaches have shifted significantly since Diane Philips' article “Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative” (2000).¹ Philips was adamant that “the heroines of the single woman novel assume all the gains of the twentieth-century women’s movement [...] yet they] leave traditional gender relations and patriarchal structures profoundly unchallenged”.² More recently theorists including Van Slooten (2006), Genz (2010) and Hunting (2012) have argued that chick lit’s engagement with feminism is complex and at times, contradictory.

Academics on Chick Lit

Despite a veritable cacophony of discussion about chick lit in the mainstream media, particularly in the late 1990s, research in the genre had, until 2005 been

² Ibid.: 250.
sparse, with Imelda Whelehan in *The Feminist Bestseller* noting that there had not been much interest in chick lit to date.³ In 2006, Emma Anderson in her Master’s thesis on Australian chick lit made a similar observation, claiming, “due to its youth and low cultural status [...] very little scholarly work has been published on chick-lit”.⁴ In the same year, Michele M. Glasburgh’s Master’s thesis echoed a similar observation.⁵ Now, four significant book length contributions have provided commentary on the genre. Imelda Whelehan’s *The Feminist Bestseller* (2005) explores the relationship between the modern women’s movement and women’s popular writing from the late 1960s through to chick lit published at the turn of the millennium. In 2006, Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young edited a collection of fourteen essays, *Chick lit: The New Women’s Fiction* (2006) which contemplated the origins of the genre, the various types of writing that fall under the ‘chick lit’ name and central themes that distinguish chick texts from other types of fiction. This anthology of essays does much of the groundwork needed to define and map the early years of the genre including essays that make connections to eighteenth and nineteenth century women’s fiction and those that examine subgenres such as ‘sistah lit’ and ‘mommy lit’. Some essays describe the representation of feminist themes such as sexuality, consumption and body image. The essays together directly or indirectly probe the genre’s conflicted relationship with feminism. Ferriss and Young state in their Introduction to the collection that this relationship is indicated in the responses to the genre:

> Reactions to chick lit are divided between those who expect literature by and about women to advance the political activism of feminism, to represent women’s struggles in patriarchal culture and offer inspiring images of strong, powerful women, and those who argue instead that it should portray the reality of young women grappling with modern life.⁶

This division is certainly apparent in the academic responses to the genre, one which I discuss throughout this chapter. In addition to Whelehan’s *Feminist Bestseller* and Ferriss and Young’s edited collection, two other book length

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studies of chick lit have made significant contributions to the study of the genre. Caroline J. Smith's *Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Chick Lit* (2008) describes the influence of women’s advice manuals on the consumer practices of heroines represented in chick lit. Stephanie Harzewski’s *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* (2011) proposes that chick lit is a form of postfeminist fiction that provides a sociocultural lens on contemporary gender relations.

A number of other publications complement these book length studies. A dedicated University of Sheffield webpage launched in 2009 contains a collection of working paper essays on chick lit. The page includes notable contributions including Rosalind Gill’s “Lad Lit as Mediated Intimacy: A Postfeminist Tale of Female Power, Male Vulnerability and Toast”\(^7\), Sarah Gamble’s “When Romantic Heroines Turn Bad: The Rise of the ‘Anti-Chick lit’ Novel”\(^8\) and Imelda Whelehan’s “Teening Chick Lit”.\(^9\) Other significant, though shorter publications have examined chick lit from a range of angles, including those that focus on *Bridget Jones’s Diary*\(^10\), explore chick novels about single women\(^11\), examine romance and femininity\(^12\) and domestic advice novels.\(^13\) Ferriss and Young, editors of the essay collection on the genre, *Chick Lit: The Women’s Fiction* have written about the generational differences in analyses of chick lit while Cheryl A. Wilson explains the uses of chick lit in undergraduate teaching.\(^14\) Margaret R. Rowntree,\(^15\) Lia Bryant and Nicole Moulding have

\(^7\) Sarah Gormley and Sarah Mills, eds., *Chick Lit*, vol. 13, Working Papers on the Web (September 2009).
\(^8\) Gill, "Lad Lit as Mediated Intimacy: A Postfeminist Tale of Female Power, Male Vulnerability and Toast."
\(^12\) See Philips (2000) and Whelehan (2004).
\(^13\) Gill and Herdleckerhoff, "Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?.”
\(^16\) Margaret R. Rowntree’s PhD thesis *Tri millenium Feminine Sexualities: Representations, Lives and Daydreams* expands on the research discussed in her journal article with Bryant and
researched the reading responses to chick texts in their paper, "Women's Emotional Experiences of Chick Lit and Chick Flicks: An Ambivalent Audience". Rochelle Hurst takes a slightly different approach by exploring the similarities and differences between Harlequin Mills and Boon romances and the debate surrounding *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin A. Brabon's *Postfeminism: Cultural Texts and Theories* (2009) unpack contemporary feminism and devote a chapter to chick lit and 'girl power' discourses. Other authors have written about chick lit with a focus on specific themes and issues including representations of the body, work and professional practice, reproduction, sexuality, masculinity and consumerism. For example, Elizabeth Bullen, Kim Toffoletti and Liz Parsons have applied postfeminist theories of sexuality to young adult chick lit. Those who draw chick lit specifically into debates about contemporary feminism, especially postfeminism and third wave feminism, include Ferriss and Young's "Chick, Girls and Choice: Redefining Feminism" and Eva Chen's "Neoliberal Moulding."
Self-Governance and Popular Postfeminism in Contemporary Anglo-American Chick Lit”.\(^{28}\)

Rowntree, Moulding and Bryant have undertaken research into audience responses to the feminine sexual representations in chick lit and chick flicks.\(^{29}\) The most interesting finding from their research is that the sample of forty-one women rejected the assertion that they read and watched chick texts because of its ability to “reflect back everyday life for women in all its messy detail”.\(^{30}\) Rather, for the women consulted chick texts appealed as entertainment and fantasy. Like Rowntree, Moulding and Bryant, my research too finds that readers may gravitate to chick lit because of the pleasure it provides in depicting fantasy scenarios rather than its representation of reality.

Chick lit has also been the topic of several university theses, including those by Harzewski\(^{31}\) and Smith,\(^{32}\) on which their published books are based. Other notable theses include those by Michelle Glasburgh (2006), Emma Anderson (2006), Emily Mathisen (2010), Mary Ryan (2011), Margaret Rowntree (2012) and Laura Gronewold (2012).\(^{33}\) As I noted in Chapter One, Emma Anderson has undertaken research into female sexuality in Australian chick lit for her creative writing doctoral thesis. Michelle Glasburgh's Master's thesis, Chick Lit: The New Face of Postfeminist Fiction applies five characteristics of postfeminism which she draws from Susan Faludi's Backlash.\(^{34}\) Emily Mathisen's Master's thesis undertakes a content analysis of book reviews about chick lit and its more 'literary' contemporaries to examine the dominant phrases and adjectives used


\(^{29}\) Rowntree, Bryant, and Moulding, "Women's Emotional Experiences of Chick Lit and Chick Flicks: An Ambivalent Audience."

\(^{30}\) Ibid.


\(^{32}\) Caroline J. Smith, "Cosmopolitan Culture and Consumerism in Contemporary Women's Popular Fiction" (Doctor of Philosophy, University of Delaware, 2005a).

\(^{33}\) Laura Gronewold, "Chick Lit and Its Canonical Forefathers: Anxieties About Female Subjectivity in Contemporary Women's Fiction" (University of Arizona, 2012).

\(^{34}\) Glasburgh, "Chick Lit: The New Face of Postfeminist Fiction?".
to describe the genre. Mary Ryan examines Irish chick lit, particularly the novels of Marian Keyes. Numerous other theses have been written and are available via electronic library databases however a complete overview of them is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Chick lit from different socio-cultural origins has also been the focus of academic analyses. In 2004, Jenny M. Djundjung published her analysis of urban single women in Indonesian chick lit. Djundjung argues that the protagonists of this branch of chick lit conform to stereotypical gender roles and patriarchal ideologies. Similarly, Wenche Ommundsen’s transnational chick lit critique compares cosmopolitanism and globalisation in three novels including two by Australian Indigenous author Anita Heiss. Eva Chen’s “Shanghai(Ed) Babies: Geopolitics, Biopolitics and the Global Chick Lit” examines the emergence of chick lit written from a Chinese perspective. Pamela Thoma provides a critique of Asian-American chick lit by drawing upon neoliberal consumer citizenship discourses. Thoma argues that the two novels China Dolls and Goddess for Hire are examples of “labor lit” because “they sideline conventional romance and represent romance primarily in relation to a neo-liberal work ethic and a quest for professional employment in a workplace where production and consumption are intertwined”. Pamela Butler and Jigne Desai examine South Asian American chick lit using a combination of critical race and transnational feminist theory. They argue that the novels “work to produce a (trans)national, racialized, feminine subject embedded within neoliberalism,

38 Ommundsen (2011) compares the notions of cosmopolitanism and globalisation in Rajaa Alsanea’s Girls of Riyadh, Annie Wang’s The People’s Republic of Desire and Anita Heiss’s Not Meeting Mr Right and Avoiding Mr Right.
heteronormativity, and racism”. Mary Ryan has been a prolific publisher of articles about Irish chick lit, particularly the work of Marian Keyes. Ryan has examined representations of morality, reproduction, patriarchal Ireland and working life in the novels. Amanda Maria Morrison examines representations of Latinos and Hispanic culture in the chick lit novels of Alisa Valdes-Rodriguez. It is clear from this overview that permutations of chick lit from different countries or cultural perspectives are of interest to many scholars.

Lisa A. Guerrero examines chick lit “in black and white” in her essay that appears in Chick Lit: The New Women’s Fiction. Guerrero undertakes a textual analysis of Bridget Jones’s Diary as chick lit and Waiting to Exhale as an example of “sistah lit”. She compares chick lit and sistah lit through four main themes: romance, men, friends and family, and self-worth to examine the representation of race/ethnicity, class and love. She argues that there are differences in the representation of these themes in chick lit and sistah lit. In particular, sistah lit performs a vital task in challenging what she describes as the “popular ethnocentrism” of chick lit where it is assumed that “women of color don’t exist in urban worlds of glamour”. She notes that sistah lit exposes readers to “black women who are upper class, couture wearing, trendsetting, and powerful, culturally and economically”. However, she argues that chick lit and sistah lit have different trajectories where while women generally have had to struggle for their rights, she asserts that “black women have had to come farther”. Black women, as she explains, “have had to fight for their recognition of their womanhood” where white women have “never had to convince society

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46 Ibid.
of their womanhood, though they have had to convince it of their equality”. For Guerrero, while all women share some struggles, black women have had to deal with skin colour, as she notes “in the skin is where society defines”.48

Guerrero identifies four main differences between chick lit and sistah lit. Firstly, chick lit offers romantic quests that involve domesticity and fantasies about fairy-tale love while sistah lit presents that same quest as limiting the sistah heroine’s identity or “self-worth”.49 Secondly, chick lit represents male protagonists as “unquestioned models of masculinity” whereas sistah lit offers no idealised versions of manhood rather as she states, “the bad men are always bad and the good men are never good enough”.50 Thirdly, chick lit represents family as “a mere embarrassing inconvenience” and friendships that reveal the heroine’s “self-centredness” whereas sistah lit represents family as “an inescapable burden” and friends as a “communal unit”.51 Fourthly, Guerrero argues that while sistah and chick heroines “seek self-worth”, chick heroines seek it through “institutions of womanhood, specifically marriage and childbearing”.52 Instead, sistah heroines measure their self-worth against what they see as the “social standard of womanhood, the figure of the white woman”.53 Guerrero’s comparison is most applicable to my reading of Anita Heiss’s Indigenous chick lit. As I argue in Chapter Six, Heiss’s novels contain qualities of chick lit and sistah lit.

While chick lit is the focus of this thesis, it is important to note that academic approaches have considered the wider chick culture, including chick flicks and chick television. Rosalind Gill in her much cited “Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility” (2007) uses a number of chick lit examples to support her discussion of six central postfeminist themes.54 In the Introduction to their collection of essays Chick Flicks: Contemporary Women at the Movies (2007)
Ferriss and Young outline the central tenets of chick culture, particularly the strong association between chick texts and postfeminism.\textsuperscript{55} They make the point that chick flicks occupy a contradictory site indulging in pleasures and rituals usually regarded as 'postfeminist' such as:

[A] return to femininity, the primacy of romantic attachments, girlpower, a focus on female pleasure and pleasures, and the value of consumer culture and girlie goods, including designer clothes, expensive and impractical footwear, and trendy accessories.\textsuperscript{56}

For Ferriss and Young, indulgence in these pleasures and rituals occurs alongside "address[ing] issues and tak[ing] stands originally considered feminist".\textsuperscript{57} Jessica Van Slooten examines the conflict between romance and feminism in \textit{Ally McBeal} and \textit{Bridget Jones's Diary}.\textsuperscript{58} She asserts that romance and feminism can coexist in popular texts, particularly that chick lit texts can be "smart, asking those tough feminist questions while also displaying a concern with the trappings of modern romance, strappy sandals and all".\textsuperscript{59} I subscribe to this view in my analysis of Australian chick lit. I argue that the novels utilise the elements of romance while "asking tough feminist questions", particularly those related to equality in the workplace, beauty and body norms, women's friendships and Indigenous identity.

This growing body of research has produced the definitions, origins and critical debate, particularly about chick lit’s relationship to romance and feminism including the growing recognition that chick lit's engagement with both romance and feminism is neither simple nor one-dimensional. While the scope of academic scholarship on chick lit is widening, there has not, to date been a study of Australian chick lit’s engagement with romance and feminism. My thesis fills this gap through an analysis of the narrative elements of selected Australian novels in relation to feminism and romance.

\textsuperscript{55} Ferriss and Young, "Introduction: Chick Flicks and Chick Culture ".
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{58} Van Slooten, "A Truth Universally (Un)Acknowledged: Ally Mcbeal, Bridget Jones's Diary and the Conflict between Romantic Love and Feminism."
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 52.
Chick Lit and Romance

Chick lit might seem at first to be a category of novels primarily concerned with finding a mate—the search for a decent man in a sea of indecent “perverts and Fuckwits,” to quote Ms. Jones. And although this is a controlling feature of the genre, I maintain that in many of the books this partner quest is entirely secondary to the ongoing battle chick lit’s heroines are engaging with themselves.60

In this section, I outline the main arguments regarding the relationship between chick lit and romance. As I explained in Chapter One, opinions about chick lit’s literary ancestry vary widely. For theorists such as Harzewski and Whelehan, chick lit stems partly from the prose romance and partly from popular paperback romances, with additional influences from forms such as the feminist bestseller and women’s advice manuals. Romance and love remain a universal theme and the “romance plot” is a heavily relied upon narrative structure. It is therefore not surprising that while the influences are many, chick lit’s closest relatives are the prose romance, especially Jane Austen’s Pride and Prejudice, and the paperback romance. Anna Kiernan (2006) emphasises chick lit’s relationship to these forebears stating that chick lit “can be said to fuse the literary and narrative conventions of Austen’s novels with the mass-market, rose-tinted amorous projects of Mills and Boon or Harlequin romances”.61 Kiernan notes that chick lit’s appropriation of the paperback romance’s search for “Mr Right” or tendency towards “men and marriage” has been complicated by a “new variable”: Sex.62 Because of the contemporary setting of chick lit, this is not surprising.

Deborah Philips provides a slightly different view of the romance, asserting that the genre is “complex” with “a great many divergent forms” and “readers of romance are very sophisticated in their awareness of sub-genres and

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62 Ibid., 208.
categories, but these are rarely acknowledged by critics”.63 She notes that while critics tend to approach romance as if it were “homogenous”, “it is a genre which breeds sub-genres”.64 Each sub-genre has distinctive traits with some reflecting changes to women’s rights.65 Indeed, the “domestic romances” she analyses “share many of the same desires and fantasies” but “do not necessarily end with the consummation of a love affair or with marriage”.66 As she notes, of the novels she studies:

The object of romance for the women protagonist may not necessarily be a male erotic partner; it may be another woman, it may be a child, it can be the heroine herself, and need not be a person [...] Whatever the goal of their heroines might be, these novels uniformly articulate some form of desire, and express the wish that things could be different for women.67

Chick novels rely heavily on romantic narrative codes and plots. However, with such a wide set of influences, there are various interpretations of romance and appropriations of the romance plot.

In her discussion of romance, Whelehan has remarked on the relationship between chick lit and other romance forms. She emphasises the importance of Austen’s Pride and Prejudice in influencing latter romances including popular paperback novels and more recently, Bridget Jones's Diary.68 For Whelehan, Bridget Jones's Diary, despite its close association with Pride and Prejudice, “does not capitalise upon the opportunity to revolutionise the romance”.69 Whelehan extends this observation to the wider chick lit genre saying:

These protagonists are, it is true, often hapless and lacking personal direction, but more than this chick lit celebrates the fact that in spite of their hopelessness they are swept up in the resurgence of good, honest romance narratives.70

64 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 2.
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
70 ————, The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City, 203.
Likewise, Butler and Desai note that, “critics often identify the genre’s origins in Jane Austen’s work and/or the feminist awakening novels of the 1970s, thus tracing chick lit’s genealogy generally as parallel to, and part of the trajectory of, the female bildungsroman”. Indeed, as I noted in Chapter Two, Pamela Regis has charted the romantic elements from novels such as *Pamela, Pride and Prejudice* through to works by Nora Roberts. I agree with Whelehan that *Bridget Jones's Diary* is not revolutionary in relation to romance. From my reading of Regis’s theory, “revolutionising the romance” is difficult because while the essential elements may be reorganised or presented in different ways, all eight elements must be included. What appears to be revolutionised though in chick lit is the engagement with love and romance as themes and ideals. Chick lit interrogates what love means in a contemporary context and keeps interrogating as that context changes.

For other critics, chick lit’s relationship to romance is similar to that in paperback romances. Stephanie Harzewski in *Chick Lit and Postfeminism* asserts that the genre relies on and updates romantic conventions particularly in relation to men, sexuality and marriage. Firstly, as Harzewski argues chick lit is different to Harlequin romances in the depiction of male characters. For Harzewski, chick lit depicts men as one dimensional characters or displaces them from the centrality of the text, being “shadowy figures” or in the “background”. Harzewski attributes this displacement to the first person narrative point of view of many novels which focus largely on the heroine and her view of the world. Thus male characters, their thoughts and observations, are locked out of the narrative core. This applies to some Australian chick lit including Anita Heiss’s novels which often properly introduce the romantic hero in the last pages of the story. However, other novels represent men as central to the plot. Rachael Treasure’s novels discussed in Chapter Eight employ

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73 Ibid., 33.
74 Ibid., 34.
a third person narrative that emphasises the heroine's quest, also follows her hero and shows his journey.

Harzewski notes that some male characters in chick lit experience serious life pressures and identity issues. These may be related to sexuality and sexual identity, including closet homosexuality or a lack of virility, or occasionally male characters are physically violent.\(^{75}\) Issues affecting male characters such as violence, depression, suicide and life pressures appear in novels discussed in Chapter Seven including those by Rebecca Sparrow and Catherine Jinks and in Chapter Eight on Rachael Treasure’s novels.

The second difference Harzewski found between paperback romance and chick lit is the “attitude towards premarital female sexuality”.\(^{76}\) Harzewski notes Harlequin’s shift from “trembling virgins” to the more “sexually experienced heroines” of the 1980s. Comparatively, in chick lit she finds that “heterosexual female desire and consummation drive the plot”.\(^{77}\) Chick lit depicts what Harzewski describes as “graphic sexuality” and “frankness on the degree of erotic gratification its heroines experience”.\(^{78}\) Harzewski describes the stark difference between Harlequin and chick lit: “In chick lit, there are minimal instances of genuine eroticism between men and women; men themselves are infrequently depicted as objects of desire”.\(^{79}\) For Harzewski, drawing upon Ann Snitow, the paperback romance has traditionally constructed heroes and their projection of masculinity as a quasi-pornographic pleasure for women. However, as Harzewski argues, chick lit transfers eroticism and fetishism onto other objects, such as via the desire to consume expensive products or the sense of achievement in professional success.\(^{80}\) Sex and sexuality are often important to the chick heroine however Harzewski notes that they often lack “genuinely erotic” moments. In Australian chick novels with urban settings, some heroines long for luxury goods and professional success. However, the focus for heroines

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\(^{75}\) Ibid., 35-37.
\(^{76}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{77}\) Ibid., 34.
\(^{78}\) Ibid., 35.
\(^{79}\) Ibid., 36.
\(^{80}\) Ibid.
such as Rachel Hill in Chapter Seven and Rebecca Saunders in Chapter Eight is a desire to be valued and undertake meaningful work. My analysis in Chapters Five to Nine reveals heroines as sexually desiring individuals who seek sexual gratification.

Harzewski’s third main difference between Harlequin romances and chick lit concerns money in the context of marriage. Harzewski finds that Harlequin “does not exclude the blue-collar worker from the hero position”, while chick lit “concerns itself with money and wealth in upper-middle class society”.81 In other words, the chick novels read by Harzewski focus on the lives and aspirations of the higher classes. Harzewski suggests that the chick heroine “with her sometimes upfront gold digging and sexual carousing, is a kind of prostitute picara made safe and acceptable in an unapologetically materialistic age”.82 In Australian chick lit, certainly some novels, particularly the urban novels, focus on upper-middle class society. Loretta Hill’s novels (Chapter Nine) feature heroes defined by their wealth and symbolic power. However, novels such as those discussed in Chapter Seven represent heroes who are relatively suburban, ordinary and distinctly middle class. I have found no heroines who are “prostitute picaras” in Australian chick lit. While the male and female rivals may cheat and gold dig, this is rarely true of Australian chick heroines. If a heroine manages to snag a wealthy man, such as Lena Todd, The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots’ heroine (Chapter Nine), the reader is positioned to view the relationship as based on love and intense instant attraction first and foremost. The fact that such heroes have wealth and power is a bonus rather than something the heroine intentionally seeks out. Following Harzewski’s comparison between paperback romances and chick lit novels, it is obvious that chick lit reproduces romance; however it is always a repetition with a difference.

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81 Ibid., 38.
82 Ibid., 39.
In an argument that resembles Harzewski’s, Eva Chen (2010) notes that chick lit is different to “traditional romance” because of its “valorization of sexual and consumerist agency”. Chen explains that this reflects:

The predominance of a neoliberal ideology that has in the late twentieth century moved beyond the economic dimension of maximised profit-making into the social and cultural area of subject formation, whereby instead of direct disciplinary power from the state, the individual is interpellated as the actively choosing and self-responsible consumer/entrepreneur who is motivated by economic self-interest and risk-calculation to freely and willingly engage in a ceaseless project of self-making and self-governance.  

While marriage is central in romance novels, for Chen this is the domain which offers chick lit heroines agency because they can reject marriage altogether if they so choose. For Chen, this is dealt with primarily at the level of individual characters who “takes up full responsibility rather than shifting the blame onto others or onto society”.  

Where romance heroines remained “chaste” until marriage, chick lit heroines express their sexuality notably through, “sexual aggressiveness and their ability to separate sexual pleasure from marriage or even relationships”. They also have many more men to choose from, thereby deviating from the traditional romance which tends to be one woman and one man.  

Despite chick lit appearing to glorify freedom and choice, Chen argues that there is a “similarity and homogeneity” in that “all of them end up willingly desiring the same normative heterosexual relationship and the same sexy eroticized and fashionably adorned bodily charm that has always being prescribed by patriarchy and capitalism”.  

She argues:

In their approach to love, all chick lit heroines, despite being economically and professionally successful, are love-sick, emotionally needy and yearn for men, seeking (though not always finding) fulfilment and happiness in heterosexual encounters.

I agree with Chen that chick heroines have more choice and agency than some of their romantic predecessors, particularly in their relationships and sexual

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84 Ibid.: 254.
85 Ibid.: 255.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.: 259.
88 Ibid.
behaviours; however, I disagree with Chen’s point about the chick heroine’s approach to love. I argue that Chen’s point is contrary to my findings in Australian chick lit. While heroines certainly seek meaningful “heterosexual encounters”, not all, in fact few, appear “love-sick, emotionally needy and yearn[ing] for men”. Heroines such as Rachel Hill in Chapter Seven’s *The Girl Most Likely* and Chapter Eight’s heroine Rebecca Saunders in *The Farmer’s Wife* (the sequel to *Jillaroo*), rather than being “love sick”, are actually better described as sick of love. Rachel is navigating the aftermath of a failed quickie marriage; Rebecca had her happy ending in *Jillaroo* however *The Farmer’s Wife* sees her suffering through the last days of a violent marriage as she cares for two young children and an over-mortgaged, derelict farm. These novels, with their post-happy ever after premises, interrogate love and romance, ultimately challenging the primacy of “happy ever after”. Instead they emphasise “happy for now”.

For Anna Kiernan, chick lit is more sophisticated in its representation of romance than Harlequin novels. In her analysis of three novels, Kiernan found that they had a fairly typical romantic end, however she cautioned against concluding “the romantic formula is entirely intact”. Rather, she noted that the novels had different ideologies and stories. For Kiernan, *Run Catch Kiss* positioned its heroine “within the framework of feminist identity politics in which singular notions of the self are roundly rejected”. This point is important in my reading of Australian chick lit heroines whereby they are not static beings; rather, their identities are multifaceted. Heroine’s such as Rachel Hill in *The Girl Most Likely* and Rebecca Saunders in *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* demonstrate complex identities that challenge gender essentialism and fixed notions of femininity for women and masculinity for men. Another

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89 It is important to note that while Chen (2010) provides a useful comparison between chick lit and romance, she does not actually refer to any romance novels to support her assertions. She also generalises about romance novels and about chick lit referring to “all chick lit heroines” or “all chick lit novels.” Although she states she will be critiquing chick lit she refers largely to the television shows *Sex and the City* and *Ally McBeal*. The television show *Sex and the City* is markedly different to the novel in relation to narrative structure and the construction of the central characters. *Ally McBeal* is a good example of chick television.


91 Ibid.
important point that Kiernan makes in her analysis of *Run Catch Kiss* is the novel’s “inconsistency” and “conflict of desires”. This is important to Kiernan because, as she argues, “the consistency of the linear romantic myth is what must be put into question for more complex heroines to take form in commercial women’s fiction”.92 I apply Kiernan’s point in my analysis of Australian chick lit and note such deviations to the linear romance plot, particularly in novels by Rachael Treasure in Chapter Eight.

Much has been written about chick lit’s representation of the single woman.93 Authors such as Philips and Whelehan point to the enjoyment and shortcomings of chick heroines’ single life where single chick women love their singledom and wish for a partner to share that life. Some, like Bridget Jones, feel pressured to marry because of backlash myths perpetuated by the media. Such myths pathologise single femininity by portraying unmarried women as freaks, crazies or deluded psychopaths as seen in movies such as *Fatal Attraction* (1987) and *Single White Female* (1992). Diane Philips (2000) described the “sociological phenomenon” represented in media discourse in texts such as *Bridget Jones’s Diary* as “the narrative of the late twenty-to-thirty-something single career woman, desperately in search of love”.94 Philips saw similarities and differences between so-called “single woman novels” and “the genre of Mills and Boon romance” stating “although their narrative structures reproduce many of the same features, the single woman narrative does not belong entirely to the genre of the Mills and Boon romance”.95 The main difference for Philips was that single women heroines were “financially independent”, professional women. For Philips, these novels were commodity fictions where heroines shopped for luxury goods, shopped for men and built friendships based on “shared tastes and consumption patterns”.96 Philips argued: “There is a conflation and a confusion in these novels between romantic desire for a man and for the commodities of luxury and fashion which he is expected to provide”.97 It was

92 Ibid.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.: 247.
97 Ibid.
through the “pursuit of love” that Philips noted that the ten novels she studied revealed a “sense of dissatisfaction in young women’s lives, a dissatisfaction that is expressed in the pursuit of love, and that is assumed in these romance narratives to be answered by a man”.98 Central to that dissatisfaction was the pursuit of what are sometimes contradictory aspects of femininity including what she described as “simultaneously glamorous and maternal, cosmopolitan and a homemaker”99 and the suggestion that consumption provided the antidote. For Philips, the novels suggested that “romantic success” resulted from consumer success, particularly “the successful deployment of consumer skills”.100 I agree with Philips that a profound sense of dissatisfaction is represented in chick novels. However, in the Australian chick novels I analyse, consumption is not usually the answer. Rather, heroines long for meaningful, rewarding work, strong ties to others including family, friends and the community and Rebecca in Chapter Eight particularly values her relationship with the land. To these heroines, a loving relationship with a man compliments other aspects of life.

Stéphanie Genz examines romance and chick lit through the tensions between the single woman heroine’s search for romance and her desire for independence. For Genz, the “postfeminist singleton” is trying to reconcile her “independent urban life” and her “yearning for a man”.101 Bridget Jones for example, as Genz explains, is a heroine, “bewildered by the contradictory demands and mixed messages of heterosexual romance and feminist emancipation”.102 Genz argues that the critics frequently note the mismatch between romance and gender politics, where “commentators criticize the lack of feminist politics and collectivity in postfeminist depictions of the singleton and they focus on her nostalgic and retrogressive pursuit of romance/marriage”.103 The criticism that Genz refers to suggests that commentators have an either/or approach to chick lit; the novels are either

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99 Ibid.: 249.
100 Ibid.: 249-50.
102 Ibid.
103 Ibid.
feminist or romantic. Like Genz, I argue that the novels are more complex than this distinction permits.

Kyra Hunting addresses the perceived binary between romance and having an independent successful professional life for chick heroines of North American television shows. For Hunting, rather than being mutually exclusive, she argues that “Romance is not posited as a solution to, or end to, career or personal problems but instead as deeply interrelated with them”. For her, Sex and the City is geared towards finding romance and love while Cashmere Mafia and Lipstick Jungle “can be understood as discursively engaging with the afterwards of “Happily Ever After”. In chick lit, romance is one theme along with consumption, friendships, body modification and beauty, sex and sexuality. The inner tension between singledom and coupledom is played out for the most part in the endings of chick novels, which have always been a contentious topic in the study of romance as I discussed in Chapter Two. Feminist critics of the romance have two central concerns, firstly, the repetitive nature of the happy ending that was nearly always built around marriage, and secondly, the implication of marriage as “enslaving heroines and binding readers”. However, this argument cannot simply be grafted onto chick lit. While those who study chick lit note a sustained engagement with the romance narrative structure and themes of love and companionship, Harzewski and Glasburgh attest that many novels do not end in marriage and some do not even end happily. Harzewski remarks on the significance of this when she states:

As a chick lit novel does not necessarily culminate in marriage or long-term union, it presents a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring, in varying degrees, the dissolution of romantic ideals, to showing those ideals as unmet, sometimes unrealistic, expectations.

Chick lit for Harzewski revises the Harlequin romance and provides what she describes as a “postfeminist alternative”. Michelle Glasburgh in her content analysis of ten chick novels found that heroines wanted to embrace romance

104 Hunting, "Women Talk: Chick Lit TV and the Dialogues of Feminism," 193.
105 Ibid.: 192.
106 Harzewski, Chick Lit and Postfeminism; Glasburgh, "Chick Lit: The New Face of Postfeminist Fiction?".
107 Harzewski, Chick Lit and Postfeminism, 40.
and romantic relationships, where eight out of ten books concluded with the heroine in a serious relationship.\footnote{Glasburgh, "Chick Lit: The New Face of Postfeminist Fiction?", 79.} Glasburgh noted that all novels ended happily even if the heroine did not have her man. Thus, such novels offered alternatives to the ‘happy ending’ where it was “possible to find happiness down other avenues.”\footnote{Ibid., 82.} This is consistent with my reading of Australian chick lit where most novels end happily; however few end in marriage and not all in romantic certainty.

Chick endings are complicated in other ways such as through their relationship to other novels. Van Slooten for example discusses chick lit that are part of a series of books by the same author.\footnote{Van Slooten, "A Truth Universally (Un)Acknowledged: Ally McBeal, Bridget Jones’s Diary and the Conflict between Romantic Love and Feminism," 38.} The most popular example of a clutch of novels with the same heroine are those about Bridget Jones: Bridget Jones’s Diary (1996), its sequels Bridget Jones and the Edge of Reason (1999) and Mad About the Boy (2013) as well as the Bridget Jones newspaper column written between 2005 and 2006. Sophie Kinsella’s six novel Shopaholic series which began with the bestselling Secret Dreamworld of a Shopaholic (2000) is another example. Novels in a series by Fielding and Kinsella demonstrate how romantic endings can be complicated by sequels and adaptations. For example, one novel may conclude with romantic certainty and the next begin with romantic catastrophe, perhaps where a couple have recently separated or are in crisis.\footnote{Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary series is a case in point because in 2013 the highly anticipated third novel in the series, Mad About The Boy, was published. Many expectant readers were shocked to discover that Mark Darcy’s character had died leaving Bridget a fifty-something widow with two children.}

Chapter Eight considers the implications of a series of novels through a reading of Jillaroo with its traditional romantic happy ending and its sequel The Farmer’s Wife which begins with the death of the romance.

Van Slooten discusses the importance of considering fantasy when analysing chick texts. In discussing Bridget Jones’s Diary and Ally McBeal, Van Slooten notes that both texts are romances that “embody the range of fantasies and
nightmares of real women”. She argues that such heroines “pursue romantic love, professional success and sustaining friendships despite the grim struggle and personal conflicts”. She asserts that endings without marriage reveal that “marriage is not the ultimate goal”. Rather, *Ally McBeal* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, “emphasise the protagonists’ search for love [and do so...] because this quest proves difficult”. Thus, Van Slooten notes the limits of critical approaches to the romance stating, “much of the available criticism of romance as a literary genre is dated [...It] fails to address the concerns of contemporary romance like *Ally McBeal* and *Bridget Jones’s Diary*”. For Van Slooten, these texts draw on reality while remaining fictional. As fiction, they are not “bound by the same reality as real life women”. Subsequently, such texts are a ‘safe’ place for women to “play out their own conflicts through these fictional characters”. Van Slooten concludes by emphasising the value of chick lit to “expose many new twists on age-old questions of romance, sex and power”. Indeed, as I argue in Chapters Five through Nine, Australian chick lit does this.

In conclusion, there is much agreement that chick lit draws on and continues the tradition of romantic writing, however the extent to which it reproduces or revolutionises romance is contested. Arguably, this is due to the diversity of novels on offer, with each engaging differently with romance and love. That said, theorists have remarked on a number of characteristics in chick lit in relation to love and romance. These include, male characters not being central to the narrative, in some cases silenced; women engaging in assertive and sometimes aggressive sexual behaviour that rarely results in eroticism; marriage being presented as unnecessary; some heroines acting desperately in their search for love; the difficulty reconciling independence and desire for a partner and endings that are contested, rarely ending in marriage. While many

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113 Ibid., 48.
114 Ibid., 49.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid., 51.
117 Ibid., 39.
118 Ibid.
119 Ibid., 51.
authors have examined the similarities and differences between chick lit and previous forms of romance, particularly the popular mass market romance, a noticeable gap is that none have considered chick lit’s romantic narrative structure in a holistic way, such as by applying Regis's theory of the romance. In Chapters Five to Nine, I do this to a selection of Australian chick novels to explore more deeply chick lit’s engagement with romance and feminism.

**Chick Lit and Feminism**

In this section I outline the main two approaches taken to understanding chick lit’s relationship to feminism. The first is a “chick postfeminist” reading of chick lit. Alternatively, authors approach chick lit using an ‘A’ postfeminist theoretical framework which has been influenced by poststructuralist and postmodernist theory. ‘A’ postfeminist critiques of chick lit see its relationship to feminism as complicated and multifaceted. In this section I explore both of these approaches to chick lit. I argue that chick lit can be read through both ‘faces’ of postfeminism and therefore are open to multiple readings.

*Chick Lit Though a “Chick Postfeminist” Lens*

One of the earliest arguments about chick lit and feminism is found in Deborah Philips’, “Shopping for single men: The single woman narrative” (2000)\(^{120}\). The article examined what Philips noted was a new trend in publishing in the late 1990s where novels including *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Sex and the City* focussed on the lives of single women.\(^{121}\) For Philips, the ten novels she studied were largely antifeminist: “the narrator [...] will often deliberately distance the heroine from any suggestion of feminism, while simultaneously endorsing her successful career”.\(^{122}\) Philips found that a heroine’s solidarity with women, rather than based on strong friendship was founded on similar consumer tastes. Feminism was presented as a dirty word, one from which heroines repeatedly tried to disassociate themselves. According to Philips, this genre of single

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\(^{120}\) Philips, "Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative."

\(^{121}\) Philips examined a total of ten novels for her study.

protagonists “is one that ultimately accepts a status for women and gender relations that belong to a pre-feminist generation”. In particular, she stated:

The heroines of the single women novel assume all the gains of the twentieth-century women’s movement. They take their work and independence for granted, but leave traditional gender relations and patriarchal structures profoundly unchallenged.

Philips's discussion of ten novels was one of the first to address the relationship between feminism and romance in chick novels. I do not entirely agree with Philips on a number of fronts. I disagree that the novels she discussed are ‘antifeminist’ and only about consumption. Moreover, I find that her argument cannot be applied to novels with the same characteristics outside of the ones she discussed. Rather, as I argue in the following chapters, a feminist sensibility pervades single woman novels from Australia. The novels explore more than the consumptive habits of their heroines including important issues relevant to feminism such as body image, friend and family relationships, sexual practices, mental and physical health and those related to work. Single woman texts do not totally accept “a status for women and gender relations that belong to a pre-feminist generation”. Philips was writing in the early years of the chick genre, drawing upon novels published pre-millennium. The genre has evolved and developed since then and as I argue below, the representation of romance and feminism has shifted significantly. As I show, some Australian chick novels such as *The Boy’s Club* and *Jillaroo* reject inequality for women in the workplace and highlight the need for change.

Arguments about chick lit’s supposed ‘antifeminism’ such as those made by Philips have morphed into arguments that chick lit is postfeminist in the style of “chick postfeminism”. In the widely cited paper, “Postfeminism and Popular Culture” (2004), Angela McRobbie argued that some examples of contemporary popular culture “are perniciously effective in [...] undoing of feminism, while simultaneously appearing to be engaging in a well-informed and even well-intended response to feminism”. For McRobbie, postfeminism “positively
draws on and invokes feminism as that which can be taken into account, to suggest that equality is achieved in order to install a whole repertoire of new meanings, which emphasise that it is no longer needed, it is a spent force”. McRobbie utilises concepts such as “feminist success” and “female success” to acknowledge the way that institutions have adopted aspects of feminist thinking, thereby showing that those very same institutions are “modern and abreast with social change”. However, McRobbie contests claims of feminist success and the creation of new modes of female subjectivity by drawing upon a number of examples including *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. The new female subject, of which Bridget is an example, as McRobbie asserts, is “despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a condition of her freedom”. McRobbie makes an interesting point here about ‘silence’, suggesting that characters such as Bridget Jones are perhaps too busy exercising their freedoms and choices to undertake a critique of persistent gender inequalities. Moreover, McRobbie points out that this subject intensely self-monitors, especially when they cannot quite actualise their own success. McRobbie attributes these behaviours to changing gender roles. Bridget Jones is indeed a compelling example of this postfeminist subject who uses her diary to record her efforts at transformation. An important point that McRobbie makes about choice within postfeminism is that it “is surely, within lifestyle culture, a modality of constraint” because individuals feel under pressure to “make the right choices”. What McRobbie emphasises is that while women may feel they are exercising freedom and choice, they must be conscious that those freedoms and choices are usually predetermined in some way and restricted through social practices, culture, law and language. In mapping the terrain of postfeminism, McRobbie notes the importance of popular culture, particularly referring to chick lit, when she states, “These young women’s genres are vital to the

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126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.: 257.
128 Ibid.: 260.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.: 261.
construction of a new 'gender regime'.\textsuperscript{132} McRobbie thus suggests that genres such as chick lit are integral to mapping and understanding postfeminism.

McRobbie is not alone in associating chick texts with postfeminism.\textsuperscript{133} Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff consider postfeminism and romance in chick lit. As I mentioned in the previous section, they argue that chick lit rewrites the romance to an extent:

> [B]ut not in ways that allow for complex analyses of power, subjectivity and desire, but rather in ways that suggest women's salvation is to be found in the pleasures of a worked-on, worked-out body and the arms of a good man.\textsuperscript{134}

They examine a selection of novels in relation to five themes: “the construction of sexual experience; depictions of the heroine’s intelligence and independence; beauty and appearance; work; and singleness”.\textsuperscript{135} They assert that chick lit’s “postfeminist sensibility” is evident in numerous ways, including its “ambivalent” treatment of feminist ideas by way of “taking it for granted and repudiation,” “the emphasis accorded to individual choice and empowerment” where “prefeminist ideas are being (seductively) repackaged as postfeminist freedoms” and the representation of protagonists as “empowered sexual subjects” who contradictorily appear to the hero as “neo-virgins”.\textsuperscript{136} In analysing these themes in chick lit, Gill and Herdieckerhoff argue that such representations, contradictory and complex, “completely eschews any discussion of power, and has no language, besides that of individual free choice, with which to discuss women's lives”.\textsuperscript{137} I agree with Gill and Herdieckerhoff that chick lit presents examples of the so-called “new women”, some of whom are sexually empowered consumers who long for a beautiful, thin body; however I argue that this is one side of chick lit, and arguably only a part of what narratives reveal about their heroines. It is difficult to argue against claims that chick lit emphasises individual choice and empowerment when most

\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.: 262.
\textsuperscript{133} See Whelehan (2002), Gill (2006) and Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) for discussions of chick lit and postfeminism.
\textsuperscript{134} Gill and Herdieckerhoff, "Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?.”
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
novels offer a microcosm of a single heroine’s life. Nevertheless, as I explore in latter chapters, Australian chick lit heroines evolve over the course of novels. While they exemplify aspects of the “postfeminist sensibility” at various points in the narrative, a number of heroines reject those same aspects of the postfeminist sensibility before the novel’s end.

Imelda Whelehan contextualises chick lit within a longer tradition of written works that engage with feminism, works she calls ‘feminist bestsellers.’ Whelehan argues that fiction, from the so-called ‘consciousness-raising novels’ which positioned readers to reflect on how femininity and patriarchy constrained their lives, through to chick lit, engage with feminism. She argues that many novels published during the women’s movement of the 1970s and 1980s, raised awareness amongst readers of a “problem shared”. Even though Whelehan admits she has ‘dismissed’ chick lit in previous publications, The Feminist Bestseller argues that chick novels “invite female readers to appraise their own lives while reading fictional accounts of contemporary women”.138 One of the main differences that Whelehan notes between “feminist bestsellers” and chick lit is that in feminist bestsellers there was an abundance of “blood and rage” whereas in chick lit these are noticeably absent.139 I agree with Whelehan that chick lit novels tend to avoid blood and rage, however Chapter Five’s allmenarebastards.com and The Boy’s Club contain furious heroines who rally against mistreatment, sexism or misogyny at the hands of men. Chapter Eight’s heroine Rebecca Saunders also vents her anger at a litany of injustices in her life, many at the hands of men.

Chick Lit Through an “Academic Postfeminist” Lens
Several theorists write of chick lit’s complicated, sometimes multifaceted relationship to feminism. Stéphanie Genz (2010) takes an “‘Academic’ Postfeminist Approach” to discussing the “postfeminist singleton” in fiction and television texts. It is useful to quote at length her description of the theoretical field and postfeminist woman within it:

138 Whelehan, The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City, 16.
139 Ibid., 218-19.
The Postfeminist landscape generates complex and ambiguous portrayals of femaleness, femininity, and feminism, exploring the contingent and unresolvable tension between these subject positions. In particular, the PFW (Postfeminist Woman) navigates the conflicts between her feminist values and her feminine body, between individual and collective achievement, between professional career and personal relationship. She inhabits a nondualistic space that holds together these varied and often oppositional stances and thus, she provides multiple opportunities for female identification. The PFW wants to “have it all” as she refuses to dichotomise and choose between her public and private, feminist, and feminine identities. She rearticulates and blurs binary distinctions between feminism and femininity, between professionalism and domesticity, refuting monolithic and homogenous definitions of postfeminist subjectivity.140

Genz highlights the complexity and the range of identity types that fall under the term ‘postfeminist’. Thus, Genz cautions feminist theorists to tread carefully, avoiding essentialism. There is no single postfeminist identity; indeed, related identities are highly unstable and at times contradictory. For Genz, this complexity makes it difficult for the singleton to “have it all” because femininity and feminism are constantly in conflict. She rejects suggestions that the postfeminist singleton is “an egocentric composite of frivolous neuroses and a prefeminist nostalgist obsessed with male approval”.141 Rather what Genz proposes is that:

Postfeminism's personalised narratives depict the struggles of contemporary womanhood to blend and integrate her contradictory aspirations. The postfeminist singleton endeavours to find a subject position that permits her to hang onto the material and social gains achieved by the women's movement as well as indulge her romantic longings.142

Thus, for Genz postfeminist singletons such as Bridget Jones and Ally McBeal:

[D]iscard the notion of a perfect feminine or feminist identity in its embrace of a postfeminist in-betweenness and incoherence as the site of fulfilment [...] Negotiating the conflicting demands of heterosexual romance and professional achievement, feminine embodiment and feminist agency, the postfeminist singleton occupies multivalent and paradoxical space between dualities as she creates a new subjective stance that complicates female identity rather than defining it.143

140 Genz, "Singled Out: Postfeminism's "New Woman" and the Dilemma of Having It All," 98.
141 Ibid.: 102.
142 Ibid.
143 Ibid.: 115.
Genz’s argument relates to my analysis of Australian chick lit in providing a way to discuss the contradiction in the novels where heroines move between different feminist identities and often want to obtain or retain their “material and social gains” while reconciling their desire for loving companionate relationships.

Like Genz, Kyra Hunting takes an academic postfeminist approach to the representation of feminism in chick lit. Hunting’s article about feminism and ‘chick lit television’ (2012) attempts to rescue shows such as Sex and the City and Lipstick Jungle from being dismissed as ‘regressively’ postfeminist. Indeed, Hunting argues that Sex and the City resists easily being pigeonholed as regressive or progressive in relation to feminism.\[144\] Rather, as she notes, such shows “trouble the definitions they are supposed to exemplify”.\[145\] Instead of attempting to dismiss or disidentify with second wave feminism, Hunting argues that shows such as Sex and the City “evoke the work of second-wave feminism as necessary for the third-wave feminism of the programs’ protagonists”.\[146\] She draws upon Butler and Dow to shape her argument that “texts may be simultaneously feminist and postfeminist [...] or regressive and subversive”.\[147\] She argues that chick lit television is one of the few places where issues relevant to women such as sexism at work are discussed and multiple perspectives are offered. For Hunting, such programs employ “discursivity, multiplicity and performativity” with the effect that they may appear “superficially postfeminist”; however, “can function at their core to move toward feminist goals”.\[148\] Subsequently, Hunting calls for a re-examination of these texts for “their political potential”. While programs such as Sex and the City are often labelled postfeminist because they are “consumer driven, glamour and appearance obsessed” featuring professional successful women, Hunting argues that they “simultaneously destabilize (postfeminist ideals) by creating spaces for fluid sexuality, allowing experimentation with masculine gender

\[144\] Hunting, "Women Talk: Chick Lit TV and the Dialogues of Feminism."
\[145\] Ibid.: 190.
\[146\] Ibid.: 191.
\[147\] Ibid.: 199.
\[148\] Ibid.: 187.
performance, and creating nonnormative, and nonbiological narratives of maternity”. She states:

While chick-lit television may not be anyone’s idea of the perfect feminist text, its role in allowing a space for different versions of womanhood and the issues that women face to be discussed makes it invaluable for considering the way feminism, and not merely postfeminism, operate in popular entertainment media.

What is most important in Hunting’s article is the notion that media texts can appear on the surface ‘postfeminist’ or ‘retrogressive’ yet underneath can “move towards feminist goals”. I find this to be so in Australian chick lit.

For Patricia Leavy, chick lit has the potential to represent feminist ideas and issues for educational purposes. Leavy employed the chick lit format to write a book, Low Fat Love, specifically for use in the classroom. She did this so she could represent in literary form, her decade long feminist research into the identity issues of young women and her teaching in a sociological course on gender, sexuality and popular culture. Her book reflected her belief in the social construction of gender and what she described as “her desire to expose dominant forms of femininity for the purpose of subverting them, and in the process empowering female readers”. She decided on the chick lit genre because she believed it would be “familiar” and “pleasurable” to her target audience. She describes the reading process she expected her readers to participate in: “I invited readers into a traditional chick-lit love plot, only to subvert it, unravel it, as the women in the book ultimately are seeking their own self-actualization”. What is important in Leavy’s article is her report on the ability to use the chick lit genre for feminist purposes. The way she has written her novel suggests that the romance plot can be used as a ruse: a familiar narrative structure that is inviting to readers, but which can be appropriated, subverted and deployed for feminist purposes. Leavy’s articulation of the

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149 Ibid.: 191.
150 Ibid.: 200.
151 She interviewed young women about their "relationships, sexuality, body image and overall identity issues." Leavy, "Fiction and the Feminist Academic Novel," 519.
152 Ibid.
153 Ibid.: 522.
feminist redeployment of romance exemplifies Cranny-Francis’s claims about feminist uses of genre fiction I outlined in Chapter One.

Eva Chen analyses what she calls “neoliberal self-governance and popular postfeminism” in chick lit. She argues that feminist approaches to chick lit that focus on it as “backlash, rerotexism or as commodification” need to “refocus their critique”. She notes a contradiction in the feminist criticism of chick lit, particularly where chick lit appears to have “multiplicity and freedom of sexual choice/expression” yet is often accused of “being conservative and reinforcing the patriarchal status quo”. Chen argues that chick lit’s inability to challenge the repressive sexual status quo is conservative. For example, Chen refers to how in the past the subject would have been a “passively receiving victim”; today, particularly for chick lit heroines, the subject “actively makes her choice” where she “chooses” to be oppressed. Chen notes in relation to chick lit heroines, “this feeling that despite their much-touted new freedom and agency these women are not happy, are in fact under constant pressure and sometimes desperate, is quite widespread in the chick lit texts”. Despite her criticisms of the genre, Chen argues that chick lit is a “complicated” genre that doesn’t just “reinforce patriarchal norms”; it reflects many “inner tensions and layers”.

With a focus also partly on consumerism, Stephanie Harzewski’s *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, provides a comprehensive study of chick lit in relation to feminism. Contextualised within postmodern theory, Harzewski examines novels including *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *The Devil Wears Prada* as examples of novels often described as ‘postfeminist fiction’. Like Smith, Harzewski connects chick lit with consumer culture and the commodification of desire. Harzewski’s aim is to examine the genre through various lenses, particularly in relation to the romance and bildungsroman. She links chick lit to certain social and cultural

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155 Original emphasis. Ibid.
156 Ibid.: 257.
157 Ibid.: 263.
158 Ibid.: 269.
159 Ibid.: 271.
160 Ibid.
phenomena, particularly “gender relations in the U.S. and British society since the late 1990s” and finds that chick lit reveals much about contemporary gender politics including postfeminism. Her final chapter is devoted to chick lit's relationship to feminism which she states offers “an implicit commentary on feminism's gains and deficiencies”. She asserts that chick lit cannot be dismissed as antifeminist, rather it is a “selective, half-utopian amalgamation of earlier feminist tenets.”

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have explored the theoretical inquiries into chick lit in relation to romance and feminism. There is a distinct relationship between chick lit and the prose romance novel and the popular romance novel; whether chick lit improves or "revolutionises" romance is much debated. Chick lit treats male characters differently to other forms of romance, either sidelining or displacing them, emphasises sex and sexual relationships and focuses on upper class lifestyles. In some cases, chick heroines apply their consumer skills to their relationships with men. In relation to feminism, I have discussed two central approaches: the chick postfeminist and academic postfeminist approach. The chick postfeminist approach critiques chick lit for attempting to undermine or undercut the gains of second wave feminism. The academic postfeminist approach argues that chick lit's relationship to feminism is more complicated than simply being part of the backlash. Rather, chick lit has a contradictory and complex relationship with feminism. What is obvious from these arguments is that chick lit's relationship to romance and feminism is layered and contradictory.

In the next chapter I apply these approaches to romance and feminism to Australian urban chick lit. In particular, I explore the complexity and contradiction between the utilisation of the romance plot and themes of love and romance as well as the representation of feminism in novels by Allison Rushby, Pip Karmel, Wendy Squires, Wendy Harmer and Maggie Alderson. I

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162 Ibid., 21.
163 Ibid., 181.
argue that the novels all use the romance plot. However, the romantic plot is often directly contradicted by the cynical treatment of love and romance as themes. The representation of feminism is complex with novels such as Allison Rushby’s *allmenarebastards.com* and Wendy Squires’ *The Boy’s Club* demonstrating slippage between postfeminist and feminist ideas.
Chapter Five: Postfeminist Singleness and Messy Love in Urban Australian Chick Lit

Love is like a tide. When it’s in, everything looks beautiful and inviting. Only when love recedes can you see the debris beneath the surface—the old bottles, the rusty prams, the sewage pipes, the bloated cats and dogs weighted down to drown.

Kathy Lette in To Love, Honour and Betray.¹

Introduction

Several scholars, including Philips (2000, 2006), Whelehan (2000, 2004, 2005), Negra (2004) and Genz (2010), have examined chick lit’s contradictory representation of single urban women and their engagement with romantic ideals and feminist freedoms. In 2000, Philips critiqued the novelistic representation of single women who enjoyed the benefits of the women’s movement without feeling the need to challenge persistent patriarchal structures.² Such heroines, for Philips, were far too busy shopping, both for clothes and men, to worry about gender inequality. Diane Negra emphasised how, within a neo-conservative climate, popular culture could be usurped to pathologise single women and encourage domesticity, marriage and motherhood through tropes such as “hometown return”.³ Genz however explained the complex and contradictory identity politics of “postfeminist women”. For Genz, such women defy concrete categorisation and “rearticulate [...] and blur binary distinctions between feminism and femininity, between professionalism and domesticity, refuting monolithic and homogenous definitions of postfeminist subjectivity”.⁴

¹ Kathy Lette, To Love, Honour and Betray (Till Divorce Us Do Part) (London: Bantam, 2008), 381.
⁴ Genz, "Singled Out: Postfeminism’s "New Woman" and the Dilemma of Having It All," 98.
This Chapter explores how romance and feminism are represented in urban Australian chick lit with a focus on single women. Most novels have the essential structural romantic elements while simultaneously questioning (and sometimes rejecting) the ideals that define romance and love. They are mostly set in the Australian cities such as Sydney and Melbourne. I focus on the structural qualities that construct romance and feminism, especially the plot, characters and themes. Close analysis of these textual elements reveals the contradictions and complexity of the “postfeminist chick novel”. The writers of these novels want to have it “both ways”: retaining the romance structure while rejecting ideas of love and romance deemed confining, outdated or simply impossible within a contemporary context. I argue that urban Australian chick lit’s interrogation of love and romance continues the discussion about love and romance that occurred within the women’s movement. Australian urban heroines have benefitted from the women’s movement; they have education, high-flying careers and most live independently. Their mostly well-paid jobs mean they can afford to indulge in consumption and beautification rituals. Yet, their good fortune does not prevent them experiencing career, relationship, family or personal problems. I discuss how the novels use their plots to address issues relevant to feminism. Novels such as allmenarebastards.com and The Boy’s Club directly represent heroines as they face sexism or misogyny; some heroines undertake legal cases in line with the Australian Affirmative Action Act 1984. This chapter argues that Australian urban chick lit engages with romance and feminism variably; most are romances structurally, however some are more feminist than others.

**Reworking the Romance Plot**

As I explained in Chapter Two, for Pamela Regis, romance plots are defined by “eight essential elements” which lead a heroine “to freedom”. If one or more of these essential elements is missing, then a novel is not a romance. However, according to Regis, the romantic elements can be fashioned in many ways,

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including being “doubled, amplified, diminished, echoed, made as comic or serious as the context requires”.\(^6\) Subsequently, novels that include the essential elements are repetitions with difference.\(^7\) This section examines Australian urban chick novels through Regis’s theory of the romance and Gill and Herdieckerhoff’s claim that chick lit “rewrites the romance”, however, not in ways that allow for “complex analyses of power, subjectivity and desire”.\(^8\) I argue that Australian chick lit mostly includes the essential elements of romance and that they offer complex representations of issues related to “power, subjectivity and desire”.

Australian heroines begin the novels single after a series of disastrous relationships (Me, Myself and I, Miss Lonely Hearts, Pants on Fire, allmenarebastards.com), recently dumped by boyfriends (Love Struck, Love and Punishment), in marriages either on the cusp of falling apart (Hand Bags and Gladrags, How to Break Your Own Heart) or which have already fallen apart (The Boy’s Club, Mad About the Boy). All heroines are single at one point in the novel, even if they begin the novel married. The romance plot therefore become a useful way to engage with ideas around singleness, including the anxiety heroines feel within a culture where marriage and family life are still important cultural institutions.

Maggie Alderson’s Pants on Fire, Melanie La’Brooy’s Love Struck and Sheryn George’s Miss Lonely Hearts all exhibit Regis’s (2003) essential romantic elements with heroines going from single to coupled, though none marry at novel’s end. Each novel offers a slightly different permutation of romance exemplifying Regis’s point that there is much variation in form.\(^9\) Maggie Alderson’s debut novel, Pants on Fire, for example, deploys the essential

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\(^6\) Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 205.

\(^7\) My understanding of romance as repetitions with difference has been informed by Deleuze’s (1994) discussion of “complex repetition” and time. Because of the nature of time that always moves forward, every repetition is always with difference. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (London: Athlone, 1994).

\(^8\) Gill and Herdieckerhoff, "Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?.”

elements of romance to show the “courtship and betrothal” of its heroine. Alderson’s heroine, Georgia Abbott, experiences romance as “a single girl in a party town” (back cover) after moving to Sydney from London to work on a women’s magazine. She sees Sydney as an outsider who is engulfed in the frenetic and excessive party scene of the city’s middle and upper classes. Regis’s first romantic element, “a definition of society” includes the “flaws” and aspects that “may be incomplete, superannuated, or corrupt.” For Georgia, society is “flawed” because of the pain she feels having fled England after breaking-up with a cheating fiancée. Sydney offers her the hope of a fresh start and the opportunity to find new love. She is presented as someone aware of romantic myths about Australia, playfully admitting that she has read Neville Shute’s classic novel *A Town Like Alice*.

Georgia’s summary of Shute’s novel anticipates her own journey to a loving relationship. She meets and dates numerous men who act as decoy heroes while for much of the novel the ‘real’ hero, Rory, appears to be unavailable because he already has a girlfriend. It is only late in the novel that his romantic availability is revealed.

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10 Ibid., 19.
11 This motif of a heroine being plunged into an unfamiliar context or travelling to a new place appears in novels by Monica McInerney (*A Taste for It, Upside Down Inside Out, Spin the Bottle, Those Faraday Girls*) and Loretta Hill’s *The Girl in Steel Capped Boots*.
13 *A Town Like Alice* (1950) tells the story of Jean Paget, a young woman from England living in Malaya who becomes a Japanese prisoner of war. During her time in captivity, a young Australian man risks his own life to help Jean and other women held prisoner. Jean later decides to search for Joe and eventually finds him in an outback Australian town.
14 Potential heroes who already have girlfriends or lovers present a sizable external barrier to the progression of romance. In Georgia’s case, Rory’s girlfriend is a love rival and foil. Monica McInerney’s *A Taste for It* includes a similar love rival character that is contrasted to the novel’s heroine Maura. Maura is attracted to the hero Dominic; however, she assumes that he is already in a relationship with a young beautiful woman who appears to accompany him on his travels. Maura incorrectly assumes that Carla is Dominic’s girlfriend, however eventually learns that Dominic is Carla’s guardian.
After a series of romantic disappointments and a year working at the magazine *Glow*, Georgia decides to return home to England.\textsuperscript{15} She admits that she feels she has an “attract[ion] to excessive people”, has repeated “stupid choices” and therefore has not made the most of her time in Australia (357). Georgia hoped to find “companionate love” in what she tells the reader is a sea of “primitive” males (12).\textsuperscript{16} Eva Chen (2010) has criticised chick lit heroines for being “love-sick” and “emotionally needy [...]” seeking (though not always finding) fulfilment and happiness in heterosexual encounters.\textsuperscript{17} Georgia is hardly “love-sick” and “emotionally needy”; yet, she has encountered a number of men throughout the novel and found them lacking. Furthermore, Georgia’s reasons for returning to England exemplify McRobbie’s postfeminist subject who “self-blames” when “success eludes him or her”.\textsuperscript{18} Georgia however is saved from “self-blaming” and a sense of failure as she is about to depart Australia. She has had quasi-romantic moments with Rory, however only when he shows up at the airport is their relationship assured. Rory explains that he has “contrived” their meeting and many of their meetings before it. On this occasion, his visit to the airport departure lounge is because he is going to England “to be with [her]” (379). *Miss Lonely Hearts* is also a romance that sees a single heroine Meg Tooley recovering from a hurtful breakup.\textsuperscript{19} Her dating regime is enforced by a friend who places an ad in the singles column of the local paper. The friend informs Meg that “it was time” she got over her ex-boyfriend and that the ad might eventuate in (at the very least) a “good shag” (8).\textsuperscript{20} Meg exhibits the benefits of

\textsuperscript{15} Georgia’s decision to “return home” reflects Elpseth Probyn’s (1997) “postfeminist ontology” where women “have to fight for [themself] but at the end of the day [...] can always go home” (130). In Georgia’s case, she “retreats” from professional success in Sydney because of romantic disappointment.

\textsuperscript{16} Regis explores the term “companionate” in relation to marriage defining such relationships as unions based on “mutual comfort and support, including love, between spouses”. Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 57.

\textsuperscript{17} Chen, "Neoliberal Self-Governance and Popular Postfeminism in Contemporary Anglo-American Chick Lit," 259.

\textsuperscript{18} McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 260.

\textsuperscript{19} The post-break-up premise is used in other chick novels including Marian Keyes’s *Watermelon*, Monica McInerney’s *Upside Down Inside Out* and *The House of Memories*, Rebecca Sparrow’s *The Girl Most Likely* and Jennifer Weiner’s *In Her Shoes*.

\textsuperscript{20} For Meg’s friend, the singles ad is not necessarily a ploy to find “companionate love” (Regis 2003) or a lasting relationship; nor is it expected to result in Meg learning about or “knowing love” (hooks 2000, 173). Rather, Meg’s friend hopes that the advertisement might offer Meg the opportunity to experience a moment of what Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006) describe as being an “empowered” postfeminist “sexual subject”.
single life: she has many friends, a magazine career and independence. However, the romantic element of “the definition of society” turns such benefits into “flaws” whereby one of her friends places the singles advertisement without her knowledge resulting in Meg’s humiliation, the ‘glamorous’ media career features a demonic boss and lousy pay, and, she is single because she is scared of relationships (her friend describes her as a “LOVE WIMP” (original emphasis, 26)). Thus, singledom is presented as complex and with numerous shortcomings.

Rather than actively “pursuing love”, Meg is presented initially as a reluctant romantic heroine. She is by no means “desperately in search of love” as Philips (2000) has observed of single women heroines. Meg’s magazine career and the Lonely Hearts column ad distract her from her heartbreak while allowing her to meet new men, including Nick Green the art director at sports magazine Pfoar!. Meg’s attraction to Nick is instant. Regis (2003) explains that “attraction”, an essential romantic element, “establishes for the reader the reason that this couple must marry”. Meg’s first impression of Nick as “rootable” (76) alludes to his physical appearance and a “phallic intensity” which Harzewski states is usually found in Harlequin romances though rarely in chick lit. As their relationship develops, the reasons for this couple’s suitability beyond sexual attraction become clearer when Meg describes Nick as “the perfect man”: “hot”, “funny”, “kind”, “sweet without being drippy” (85). While at first Nick appears to have all the qualities of a reconstructed male hero who is attractive and sensitive, a coffee date leads Meg to conclude he is gay (84-85). Her judgement about Nick’s sexuality is proven wrong when her female magazine colleagues tell her otherwise. Meg can now consider a romantic relationship with Nick; yet, her intentions are derailed by numerous “external barriers” defined by Regis as circumstances outside the hero or

22 Attraction is a key element of romance. Instant attraction between a heroine and hero occurs in chick lit novels including McInerney’s A Taste for It and Family Babbage, Jane Green’s Jemima J, Loretta Hill’s The Girl in the Hard Hat, Amy Jenkins’ Honey Moon, Pip Karmel’s Me Myself and I and Rachael Treasure’s Jillaroo.
23 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 33.
24 Harzewski, Chick Lit and Postfeminism, 36.
heroine’s mind. For Meg, these barriers include missing a date with Nick, becoming sidetracked by her ex-boyfriend and being sent on a plastic surgery assignment for work. Undeterred by these barriers which delay the romance, Meg is determined to discover if Nick is interested in her and, after confronting him late in the novel, they decide to go on a date. Their attraction culminates in a passionate night together with Meg asking “what now” to which he replies playfully “we could start with sleeping together at least five nights a week” (427). This novel does not end in marriage, indeed, like Van Slooten’s conclusion about Bridget Jones’s Diary and Ally McBeal, marriage is not Meg’s “ultimate goal”. Rather, the final element, which Regis terms “betrothal” sees heroines overcome barriers and “symbolic death”. In surmounting the barriers, the heroine is “free to choose her hero” and readers are certain the couple “end up together”. Meg enters a loving relationship with Nick. She confesses that Nick keeps asking her to move in with him (suggestive of betrothal), however she resists because she is concerned that the relationship might not last (436). Meg tells the reader that it is “pretty good” to be “in love with someone who is in love with you” (440). In her closing monologue, while happy in her relationship and metaphorically “betrothed”, Meg is cautious and tentative, not wanting to rush her commitment to Nick. Single women such as Pant’s on Fire’s Georgia and Miss Lonelyhearts’ Meg navigate and overcome many barriers to beginning a relationship; yet, they appear tentative about commitment. These novels therefore circumvent happily ever after, instead ending with happy for now.

While a romance heroine’s typical trajectory is from single to married, urban Australian chick lit includes women who were once single, then married, then find themselves single again. Kyra Hunting’s examination of “chick lit television” describes such plots as a discursive engagement with the afterwards of “Happily Ever After”. For Hunting, texts that probe the “after” of “happily ever

25 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 32.
27 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 38.
28 Hunting, Women Talk: Chick Lit TV and the Dialogues of Feminism,” 192.
after” offer a “more realistic portrait of single life”.\textsuperscript{29} Arguably, notions of “post-happy ever after” question the certainty of marriage and, like romantic fiction before it, reflect what Mitchell (1984) saw as a reflection of wider cultural changes to ideals about love and marriage.\textsuperscript{30} One version of the post-happily ever after story in Australian chick lit is where heroines begin successfully married only to see their marriage collapse over the course of the novel.\textsuperscript{31} Maggie Alderson explores alternative versions of marriage gone wrong in \textit{Mad About the Boy} and \textit{Handbags and Gladrags}.\textsuperscript{32} For instance, in \textit{Mad About the Boy}, Antonia Heaveringham is faced with her husband’s sudden announcement after ten years of marriage that “I’m a pouf” (1) and “I’ve got a boyfriend” (1).\textsuperscript{33} At first Antonia finds this announcement unbelievable, particularly because all of Hugo’s supposedly “camp” interests (crying in soppy films and adoring fancy dress parties) were the “things that made (Antonia) fall in love with him” (1). Antonia, via an introspective narrative, tells the reader of their relationship where they were “best buddies” (8) who had “lots of cuddles”, loved a “good laugh” together (11) and were seen as the “perfect couple”. Their marriage exemplifies Regis’s description of a “companionate marriage” built on “mutual comfort and support”.\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{29} Harzewski, \textit{Chick Lit and Postfeminism}, 40.
\textsuperscript{30} See Mitchell’s (1984) chapter on “Aspects of Feminism” where she devotes a section to “Romantic Love”.
\textsuperscript{31} It may be argued that this formulation of romance reflects the rate of divorces in Australian society and beliefs about marital success. According to the Australian Census Bureau (2013) statistics on Divorce, in 2012 there were 49,917 divorces in Australia. Graph 2.1 depicts the rate of divorces from 1992 to 2012 and shows that over the period divorces peaked in 2001 at approximately 55,500 followed by a drop to 47,500 in 2008. Overall, the graph shows a trend of increasing divorce. It is important to remember that these are crude numbers, not percentages per capita. Arguably, meaningful conclusions can only be made by comparing divorce rates and marriage rates. The ABS shows that marriage rates are also increasing. Therefore, the increase in the number of divorces may be a direct result of the increase in the number of marriages. See Australian Bureau of Statistics, “Divorce,” http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/3310.0~2012~Chapter~Divorces?OpenDocument.
\textsuperscript{32} Other chick novels that explore marriage gone wrong include Rebecca Sparrow’s \textit{The Girl Most Likely}, Marian Keyes’s \textit{Watermelon} and \textit{The Other Side of the Story}, Rachael Treasure’s \textit{The Farmer’s Wife} and Kathleen Tessaro’s \textit{Elegance}.
\textsuperscript{33} Hugo’s revelation exemplifies Harzewski’s (2011) observation that men in chick lit are not always presented simply or without flaws. Harzewski notes that some experience closet homosexuality (35-37). In \textit{Mad About the Boy} Hugo’s sudden emergence from the “closet” provides the novel’s premise.
\textsuperscript{34} Regis, \textit{A Natural History of the Romance Novel}, 57.
Once the marriage ends, Antonia is not “desperate” or “love-sick” as Chen (2010) argues of chick heroines; rather, she has been hurt by love and the dissolution of her relationship. While Hugo begins a new relationship with his male lover, Antonia suffers an emotional breakdown. Moreover, she becomes a social outcast with other women fearful she will steal their husbands. This exclusion exemplifies what Negra (2004) describes as the “pathologisation of single femininity” in which single women are viewed as potential threats to marriage and “family values”. Furthermore, Antonia’s attempted rape by the husband of one of her friend’s suggests that she is marginalised because of her singleness and therefore vulnerable to dangerous men. Hugo’s departure is subsequently a prelude to the low point in Antonia’s life when she must reinvent herself as a single woman. With the help of her uncle, the fairy godmother-like Percy, Antonia reinvents herself physically and emotionally, going to the gym to increase her fitness and strength and taking better care of herself. She eventually meets a martial arts expert (who happens to be “a younger man”) who is a foil for the “dangerous” older man who attempted to rape her. Eventually she begins to fall in love again. The biggest barrier to Antonia’s happy ending is herself; she cannot find new companionate love until she has healed from past hurts. While the novel has all of Regis’s essential elements of romance, it also exemplifies Philips’ observation that the “object of romance” is not necessarily “a male erotic partner”; it can be the heroine’s desire “for herself”. While Antonia ultimately finds an erotic partner, self-possession following her marriage is presented as equally important, if not more important, than securing new love.

In the tradition of novels such as Allison Pearson’s I Don’t Know How She Does It, Wendy Squires’ roman à clef The Boy’s Club decentralises romance to focus on

35 Negra, "Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO."
36 Uncle Percy is a cross between the fairy godmother common to fairy tales (such as Cinderella) and the “gay best friend” often found in chick lit.
38 Chris Baldick (1990) defines the roman à clef or “novel with a key” as being where readers will “recognise identifiable persons from real life thinly disguised as fictional characters.” Chick lit roman à clef includes The Devil Wears Prada and Sex and the City. Chris Baldick, Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 191.
the heroine’s career.\textsuperscript{39} The novel is a post-marriage plot where the heroine, Rosie Lang, finds herself in ‘living hell’: she is a divorced, single mother, supporting a massive mortgage and working as a gun public relations executive at a television station that, at best, is a pre-feminist boy’s club.\textsuperscript{40} Struggling to keep a remotely balanced life, Rosie labours under a terrifying misogynistic male boss, equally sexist male executives and a news reader with a Jekyll and Hyde personality (newsreader by day with pregnant wife in tow; cocaine snorting womanising party animal by night). Despite a job that demands her complete attention, Rosie manages to combine her professional life with romance. She meets the aptly named “SNAG Dad” (Daniel) who she occasionally bumps into outside the local “Little Darlings Daycare centre” when they are dropping off their children.\textsuperscript{41} At first, Rosie begrudges Daniel his relaxed air, asking the reader “how could someone be that happy and organised all the time?” (15). The use of “SNAG” as an initial nickname for Daniel, implying he is a sensitive and caring new man, suggests that Rosie is not automatically attracted to him.\textsuperscript{42} Rosie later learns that Daniel’s wife left him for his business partner and he is now a sole parent caring for a young son. Despite meeting Daniel, her eventual love interest, the novel’s first half sidelines romance to focus on Rosie’s career.

Romance becomes more prominent mid-way through the novel when Rosie is forced to shop for a dress with her friend Lou for a forthcoming awards ceremony.\textsuperscript{43} While Philips (2000) has noted that “single women novels” often

\textsuperscript{39} Wendy Squires was previously a publicist for Channel Nine and is now a columnist for The Age newspaper. Michael Bodey, “TV’s Still a Man’s World,” The Australian, January 2 2012.

\textsuperscript{40} Other chick lit that places a heroine into contexts dominated by men include The Un-Domestic Goddess by Sophie Kinsella, I Don’t Know How She Does It by Alison Pearson, Jillaroo by Rachael Treasure and novels by Loretta Hill.

\textsuperscript{41} Rosie calls Daniel “SNAG dad” because initially he appears to be a “sensitive, new age, guy”; he always drops his child at school and appears calm and organized. McMahon (1998) traces the term “SNAG” to political speeches given by Australian politicians Paul Keating and John Hanson in the 1990s. Both politicians referred to themselves as “Sensitive New Age” in relation to domestic roles such as “nappy changing” arguably to appeal to female voters. McMahon notes in their exploration of “New Man” and “SNAG” rhetoric that men had not gravitated to the domestic as much as women had taken to work.

\textsuperscript{42} McMahon (1998) identifies some of the contradictions of the “New Man” for example, in terms of sexual appeal where women do not tend to find SNAG men sexually desirable (150).

\textsuperscript{43} Heroines who go on shopping adventures with their friends are a common occurrence in chick novels. Shopping scenes serve multiple purposes in showing female bonding, indulging in
show friendships based on “shared tastes and consumption patterns” 44, Rosie’s shopping experience with her friend Lou demonstrates their divergent tastes. Lou makes Rosie try on a succession of awful dresses. The pinnacle is a “ridiculous” “multicoloured swirling silk chiffon” (119-120) which sees one of Rosie’s nipples “wriggle out of its bodiced surrounds” (120) exposing it to the whole shop, serendipitously including Daniel. While Rosie expresses mortification, Daniel tells her she is “quite beautiful” (120). 45 Their attraction, now instant and obvious, positions readers to believe that this couple “must marry” because Daniel counterbalances Rosie’s workaholism and stress with his calm, sensitive persona; he also recognises her “beauty” despite her outward appearance of having an unruly body and being, at times, a “New Insensitive Woman”. 46 He invites Rosie and her friend around for a barbeque later that day where Rosie discovers more about Daniel including his career as a discrimination lawyer and his beautifully calming house. Daniel’s career and nickname of “SNAG” exemplifies Projansky’s (2001) “men can be feminists too” postfeminism. Daniel has taken on “women’s roles” in the home as a single father and in his career in helping clients, many of whom are women, to pursue discrimination cases. 47

Romance is threatened in this novel by Rosie’s job, which, having taken over her life, poses a risk to her relationship with Daniel. The conflict between her personal and professional life evidences what Genz (2010) describes as one of the “struggles of contemporary womanhood to blend and integrate her consumerism and demonstrating what Philips (2000) describes as friendships based on “shared tastes and consumption patterns”.

45 Daniel’s comment that Rosie is “quite beautiful” despite wearing an unflattering dress and her implied shame at her uncontrollable nipple reminds readers of Bridget Jones’s Diary. Bridget struggles with her self-esteem for much of the novel, yet, her hero, Mark, recognizes her internal and external beauty. This is especially obvious in his statement that “all the other girls I know are so lacquered over” (237). Here he singles out Bridget for her authenticity.
46 McMahon (1998) refers to an Age newspaper article that humorlessly portrays the New Man as complaining when “the New Insensitive Woman goes on extended business trips” (151).
contradictory aspirations”.\textsuperscript{48} The point of ritual death, which Regis explains is when a romantic resolution seems “absolutely impossible”\textsuperscript{49}, sees Rosie’s relationship with Daniel in jeopardy when she is caught “working” on the phone while smoking at her son’s birthday party. Daniel and her family criticise her inability to disconnect from work and implore her to change. Rosie’s redemption begins when she decides to plot her withdrawal from her horror job\textsuperscript{50} having been asked if she is “on her rag” or told she is a “ball breaker” too many times by the workplace “boy’s club”.\textsuperscript{51} Daniel’s career as a discrimination lawyer contributes to the “recognition” where the external barrier of Rosie’s job is “removed” and “disregarded”.\textsuperscript{52} Having chosen work over family and love for too long, Rosie decides to leave her job but not before catalysing change in the television station. While it may be possible to work and have a family, Rosie’s story shows not all jobs are compatible with having a family and partner. She cannot “have it all”; professional success in her current job and personal happiness, feminism and femininity are “mutually exclusive”.\textsuperscript{53} The novel positions readers to see that the patriarchal television station that demands so much of Rosie’s time and energy is the reason for her inability to reconcile work and home and the primary delay in the progress of her romantic relationship. Rosie’s lover Daniel is characterised as a man who is sympathetic to Rosie’s desire to act on the sexism and misogyny at the station, helping her launch a clutch of legal cases. This novel therefore employs a romantic narrative structure to critically examine notions of work and personal life.

Allison Rushby’s \textit{allmenarebastards.com} has all the narrative elements of romance, while thematically rejecting romance and love until the very end.

\textsuperscript{48} Genz, ”Singled Out: Postfeminism’s ”New Woman” and the Dilemma of Having It All,” 102.
\textsuperscript{49} Regis, \textit{A Natural History of the Romance Novel}, 35.
\textsuperscript{50} Rosie’s formulation of a plan to leave her job is similar to Kate Reddy in Allison Pearson’s \textit{I Don’t Know How She Does It}. Kate decides that before she officially resigns, she must seek revenge on a male colleague for his sexist behavior.
\textsuperscript{51} The TV station boss Big Keith and the male executives engage in ongoing sexism and discrimination suggesting that the problem is institutionalized. While anti-discrimination law assists individuals in launching complaints, addressing institutionalized sexism is more difficult to address because it involves organizational change including education programs, formal procedures for addressing claims and an endorsement by those in power.
\textsuperscript{52} Regis, \textit{A Natural History of the Romance Novel}, 36.
\textsuperscript{53} Moseley and Read, ”’Having It Ally’: Popular Television (Post-) Feminism,” 231.
when love is recuperated. Regis’s (2003) theory of the romance examines the narrative elements vital to the form. However, just because a novel has the “essential elements” of romance does not mean that it accepts love and romance uncritically. This tension between narrative structure and the strength of a novel’s themes is exemplified in allmenarebastards.com. Heroine Gemma Barton launches a “man-hating” website where women post brief accounts of “bastards” they have encountered. The site quickly becomes so popular that it attracts advertisers and requires Gemma’s full-time attention to moderate content and respond to a litany of e-mails. Gemma is initially a post-romantic heroine who was dumped six months before her wedding. Her heartbreak fuels her work on the website and simultaneously prevents her moving on with her life. The website initially provides an external barrier to romance before later becoming the catalyst for a new relationship with her personal assistant, Chris, who she describes in subdued terms as “nice-looking and pleasant” (99). Chris helps Gemma organise her business around the website and organise her life. He pretends to be one of the website’s “man-hating” message posters and under the cloak of another identity challenges her radical views about men. The challenge to her views about men as “bastards” eventually leads to her recognition that “all men are not bastards...some people are bastards”. The novel has all the essential romantic narrative elements; however, the first half is dominated by the man-hating theme. The narrative structure as romance and the anti-man theme illustrates the way that chick lit can present conflicting and contradictory messages about love and romance.

Multiple plots are a mechanism that writers use to explore the life choices of different protagonists. The multiplot novel, as Peter Garrett has explored, “raises an immediate and fundamental problem of coherence” whereby a

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54 Allison Rushby is an author of young adult and women’s fiction. It is interesting to note that allmenarebastards.com is also published under the more benign title Friday Night Cocktails.

55 A number of chick lit authors employ multiplots to examine the lives of multiple heroines. For example, Marian Keyes’ The Other Side of the Story, Jane Green’s Lifeswap and Monica McInerney’s The Alphabet Sisters, Those Faraday Girls and At Home with the Templetons, and Liane Moriarty’s Three Wishes.

“single center” or single truth becomes illusive, if not impossible to discern.\textsuperscript{57} Multiplot novels for Garrett, equate to multiple voices in a “dialogical” or “polyphonic” manner.\textsuperscript{58} In chick lit, multiplot novels involve two or more narratives where most contain the essential romantic elements. Usually, each plot assembles the romantic elements differently, thereby exploring different experiences of romance for heroines. \textit{Me Myself and I} uses a multiplot structure to contrast the romantic experiences and choices of one heroine. Traditionally, multiplot romances contain multiple heroines spread across multiple plots. \textit{Me Myself and I} however dedicates one plot each to the married and single version of one heroine. Pamela Drury has travelled widely, has a successful career as a political journalist and her own apartment. However, she has also internalised “backlash myths” such as “grieving from a ‘man shortage’”\textsuperscript{59} in her worry that she has missed out on love, telling herself she “should be married” (32). The novel creates a parallel plot when Pamela Drury fantasises about the married version of herself as Mrs Pamela Dickson. Unlike the perpetually single Pamela Drury, Pamela Dickson married her childhood sweetheart, had three children and now works part-time writing articles for a women's magazine. In this case, the two plots enable the heroine to experience the single and married version of herself prompting readers to reflect on the “what if” scenario represented.

Both plots in \textit{Me, Myself and I} engage with notions of romance and draw on the eight essential narrative elements. However, \textit{Me Myself and I}'s multiple plot complicates the application of Regis’s theory because one plot (that of Mrs Pamela Dickson) comprises all essential elements while the other (that of single Pamela Drury) is best described using Regis’s phrase, the “near miss romance”. Unmarried Pamela Drury’s plot sees her meet Ben Monroe, a high school Student Crisis Counsellor who also teaches self-defence to young women. Pamela’s physical attraction to Ben is instant; she describes him to the reader as “early thirties” with a “Good name. Strong. Sexy. Probably gay, and definitely not available” (50). Despite her attraction, Pamela discovers that Ben is married.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 3.  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 8.  
\textsuperscript{59} Faludi, \textit{Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women}, 1.
with children, a significant “external barrier” to romance.\textsuperscript{60} Pamela is devastated. Soon after, she is whisked into the parallel narrative of her married self, Pamela Dickson. Only later in the novel, when Pamela Drury returns to her single self does the reader learn that in the elapsed time, she has been on a disastrous date with Ben, one involving a vomiting child. In the novel’s last chapter, Ben arrives at Pamela’s apartment unannounced and asks if she will, “give it another go. Do something some time […] I could cook you dinner” (221).\textsuperscript{61} Her reply is a “nod” and a “maybe” then “[o]n impulse she leans over the railing and kisses him ardently before breaking the clinch and continuing up the stairs” (221-222) to her apartment. While the “maybe” and the “kiss” suggest the relationship has romantic potential, it is not guaranteed. Moreover, the novel concludes with Pamela looking out her living room window “over the rooftops to a perfectly blue sky. A moment’s peace. A future full of possibilities. She smiles” (222). This “single woman” plot is what Regis terms a “near-miss romance” where vital elements are omitted;\textsuperscript{62} there is no “declaration” of love or “betrothal”, though the reader is positioned to think that a solid relationship between Pamela Drury and Ben will ensue eventually. In Pamela Drury’s plot, although she would like a lover, “the object of romance” as Philips has explained, is “the heroine herself” rather than a “male erotic partner”.\textsuperscript{63} Furthermore, the single woman plot in \textit{Me, Myself and I} emphasises the open ending of “a life of possibilities” over the certainty of love and betrothal.\textsuperscript{64}

\textit{Me, Myself and I}’s second plot sees Pamela Drury temporarily enter the life of her married self, Pamela Dickson. In this trajectory, Pamela married her

\textsuperscript{60} See Regis (2003) for her discussion of “internal” and “external” barriers to romance (32-33).
\textsuperscript{61} Pamela and Ben also discuss his children in this scene. Having just returned from being the married mother Pamela Dickson, Pamela Drury is reluctant to have to suddenly take care of children again. As Pamela Dickson, she was disturbed to have to help her youngest child go to the toilet. It is therefore not surprising that Pamela Drury asks Ben about his child-care arrangements. He tells her that he takes care of his children on weekends and assures her that “wiping their bottoms” is his job. Readers are positioned to see Ben as a “SNAG” in his fulfillment of these domestic and childcare roles.
\textsuperscript{62} See Regis’s chapter on “The Genre’s Limits”. Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 47-50.
\textsuperscript{63} Philips, Women’s Fiction 1945-2005: Writing Romance, 2.
\textsuperscript{64} This ending deviates from deterministic endings that result in romantic certainty or marriage. Gayle Greene (1991) regards “open ends” as an alternative to “old plots” (13). Molly Hite (1989) views “open ends” as a way to resist “enclosing” or “entrapping” heroines (5).
university sweetheart, Robert Dickson. This plot contains the eight essential romantic elements and therefore fits Regis's definition of romance as “a work of prose fiction that tells the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines”. In Pamela Dickson’s plot, readers learn of her meeting Robert at a seedy university bar, their attraction, first dates and ultimately, Robert's proposal. The moment of the proposal is where the narrative splits into Pamela's single life and her married life. The singleton Pamela wonders what life would have been like if she had accepted Robert's proposal. The second plot, whether a dream or quasi-supernatural quirk of fate, allows Pamela to experience married life to learn the answer to this question. The narrative of married Pamela contains two betrothals; Pamela accepts Robert’s initial proposal and they marry, then late in the novel, after they have overcome significant barriers to their relationship, including infidelity, Robert presents Pamela with a ring and on bended knee, asks for “an option on another thirteen years” (202). The second narrative is a device to compare love and romance for the single Pamela and her married doppelganger. This novel illustrates that even though a heroine may secure a happy ending, that ending and the certainty of “happy forever” is never guaranteed. Furthermore, the novel explores a heroine's experience of “having it all” or “having it both ways” because it is not possible to be single and married with children. It allows her and the reader to explore the advantages and disadvantages, the “fantasies and nightmares” of single and married life. If chick texts “embody the range of fantasies and nightmares of real women” as Van Slooten argues, *Me Myself and I* uses a multiplot romance to offer the fantasy and nightmare of single and married life.

For chick lit heroines, the pursuit, acquisition and retainment of love and romance fits into a broader contemporary life including a demanding career, family, friendship commitments and motherhood. In these novels, romance and love are important, particularly to single women who may feel social pressures to be partnered or married. These novels represent a mixture of the “fantasies and nightmares” of women’s experience of relationships, as Jessica Van Slooten

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has noted of other chick texts. As the essential plot elements must be retained for a novel to be romance, “revolutionising” the genre is difficult: if one or more of the elements is missed, a novel is not a romance, thus revolution must occur within the bounds of a predetermined set of plot points. Additionally, being a romance does not preclude a novel from engaging with issues of power, desire or complex subjectivity. In these Australian urban novels, the romance narrative is a way to explore life choices around career and relationships.

**Questioning Love and Romance**

In the previous section, I argued that urban Australian chick lit draws strongly on the essential romantic elements and engages with traditional ideas of romantic love. Van Slooten has noted that chick texts are preoccupied with the search for love because “this quest proves most difficult”. In this section I argue, love as a theme is not presented unproblematically in urban Australian chick lit. Rather, these novels challenge traditional understandings of romantic partnerships as “forever” and based upon “soulmates” as well as reflecting on the calibre of available men and questioning romantic institutions such as marriage. I argue that this produces inherent tensions and contradictions in chick lit: that the romance plot is centralised while romance and love are questioned and, sometimes, rejected.

In chick lit, heroines often have difficulty finding a suitable partner. Janet McCabe (2009) observes that postfeminist films interrogate contemporary gender roles and assumptions, and in regards to relationships, such films portray the notion that “women had much to say. And men had a lot to learn”. Australian chick lit says much about the backlash myth of a “man shortage” through the difficulty women have finding a ‘decent man’ for a romantic relationship, let alone for marriage. Chick lit repeatedly suggests that some men have been slow to change to complement the ‘new’ woman empowered by increased freedoms and rights at the end of the twentieth century. One way that

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid., 49.
70 Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women*, 1.
chick lit engages with the perceived shortcomings of men is through the revenge plot. Plots that involve the fantasy of revenge, as Modleski has noted of romance novels, see heroines exert power in “bringing the man to his knees”\(^{71}\). For example in allmenarebastards.com, women exact revenge by publicly humiliating men who have betrayed, humiliated or otherwise offended their lovers. The men have been accused of benign allegations of being “ugly, short, cheap, idiotic” and unable to break-up honestly, through to more serious allegations of serial cheating (including with friends, family members and girls under the age of eighteen), asking their girlfriends to have plastic surgery and in one case, allegedly committing rape. If, as Van Slooten observes, chick texts enact women’s fantasies and nightmares, then allmenarebastards.com fantasises about public man-bashing and seeking revenge. The novel illustrates the fantasy of “how the world ought to work”\(^{72}\) in that individual men are held to account for mistreating or humiliating women. Moreover, the mere existence of the website suggests that rather than women only “self-blaming” when faced with romantic failure, they should also consider that the calibre of men may also be a contributing factor.

Chick lit novels often contain a fear that heroines will be mocked or humiliated by philandering men. Imelda Whelehan asserts in relation to novels such as Bridget Jones’s Diary that they, “uneasily celebrate [...] romance while anatomizing the ways in which romance makes dupes of perfectly rational single women”.\(^{73}\) Numerous Australian heroines have ended up broken hearted after discovering the men they love have been finding love elsewhere.\(^{74}\) In Wendy Harmer’s Love and Punishment, protagonist Francie thought her relationship with Nick was on a perfect trajectory to marriage. Suddenly, he announces he has fallen in love with an acclaimed stage actress, Poppy

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\(^{71}\) Modleski, "Popular Feminine Narratives: A Study of Romance, Gothics, and Soap Operas”.

\(^{72}\) As I outlined in Chapter Two, Kay Seidel differentiates between “fantasies” and “goals” in romance novels. She argues that the romance plot “sets up fantasies about how the world ought to work”. Seidel, "Judge Me by the Joy I Bring," 160.

\(^{73}\) Whelehan, The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City, 186.

\(^{74}\) For example, Maggie Alderson’s Pants on Fire and Mad About the Boy, Anita Heiss’s Manhattan Dreaming and Monica McInerney’s The Alphabet Sisters.

\(^{75}\) Wendy Harmer is a well-known Australian humourist who was once a political journalist. She has authored four novels including Farewell My Ovaries, Roadside Sisters and Nagging For Beginners. She also writes young adult and children's fiction.
Somerville-Smith. The crime at first in this novel is Nick’s deception in engaging in a secret affair that eventually turns into passionate love. Readers initially engage sympathetically with Francie, the woman scorned by her cheating and lying boyfriend. At first, readers see Francie as “duped by love” including romantic myths of “true love” and “forever” and believing in the deterministic path to marriage and family life.

What begins as a story of failed romance soon takes a dark turn into a revenge plot. Readers discover that Francie is guilty of her own ‘crime’: the narrative reveals that a heartbroken Francie had broken into Nick and Poppy’s “love nest”, trashed the house including “quietly and methodically cut[ting] the crotch out of every pair of La Perla undies...” (188). While looking around the house, Francie decides that Poppy, “had stolen much more than her man. She had stolen her future. Her husband and father of her children!” (184-5). The revelation of Francie’s crime repositions reader’s sympathies towards Poppy and recasts Francie as a bitter and potentially dangerous woman. Love and Punishment suggests that while heroines may use confessional narratives to portray their ex-lovers negatively, there are always two people in a relationship and thus two sides of the story. Likewise, not all chick heroines are hapless romantic dupes who are mistreated by whimsical men. Love and Punishment initially celebrates romance, indulges in romance myths of true love and forever, but ultimately rejects them in favour of the heroine’s need to reclaim self-possession. In Francie’s case, initially the “object of the romance” and main “goal” as Philips (2006) terms it, is Nick; Francie longs to reunite with her ex-lover and the future she had her heart set on. However, her romantic quest is unsuccessful and Francie’s “goal” shifts from obtaining a lover to obtaining self-possession.

Australian urban chick lit reflects on marriage as an institution usually associated with companionate love and romance while contributing to the self-worth and self-esteem of heroines. Guerrero (2006), in her analysis of chick lit and sistah lit, argues that chick heroines “seek self-worth” through “institutions
of womanhood, specifically marriage and childbearing”. With so much invested in such institutions, an unravelling marriage can detrimentally impact a heroine’s sense of self-worth. Maggie Alderson’s *Handbags and Gladrags* represents a slow unravelling of a marriage to explore the complexity of modern love relationships. Through the first person introspective narrative, readers learn that Englishwoman Emily Pointer, despite her seemingly safe and secure marriage to Oliver, has been having an affair with Miles, an Australian photographer. Oliver’s independent wealth enables their lifestyle of Sunday lunches, society gatherings and his payment of one of her maxed-out credit cards per month. Emily is warned by her friend Paul that her six-year marriage is one where Oliver “encourages Emily to live her whole life on the surface” (168). Paul describes Oliver as “a straight”, implying heterosexuality as well as a boringness attached to his lack of creativity and imagination. Oliver appears to the reader as more interested in keeping up appearances, socialising with the right people and securing business contacts than living a genuine life with Emily. Oliver’s ‘straightness’ and ‘non-creativity’ is compared to Emily’s alternative style and creative design ideas. With the narrative emphasising their differences, readers are positioned to question why Emily stays with him. While her marriage to Oliver is faltering, Emily and her lover Miles meet and continue their sexual liaisons as they globetrot between fashion shows, Emily for her job as a fashion stylist and Miles as a runway photographer. Emily assures the reader that her relationship with Miles, who she assumes is a penniless photographer, is “just sex” (1).

The emphasis on Emily and Miles’ intense physical relationship reflects Harzewski’s observation of chick lit that often “heterosexual female desire and consummation drive the plot”. In Emily’s case, “female desire” and “sex” does not progress her plot from singledom to marriage as one often finds with

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77 Original emphasis. Guerrero, “"Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves": Chick Lit in Black and White," 97.

78 This novel is a good example of chick lit that, as Harzewski (2011) notes, “concerns itself with money and wealth in upper-middle class society” (38). *Handbags and Gladrags* does not present this demographic unproblematically. Rather, the excesses of Emily and Oliver’s life is represented as unappealing because neither character is fulfilled or content.

79 Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 34.
unmarried heroines; rather, the exploration of her desire slowly undoes her marriage so that she can enter a new relationship based on companionate love as Miles is gradually presented as a better match for Emily. His compatibility with her is heightened by the revelation that when not taking runway photos, Miles is an artistic photographer. With each liaison, their relationship evolves from casual sex to a closely forged bond; as Emily becomes closer to Miles she becomes emotionally estranged from her husband. This novel suggests that one may think they have been successful in finding love and marriage; however, that does not mean that one might not stumble upon a different kind of love or have a safe, secure marriage (especially one built on weak foundations) challenged. *Handbags and Gladrags* is a cautionary tale about having realistic expectations about marriage and compatibility with lovers. Further, it associates a heroine’s self-worth with the relationships she has with others.

Another of Maggie Alderson’s heroines finds that marital certainty can be questioned as time passes and a woman reassesses what she wants from life. In *How to Break Your Own Heart*, Amelia Barlow has been happily married to Ed for fifteen years before deciding that she is ready to have a child. In this case, the “object of romance” is not an “erotic partner”, it is a baby. Ed, a gourmet wine broker and frequent traveller provides the “commodities of luxury and fashion” that Philips (2000) has noted many singleton heroines expect from their man. For Amelia these are accidental benefits of being with Ed. Unlike chick heroines who actively pursue wealthy men, Amelia and Ed’s marriage is presented as happy and companionate; however, he staunchly opposes having children. Over the course of their relationship, Amelia’s desire to be a mother has increased while Ed has remained strident in his decision not to have children. Eventually, the impasse results in Amelia deciding to leave her marriage.

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80 The reader is positioned through this narrative to place more value on an honest and authentic life than one defined by wealth and luxury. This novel therefore does not evidence Philips’ (2000) observation that “There is a conflation and a confusion in these novels between romantic desire for a man and for the commodities of luxury and fashion which he is expected to provide” (248-9). Rather, the narrative eventually sees Emily reject Oliver and her life with him for a more modest and fulfilling existence.


How to Break Your Own Heart questions romantic certainty through the heroine’s desires and choices in terms of companionship and family life. Chick heroines often desire to “have it all” in the form of career and marriage; in Amelia’s case her “it all” is companionate love and a family. How to Break Your Own Heart represents the fantasy of finding companionate marriage alongside the nightmare of discovering your husband does not share your desire for a family. In Amelia’s case, she had always hoped to “convince” Ed that having a child was the next, natural stage in their relationship. For Ed, having a child would compromise his freedom and prevent him living his life the way he wants to. Despite his love for Amelia, he is not prepared to make such a sacrifice (342). Even though Amelia expresses a realistic fear that her fertility is declining and time is of the essence, Ed refuses to compromise. Amelia does not want to be alone, however to continue with Ed means the death knell for motherhood. Amelia faces a confluence of impossible choices: If she leaves the marriage, she risks not finding new love and not having a child; if she stays married, she will not have a child. Alderson places her heroine in a very difficult situation, one of high risk and improbable reward. Amelia sums up her options:

The odds of a thirty-seven-year-old woman finding a man who wanted to have children with her in time for her still to be able to have them were very short indeed. So, the way things were, I was most likely to end up with no Ed and no children. (345)

Despite the risks, Amelia decides to leave Ed permanently, a decision that "breaks her own heart". She tells the reader she will just have to “learn to love being single and hope for the best” (351). She stocks up on DVDs of Sex and the City and Ben and Jerry’s ice-cream (348) comforting herself with the saying that it is "better to be alone than with the wrong man” (357). Amelia’s bravery in leaving Ed is eventually rewarded by her rekindling a romance with a childhood sweetheart who assures her that “everything will be fine” (380). Amelia’s predicament reveals much about the high stakes of contemporary marriage and

83 Faludi (1992) argues that one of the “backlash myths” and “false images of women” perpetuated by the media is constructed around professional women “succumbing to an ‘infertility epidemic’” (1-12). Faludi suggests that the media has repeatedly presented and emphasised “infertility” issues. Bridget Jones’s Diary in particular took up this myth by having Bridget encounter reminders about her “ticking biological clock”.

84 This line is a refrain that echoes through chick lit. Sex and the City also cautioned about being in an unfulfilling relationship with the phrase, "it is better to be alone than badly accompanied".
love. Even though it is exactly two hundred years since *Pride and Prejudice* was first published, novels such as *How to Break Your Own Heart* emphasise the importance of carefully choosing a husband or life-partner. For these chick heroines, while they have careers and independence, there is still much pressure on choosing the right man to marry.

Whether single or married, a mother or divorcée, the representation of love in Australian chick lit supports Janet McCabe’s (2009) assertion that “loving in the modern world is no easy matter”. Australian chick lit continues *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Sex and the City’s* experimentation with the romance plot where romantic myths are challenged and institutions such as marriage are questioned. Australian novels examine the representation of heroes, false and true, suggesting that the calibre of men available directly results in the quality of companionate love. Just as Kathy Lette’s quote at the start of the chapter suggested, Australian chick lit largely reproduces the traditional romance plot, representing the beauty and mystique of love and romance as well as some of “the debris beneath the surface”. One conclusion to be drawn from my selection of Australian chick lit novels is that the empowerment of women, including their increased possibilities and choices, has not simplified love and romance. Rather, it has contributed to love and romance and indeed its representation becoming complex, messy and at times contradictory.

**The Postfeminist Sensibility Reinforced?**

The previous chapter outlined criticisms levelled at chick lit in relation to feminism. For some, such as Philips (2000, 2006), McRobbie (2004b) and Gill and Herdieckerhoff (2006), chick lit heroines take feminism for granted, assume that independence and freedom are guaranteed and exhibit the postfeminist sensibility through their bodies, lifestyle choices and sexual expression. Others such as Genz (2010), Hunting (2012) and Van Slooten (2006) argue that chick lit’s engagement with feminism is complicated,

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85 In examining the “three social trends” that “meet and clash on the pages of romance”, Regis (2003) argues that up until women gained property rights, the courtship period was a crucial time for women who had to carefully choose their husband. Even though women now have property rights and can marry for love, novels such as *How to Break Your Own Heart* suggest that courtship and betrothal is still an important time for women who must weigh up “conflicting goals”.

86 McCabe and Akass, "Welcome to the Age of Un-Innocence," 161.
contradictory and resists being classified as either feminist or postfeminist. This section examines these claims in relation to urban Australian chick lit. I consider Australian chick heroines’ expression of the postfeminist sensibility, including notions of “retreat” and “return” and their engagements with feminism. I argue that over the course of a narrative, novels engage with feminism variably, slipping between different feminisms. Thus, the novels provide feminist and postfeminist perspectives and reading possibilities, meaning there is no “one size fits all” feminism to describe these books.

Some single urban chick women exemplify Philips’ observation that these heroines “assume all the gains of the twentieth-century women’s movement” and “take their work and independence for granted, but leave traditional gender relations and patriarchal structures profoundly unchallenged”.87 Such heroines exhibit their freedom and choices through their consumer choices, body modification and display, and through their sexual behaviour. However, as I argue in this section, these postfeminist freedoms are not presented without critique. Georgia in Pants on Fire for example attends a number of parties, on one hand exemplifying Camille Nurka’s view of postfeminism that, “In contrast to the strident, earnest feminist, the ‘postfeminist’ is fun, indifferent to, or even critical of, ‘politics’, cheerfully apathetic, sexy and independent […] she’s far too busy having orgasms to worry about such issues as comparable worth, daycare, or abortion.88 Pants on Fire’s Georgia Abbott, has a career as a fashion journalist, is beautiful and expresses a privileged style and taste in relation to fashion, men and consumption.89 Working on a magazine provides many opportunities for fun, frivolity and the display of her tastes and her body. She arrives in Australia from England and after only two weeks is whisked along to a party where she hopes to meet eligible men especially one who has a house “surrounded by verandahs” in the bush. The party is so debaucherous that a work colleague warns her “[y]ou’re guaranteed to leave with your IQ three

87 Philips, "Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative."
points lower than when you arrived” (9). At the party, Georgia dances with an attractive man who claims to be a weekday stockbroker and weekend farmer (10-11); she smokes a powerful hydroponic “reefer” with another man not long after (19) and her friend forces his cocaine powdered finger in her mouth and round her gums (26-28). In this example, Georgia is represented as indulging in the excesses of postfeminism. Yet, the postfeminist pleasures are not represented in a way that encourages readers to embrace them. Rather, the novel positions readers to be repelled by aspects of the excessive lifestyle, particularly the drug use.

Chick lit novels have the potential to reinforce and critique aspects of the single life for women, including its postfeminist aspects. In *Me, Myself and I* Pamela Drury is a quintessential single woman who exemplifies Genz’s (2010) statement that many single women try to reconcile their “independent urban life” and “yearning for a man”. Early in the novel, the reader learns the benefits and shortcomings of singledom from Pamela’s perspective. She has travelled the world on “adventures” galore; for her birthday, her work mates surprise her with a stripper and in preparation for a date, she wears lacy black underwear and a sexy outfit of “little black dress and high heels” (41) which she “parades” in front of the mirror (36). These characteristics and expressions reinforce feminist gains and postfeminist sensibilities: Pamela is financially independent, has a successful career (she writes politically aware articles, some about the status of women), she has her own apartment and the freedom to consume and display her sexy body.

Pamela reinforces for readers the perks of her single life, however, like other chick heroines, singledom is not presented unproblematically. McRobbie states that the postfeminist subject “self-blames” when “success eludes him or her”. In Pamela’s case, she “self-blames” because romantic success is missing from her life. After a disastrous date, Pamela seeks solace in the combination of “half a bottle of vodka”, “faithful towelling bathrobe and airline socks” (41), before

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91 McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 260.
lamenting the ghosts of boyfriends past, a “Bastard. Coward. Misogynist. Commitophobe. [sic] Dental Surgeon” (42). She worries that there are “no single men left” (62) suggesting she has internalised Faludi’s powerful backlash myths of a “man shortage” and ticking biological clock. As well it appears that Pamela has internalised the stigma sometimes projected towards single women when she confides to the reader that she knows she “shouldn’t be sitting at home, single, eating take-away pizza” (31). Pamela considers suicide by dunking her hairdryer in the water while she is having a bath; however, just as the hairdryer hits the water, a storm overhead cuts the electricity. She confesses to the reader in a defeatist tone that she “can’t even manage to top myself” (62) signifying her belief she is an abject failure. Pamela’s single life captures the complexity of singleton life including oscillating between feelings of joy and despair, success and failure. Despite Pamela’s achievements and positive life experiences, she interprets her romantic failure as signifying her total failure. Like her contemporary Bridget Jones, Pamela worries about her future when she has a “flash of herself forty years on, lying on the bathroom floor, hip broken, flannelette nightie askew, hot water bottle leakng [sic] beside her” (33). Pamela’s life has advantages and disadvantages yet, she struggles to revel in the advantages and “self-blames” about the disadvantages. Only by stepping into a parallel reality as the married version of herself does she reassess her situation to eventually conclude that married or single, there are positives and negatives.

Gill and Herdieckerhoff’s (2006) discussion of the postfeminist sensibility in a selection of chick lit concludes that postfeminism is especially obvious in the overt sexualisation of heroines in which their “salvation” is partly found in the pleasures of a “worked-on, worked-out body”.92 In my analysis of Australian urban chick lit I found this postfeminist sensibility in relation to the body reinforced in some novels and critiqued and rejected in others. For example, allmenarbastards.com critiques and rejects excessive body modification and suggests that the “worked-out” and “worked-on” body, including the thin or cosmetically altered body, does not necessarily translate into “salvation” or pleasure. Firstly, Gemma’s website allows women to post their complaints

92 Gill and Herdieckerhoff, “Rewriting the Romance: New Femininities in Chick Lit?”
about men in their lives, including men who have drawn attention to the perceived flaws of women's bodies. Numerous posts on the website assert that some men are ‘bastards’ because they have asked their girlfriends or women they date to have plastic surgery or they have broken up with them for superficial reasons about the body. For instance, one woman identifies “Tyson (San Antonio, Texas, USA)” as a “bastard”. The woman explains that she had a relationship with Tyson when she was fourteen years old and he was twenty. She explains her reasons for naming Tyson a bastard as follows:

After a couple of weeks I thought I was in love and he convinced me to have sex with him. So after he basically raped me, I asked him if it was good and he said no. He went on to tell me that this was because my tits weren’t good enough for him and that I needed to save up for implants because he ‘liked big bouncy ones’. He suggested that I ask my parents for them for my sixteenth b’day. Oh, and that they should throw a nose-job into the bargain as well. Can you believe it? Anyway, if you’re reading this, Tyson, you piece of shit, screw you. You never deserved me or my tits. Oh yeah, and guess what, dickhead. THEY GREW. (Original emphasis, 47)

The reader is positioned to believe that Tyson’s request for his teenage lover to have “breast implants” and a “nose job” is ludicrous and expressive of a culture preoccupied with unrealistic expectations of women’s bodies, including the young and developing body. Readers are encouraged to be vicariously angry at his behaviour and understanding of the reasons for his nomination as a “bastard”. The positioning of the reader in this way aligns with third wave feminist thinking about the body, especially to reflect on representations that “stigmatise and devalue the female body”.93 Examples such as this in allmenarebastards.com therefore do not reinforce notions of bodies that should be “worked-on”, such as by a plastic surgeon. Rather, it positions readers to view claims of unrealistic body improvement, and the men who demand them, with suspicion in the least and outright fury at the most.

Allmenarebastards.com positions readers to view excessive modification and acts designed to discipline the unruly body in the same ways as third wave

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93 Burns-Ardolino, "Body," 42.
feminists, who “confront the notion of the perfect body”. For example, the novel questions body norms and stereotypes via Gemma’s best friend, Sarah, who works part-time as a model. Gemma’s introspective first person narrative explains why she is highly protective of her friend. Gemma describes to the reader the history of Sarah’s modelling career, including her relationship with her agent, Barry. Gemma reveals that Barry had previously told Sarah she was “fat” and “drag[ged] Sarah’s self-esteem so low it’s practically invisible, and then [almost killed her] by making her lose ten kilos [...she] could ill-afford” (108). Gemma explains that Sarah’s weight loss was so extreme that Sarah was admitted to hospital (117). Gemma tells the reader that Sarah “was a full time model for a year or so after she finished college, but she gave it up two years ago so she could have periods and food. Not necessarily in that order” (23). The decision to give up modelling to reclaim “periods and food” suggests that Sarah experienced little pleasure or “salvation” in her thin body. Furthermore, when Barry re-enters Sarah’s life as her manager, Gemma is worried and implores her friend to avoid him. Eventually Sarah fires Barry as her agent because he instructs her to obtain a “$4000 nose job” for a deformity that neither she nor Gemma can see (190). Moreover, Barry’s plastic surgeon suggests that Sarah’s eyes “could use a little work” (190). Barry tells Sarah that the plastic surgery is necessary because she “doesn't have the [modelling] look anymore” (191). After this experience, Sarah decides to quit modelling. Readers sympathise with Gemma’s point of view and regard Barry’s suggestion of plastic surgery as excessive and unnecessary. The novel thereby critiques excessive body modification practices and rejects notions of bodily perfection, especially those obtained through plastic surgery. Ultimately, it suggests that there is little pleasure or salvation in such body modifications. In this case, postfeminist impressions of the body are invoked so they can be critiqued and rejected.

Negra (2004) argues that one aspect of postfeminism is a conservative view that “pathologises single femininity”, encourages women to “retreat” from the

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94 Ibid.
95 This statement taps into discourses about treating the “body as a project” as Brumberg (1998) has explored. Gemma’s comment about wanting to “have food and periods” rejects the disciplining of the body required to maintain certain body shapes.
workforce and embrace “family values”. In *Me Myself and I*, successful career woman Pamela Drury has her own apartment, freedom to do what she wants at any time, she can flirt with a stripper at work and shop when and for whatever she wants. Yet, she fears that she has missed love and family. The novel offers her the fantasy of suburban family life when she steps into the married version of herself. Pamela Drury steps into what Diane Negra describes as “household chic” with its “spectacle of an affluent wedding, the allure of luxury commodities, and achievement of a sumptuous domesticity, the disappointments of the world of paid work, and the rewards of motherhood”.

On the surface, her married self, Pamela Dickson, has a perfect life: she has wedding photos on the mantle, a nice suburban home complete with garden, three children, a dog and a part-time writing job. However, as Pamela Drury discovers, this mask of perfection hides a more demanding and difficult reality: Pamela Dickson and her husband are cheating on each other, there is endless washing and meal preparation, frequent school runs, torturous family outings, and the part-time job turns out to be well paid but demands her to write drivel. Pamela Drury discovers that “retreating” to suburbia and family life has its own problems. For example, she had expected a vibrant sexual relationship with her husband, yet discovers that married sex is virtually non-existent. Moreover, she is horrified that part of being a mother is the reality of providing toilet assistance to her toddler. Comedically, this novel’s comparison of Pamela’s single and married life reveals that neither life is perfect or offers “it all”; rather, “having it all” is difficult, if not impossible, because the alternative always appears more attractive. This novel turns postfeminist retreat on its head by presenting Pamela’s life both ways. Whichever choice Pamela made or makes in the future, to marry or not marry, will yield mixed blessings.

Within the postfeminist sensibility, as McRobbie has argued, feminism is “invoked” so that it can be “taken into account” and ultimately rendered useless, which I argue occurs in Australian chick lit. For example, allmenarebastards.com begins with the invocation of feminism in relation to

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96 Negra, "Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO."
98 McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 255.
men, when the heroine states: “I used to think our united sisterhood’s hatredship of men was empowering. Yeah, a few months ago I believed in [that]. But not anymore…” (Original emphasis, 1). “Sisterhood” here is used as a euphemism for feminists and “hatredship of men”. In this case, feminism is invoked purposely so the heroine can disidentify with it. This conflation of “sisterhood”, “hatredship of men” and feminism misrepresents the women’s movement by appropriating a radical view held by a small group and applying it to the whole movement. The narrator alerts the reader to her opinion that all men are not bastards on the opening page. However, she decides at the end of the novel, even though she moderates her position on men, to keep her “allmenarebastards.com” website because of money: “That’s $70,000 a year and counting we’re talking here!” (353). She tells the reader that she “toned [the website] down a bit” (Original emphasis 353) and is “in the process of setting up a list for men so everyone can have their say” (Original emphasis 353). Gemma eventually holds two contradictory ideas associated with feminism: the first is the backlash myth that feminists are “man-hating”. This view has gifted her a website and lucrative income. The second is her embrace of an egalitarian feminism that offers men the opportunity to have their say about women who have wronged them. Thus, feminism is invoked so that Gemma can partly reject aspects she deems radical or excessive.

Allmenarebastards.com exhibits the postfeminist sensibility via an “anti-feminism” that as McRobbie has suggested, “upholds the principles of gender equality while denigrating the figure of the feminist”.99 This is illustrated when Gemma is asked to appear on a daily talk-show with a gossip columnist, Heidi Killman. Heidi’s surname symbolises the perceived extremes of her political views. To begin the on-air television segment, Heidi tells an “anti-man” joke that suggests all men are brainless (344), even though her own young son is in the studio audience. Gemma, who met Heidi’s son before the show and thinks he is a “sweetie” (343), is personally alarmed by the joke. More importantly, Gemma notices the confused response of Heidi’s son who does not understand what the joke means. Suddenly, Gemma has an epiphany that "all men aren’t

99———, “Beyond Postfeminism,” 179.
People are bastards. But just some of them, and only some of them, and only some of the time” (original emphasis, 344). Gemma launches into an on-air critique of Heidi’s joke and a defence of Heidi’s son who, Gemma says, will one day “get the joke” (345). Gemma argues that:

It’s a double standard. OK, so many men are thoughtless insensitive creeps. Well, like we’ve just seen, so are some women! But that doesn’t mean they all are, does it? What kind of society tells women that males are hopeless and emotionally retarded? Well?...

We may all be feminists here, but we seem to have missed the point. We can’t become stronger by taking away somebody else’s self-esteem, that’s just bullying. We have to heighten our own self-esteem if we want to get anywhere. We have to stop blaming men for all the problems in the world. (346)

Even though Gemma uses inclusive rhetoric in her statement “we may all be feminists”, her monologue is aimed at dismantling collective feminist politics. She implies that feminism has “gone too far” and needs to be corrected. This quote invokes a particular version of feminism (the backlash myth that feminism wanted to “take away” “men’s” self-esteem and “blame men” for the world’s problems) so that it can be “taken into account”. Moreover, Gemma denigrates Heidi for her joke and her views. The phrase “we may all be feminists” is utilised to correct the radical version of feminism she has rejected. This reference illustrates McRobbie’s (2013) argument about the “complexification of the backlash” which she defines as a “common sense” agreement that “feminism had gone too far” or “backfired”.

The Boy’s Club differs from allmenarebastards.com in that it invokes feminism to reinforce its importance and relevance. Rosie Lang and her female colleagues endure endless sexism and misogyny at the hands of station boss Big Keith who she describes as “Pompous, sexist, racist and often piss-fuelled” (32) and a group of male executives she calls “the boy’s club”. As the public relations manager, Rosie is tasked with making sure a positive view of the station is presented in the media at all times, despite the male executives and a senior male newsreader’s sexist behaviour and their excessive lifestyles. Big Keith’s

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100 Social Science Bites, "Angela McRobbie on the Illusion of Equality for Women."
comments include telling Rosie that the newly appointed male newsreader “likes his pussy—there’s nothing wrong with that. Fuck knows I like a bit myself” (10). On numerous occasions, Rosie is asked whether she is “sure you’re not on your rags?” (64, 216). In addition to the verbal sexism, Rosie observes institutionalised sexism in the decisions and actions of the boys club, including moving a female journalist with an Honours Degree to reading the breakfast weather because the station’s male executives view her as “the blonde with the great tits” (111). Miserable in her new benign position of weather girl, the presenter puts on weight. The men, who only see and refer to her as specific body parts, comment, “actually [she] used to have great tits...[s]he’s gone to fat lately. Porked up overnight. Lost her fuckability, if you ask me” (111). The reader is positioned to be enraged at this display of sexism and hopeful that Rosie will enact revenge. In this novel, sexism and misogyny is represented so that it can be treated in line with third wave feminist thinking.

The men’s sexism is further revealed when they assess a woman’s concept for a television series. The series aims to represent the high levels of domestic violence in Australian society through a drama centred on a women’s refuge (173). After screening the concept, the male executives respond with an expletive laden critique that accuses the female writer of being a “stupid cow” and “moron” intent on turning the station into “Dyke TV” (175). Rosie, who is present at the concept meeting, accuses them of being “bullies” then tells them she will be calling head office and the station’s human resources department, implying she will submit a formal complaint on her colleague’s behalf. Rosie’s decision to complain on behalf of her colleague is a third wave feminist action because, as Feigenbaum (2006) outlines, everyone has the right to a work environment free from sexual harassment even if it means making complaints on behalf of a co-worker. Rosie’s complaint serves as a prelude to the novel’s final denouement in which she arranges legal action for herself and a group of female colleagues. Rosie decides to leave her job, concluding she will not “waste energy on these men anymore” (256). She gathers together five women all

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wronged by the station and with the help of her “SNAG dad” partner, Daniel, a discrimination lawyer, helps each woman launch a legal case against the station. Together, Rosie and the group of women reveal the impending legal cases at an awards ceremony where they approach the boss together “arms locked in sisterly solidarity” (292). The word “sisterly” is employed here in place of ‘feminist’ to suggest that the women are working together to achieve a common goal. This novel invokes and reinforces feminism by emphasising the women’s solidarity and the pursuit of an official complaint against sexism, misogyny and discrimination. If this were a postfeminist novel, the women would not have launched legal action against the boy's club or united together for group action.

**Conclusion**

Australian urban chick lit engages with romance via plots and themes and can be read through feminism and postfeminism. As I have argued, the novels represent the essential elements of romance; however, there is an innate tension between the workings of the romance plot and the theme of love and romance. Urban Australian chick lit appears cynical about romance and love, engaging with disastrous relationships and post happily ever after stories to question contemporary beliefs about love and the defining features of mutually beneficial relationships. Thus, in retaining romance plots but critiquing notions of love forever or “happily ever after” they demonstrate contradiction and complexity across different levels of the narrative. Moreover, just because Australian chick heroines demonstrate the benefits of structural changes to society for women in the later twentieth century, such changes have not made love and romance any easier. Rather, love and romance appear more complex and heroines battle between competing notions of singledom and coupledom, career and family life and companionate love and motherhood. Indeed, for these heroines, love “is no easy matter”.

Feminism is also contested and contradictory in these novels. It is not possible to term these novels feminist or postfeminist; they can be read as exhibiting aspects of both. Indeed, individual narratives raise feminist and postfeminist views. I have argued that the novels do not reproduce postfeminism
uncritically; for example, postfeminist “self-blaming”, postfeminist “worked-on and worked-out” bodies and “having it all” or “both ways” are invoked and critiqued. In the case of allmenarebastards.com, feminism is invoked so that it may be taken into account and corrected. In contrast, The Boy’s Club represents systemic sexism and misogyny in a television station, invoking feminism so that its relevance and usefulness can be reinforced.

The next chapter examines the four Koori (Indigenous) chick lit novels by Anita Heiss. Retaining an urban focus, this chapter considers the use of the romance and feminism as each novel sends the heroine further from her family, friends and home city. This chapter particularly examines romance and feminism in relation to Indigenous issues, a strong aspect of Heiss’s oeuvre. I argue that Heiss’s novels dispute any assertion that chick lit does not represent different cultures or only the experiences of “white women”. Heiss’s novels employ romance to explore intercultural relationships.
Chapter Six: “More Than Sex, Shopping and Shoes”¹: Cosmopolitan Indigeneity in Anita Heiss’s Koori Chick Lit

The sub-genre of Australian indigenous (sic) chick-lit was virtually invented by Heiss and, in providing a more nuanced accessible vision of aboriginal identity, she has addressed a glaring absence from the literary landscape [...It...] brings a fresh perspective to an often homogenous genre.

Anne Fullerton²

Introduction

Anita Heiss has singlehandedly revolutionised Australian chick lit by writing what she calls "Koori Lit": novels with cosmopolitan urban settings that feature Indigenous heroines. To 2014, Heiss has written four novels: Not Meeting Mr Right (2007), Avoiding Mr Right (2008), Manhattan Dreaming (2010) and Paris Dreaming (2011). Heiss’s novels represent independent, professional heroines who aspire to meet companionate lovers; however, they face a complicated dating landscape where cultural identity and racial issues must be negotiated before embarking on romantic relationships. Heiss is a prolific writer who has published twelve fiction and non-fiction books all designed to engage with Indigenous issues.³ In her memoir, Am I Black Enough For You? Heiss outlines

² Anne Fullerton, "From Big Merino to Big Apple," Sun Herald, 8 August 2010.
³ In 1996, Heiss published Sacred Cows, described on her website as “a satirical take on white Australian icons from an Indigenous perspective” (Heiss website 2013). In 2001, Heiss graduated as the first Aboriginal person to complete a Ph.D in Communications and Media from the University of Western Sydney. Her thesis focussed on Indigenous writing and publishing in Australia. She has co-edited the Macquarie PEN Anthology of Aboriginal Literature (2008) described as “the first comprehensive anthology of Australian Aboriginal writing from the late 18th century to the present” (Heiss Website 2013). In 2010, she published her historical novel, Who am I? The Diary of Mary Talence, Sydney 1937, the story of a young Aboriginal girl from the stolen generation. Heiss has also co-authored a picture book, Yirra and her Deadly Dog, Demon (2009) with the students of La Perouse Public School and a book of poems, Token Koori. Heiss’s non-fiction includes I’m Not Racist But…: A Collection of Social Observations (2007), Sacred Cows (1996) and Am I Black Enough For You (2013).
her reasons for writing chick lit, including that she found she had little in common with the characters or themes of much contemporary writing and there were no Aboriginal authors in commercial fiction. As Heiss explains, “I was driven to write a book that other Australian women like me would read in the bath, on the beach or the train or bus and so forth”. Moreover, she wanted to engage audiences on an intellectual level, especially those “that weren’t previously engaging with Aboriginal Australia in any format, either personally, professionally or subconsciously”. Heiss defends her “choice” to write commercial women’s fiction from claims she has “dumbed-down” or “betray[ed] readers of [her] serious work” by arguing that people, including Aboriginal women, are more likely to read her novels than her non-fiction.

Heiss regards chick lit as a familiar and enjoyable format for readers who she says, will generally “look for a book that looks like the book they just read”. Further, her aim is to provide “insight into just some of the realities of just some of the Aboriginal women like me”. Her novels explore aspects of life that she thought her heroines and readership commonly shared while “smashing” stereotypes associated with Indigenous Australians generally and Indigenous women particularly. To readers who have developed a perception of Aboriginal Australians based on viewing popular Australian films such as Crocodile Dundee, she says:

I don’t tell the time by the sun—I tell the time by Dolce & Gabbana...I don’t wear ochre, I wear Clinique. I don’t go walkabout, I drive a sports car. I hunt for kangaroo three times a week in the supermarket.

It is not surprising that like their author, Heiss’s Koori heroines emulate these stereotype-smashing characteristics, thereby redefining popular

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4 Heiss admits she had not watched the television version of Sex and the City and then only the first movie. Anita Heiss, Am I Black Enough for You? (North Sydney: Random House, 2012), 212-13.
5 Ibid., 213.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 214.
8 Ibid., 215.
10 Original emphasis. Heiss, Am I Black Enough for You?, 216.
12 Ibid.
representations of Indigenous culture and Indigenous women. Heiss “determinitialises” chick lit’s familiar generic characteristics and “reteterminitialises” them—to borrow Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) terms—from an Indigenous perspective. Her aim is to access a wider audience, educate readers about Indigenous issues and challenge deeply ingrained stereotypes.

In a way, Heiss undertakes a revision of chick lit in the spirit of feminists rewriting genre fiction as Cranny-Francis (1990) explains in Feminist Fiction (as I outlined in Chapter One). Heiss’ first novel Not Meeting Mr Right was described as “the indigenous (sic) version of the original Sex and the City (sic) columns”. She says that she used the name Koori Bradshaw, an allusion to Sex and the City’s Carrie Bradshaw, to describe herself because media discussions of her novel Avoiding Mr Right drew similarities between her and the Sex and the City protagonist. While Sex and the City explored the urban adventures of a newspaper columnist and her friends, Heiss’s novels focus on the experiences of professional Indigenous women working in education, government and the arts while often working in an unfamiliar city. Each Heiss novel moves the heroine further away from her home and community, thereby juxtaposing Indigenous identity and culture with new environments and social contexts. Thus, Heiss’s novels rework chick lit by intertwining the professional, personal and Indigenous identity of their heroines.

This chapter explains how Heiss’s Indigenous chick lit combines romance with cultural politics and feminism. Her novels include the essential romantic elements, however, sometimes “Mr Right” has been absent for most of the narrative, thereby rushing romance at the end. This displacement of romance enables a focus on each heroine’s travels and careers alongside an exploration of Indigenous women’s identity. All four heroines demonstrate their independence and political views regarding current issues, including women’s

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14 Heiss’s revision of chick lit is similar to Patricia Leavy’s (2012) rewriting of chick lit to educate her students about feminist ideas and issues as I outlined in Chapter Four.


16 As she has stated, “Aboriginal women...did not appear in contemporary Australian women’s fiction until I put them there”. Heiss, Am I Black Enough for You?, 215.
rights, racism and discrimination. They are therefore distinctly different from novels that Merrick states are about the “white girl in the big city [who] searches for Prince Charming” in which “details about race are almost always absent”.\textsuperscript{17} Rather, Heiss’s novels are similar to Guerrero’s argument of “sistah lit” that they challenge the “popular ethnocentrism” of chick lit where it is assumed that “women of color don’t exist in urban worlds of glamour”.\textsuperscript{18} Heiss’s novels are feminist genre fiction that use a “familiar and much loved format” to increase awareness of feminist and cultural issues, to encourage social change by positioning readers to think about politics and prompt them to act.

**Mixing Romance and Careerism in Koori Lit**

This section examines the plots of Anita Heiss’s four novels through romance and feminist theory. I apply Regis’s essential romantic elements to map the novels’ narrative structure to show that all four “tell the story of the courtship and betrothal of one or more heroines”.\textsuperscript{19} Heiss complicates the representation of romance in two ways. Firstly, she considers relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters, thereby exploring cultural relations in Australia and beyond. Secondly, she displaces romance as the narrative core, because for all four heroines, the romantic betrothal occurs late in the novel. Instead, Heiss centralises the professional and personal lives of her heroines as they achieve their goals and ambitions. I argue that Heiss’s novels use the familiar structure of romance to perform a didactic and political goal to inform and educate readers about Indigenous issues.

Heiss’s novels aim to “smash” stereotypes associated with Indigenous Australians. As she described in *Am I Black Enough For You?*:

> I wanted to demonstrate through the *Mr Right* and *Dreaming* novels that Aboriginal women, like most women, prize their friendships and desire companionship. We fall in love, we fall out of love, we make love, we have dates from hell, we are disappointed when romance fails, we fear rejection and some of us dream about Mr Right (or Ms Right depending on persuasion).\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} Merrick, "Introduction: Why Chick Lit Matters," vii-viii.
\textsuperscript{18} Guerrero, "‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White," 100.
\textsuperscript{19} Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*.
\textsuperscript{20} Heiss, *Am I Black Enough for You?*, 216-17.
Indeed, her novels centralise the experiences of professional Indigenous women attempting to reconcile their career, travel and romantic relationships.

Heiss’s first two novels, *Not Meeting Mr Right* and *Avoiding Mr Right*, include the essential elements of romance organised in a unique way. In *Not Meeting Mr Right*, Regis’s (2003) first element, the “definition of society” as “flawed”, “corrupt” or “superannuated”, relates directly to the singleton status of the protagonist Alice Aigner. Being romances, chick lit often explores the singleton’s journey to love. In Alice’s case, singleness is experienced through a postfeminist lens, which as Negra (2004) has noted, is a conservative view that “pathologises single femininity”, encourages women to “retreat” from the workforce and embrace “family values”.  

Alice, an unmarried Sydney based high-school history teacher, is revered by her friends for her love of her single life. However, in the early pages of the novel, she attends a disastrous high school reunion which she finds dominated by talk of marriage, childbirth and mothering. Suddenly Alice’s motto of “I love being single” is transformed into “I want to meet and marry Mr Right”. Feeling the need to strategize, she urgently gathers her friends to help create a step-by-step action plan. Subsequently, she embarks on numerous dates (mostly disastrous) with seemingly eligible men. Her efforts in planning her dating regime towards an ultimate goal of marriage resembles the postfeminist subject who as McRobbie (2004b) explains “self-monitors” and utilises “a diary” or a “life plan” to gain control of her life and measure her success or failure. In Alice’s case, she is encouraged into “planning” her life because she feels excluded by her high school friends. Rather, than “desperately in search of love” as Philips (2000) notes of the single woman protagonist, Alice appears desperate to marry. Alice’s motivation for her dating regime appears more out of the fear of exclusion rather than a desire to know love.

In devising her plan to date and ultimately marry, readers begin to learn about issues of inequality between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, one of the flaws in society for Heiss’s heroines. Readers may come to Heiss’s novels

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21 Negra, "Quality Postfeminism? Sex and the Single Girl on HBO."
22 McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 260.
unaware that racial inequality is an ongoing problem in Australia. Through the prism of romance, Heiss draws awareness to such issues and questions the kinds of suitable heroes available to the heroine. For example, when Alice devises her plan, she defines the kind of man she envisions to be suitable. One of the ten “Essential selection Criteria for Mr Right” is he “Must be a non-racist, non-fascist, non-homophobic believer in something, preferably himself” (37). The flaws in society are reinforced as Alice embarks on her series of dates: the sheer strangeness of men she encounters suggests that dating, let alone finding someone to marry, is a near impossible proposition.

In *Not Meeting Mr Right* Alice crosses paths with her hero before forming a stable relationship at the novel’s end. The first time they meet, Alice is in a restaurant when she sees a “good-looking guy” who seems “familiar” (95). He is wearing a “funky navy and white Mambo shirt” (95-96) which leads her to call him “shirt guy”. In this first meeting they do not talk, however Alice remembers him as “sexy”. The next time they meet, Alice has just broken up with a man she thought was marriage material. She encounters “shirt guy” at a bar where he attempts to be friendly with a “Hi, there!” to which a jilted and unhappy Alice replies, “Whatever” (259). When Alice returns to her table, her friend Liza asks what Alice said because after their conversation the guy looked “shattered” (260). Alice replies, “Shattered, schmattered. He’s Cushion Bar furniture, like us. I call him Shirt Guy. But tonight’s about me, how I feel and what I need. I really don’t care what anyone else, least of all a man might feel” (original emphasis, 260). In this interaction, Alice does not view “short guy” as hero material. She later stumbles across Shirt Guy, whose real name is Gary, one morning when she rushes to put her rubbish out in the street. Gary is her local garbage man and he has been emptying her garbage on the mornings she has forgotten. Only near the end of the novel do they meet properly so that Alice can apologise for being rude. It is obvious to the reader that they are attracted to each other but Gary rushes off telling Alice, “Gotta run, there’s an old lady in a housecoat and rollers I have to help at the top of the hill. She might get jealous if she knows she’s got competition” (275). Only in the epilogue do readers discover that Alice and Gary have started a relationship after serendipitously running into each
other again at a bookshop. Readers are told that on this occasion they have a brief conversation before Alice says she must go because she has “Christmas lights to struggle with” (336). He offers to help her with the lights, manages to complete a number of “man-jobs” for her and they discuss their shared love of history. Alice’s confesses to the reader her view of their relationship:

At first glance, many women wouldn’t consider a garbo or someone they only ever saw at a bar as an impressive option. It worked for me, though. I liked drinking a lot, and I hated putting my bin out. Gary was the complete package. His life would fit perfectly with mine. And there was plenty of chemistry” (338).

The delayed emergence of the hero maintains the reader’s curiosity in wondering who will end up being Alice’s "Mr Right". This strategy exemplifies Harzewski’s point that chick lit sometimes displaces men from the centre of a text and into the “background” because they are not the heroine’s central concern. While including the romantic elements, this novel examines intercultural relationships and challenges the heroine to reconsider her superficial judgements about the men she meets, such as her eventual hero Gary. Rather than valorise a man who can provide “the commodities of luxury and fashion” that Philips (2000) has explored in her analysis of single women novels, Not Meeting Mr Right presents an unlikely hero. Gary does not exemplify Guerrero’s observation that chick lit heroes are “unquestioned models of masculinity” while sistah lit heroes “are never good enough”. Rather, Gary is attractive and “good enough”.

In Heiss’s second novel, the heroine’s career is emphasised over what Genz (2010) asserts is the common criticism that chick texts represent a “nostalgic and reterogressive pursuit of romance/marriage”. Avoiding Mr Right sees its heroine, Peta Tully, move from Sydney to Melbourne to embark on a one-year contract as a manager in DOMSARIA, a government department for Media, Sports, Arts, Refugees and Indigenous Affairs. Peta begins the novel in a serious relationship with James, her supposed "Mr Right". Peta’s amazing job opportunity means she will have to relocate away from her home city, her

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26 Genz, "Singled Out: Postfeminism’s "New Woman" and the Dilemma of Having It All."
friends, family and her Mr Right. Peta views the move as a good opportunity professionally and personally. She admits that after eight months with James, “the more serious he got, the more unsure I became of myself and of us as a couple. He was already talking about moving in with me, and I felt pressured” (3). Thus, the romantic element of “the definition of society” sees Peta oppressed by outside forces, namely her relationship with James. The new job contract is presented as an opportunity for escape and the opportunity to meet new men. With an insight into how Peta really feels about the relationship via the introspective narrative, the reader is positioned to wonder whether Peta and James can reconcile their differences. The final chapter reveals that Peta has moved back to Sydney with the prospect of life with James looming large. She describes how she sees James, as if almost trying to convince herself; James she says, was the “ultimate safe bet” (354) because “he loved me, he missed me when I was away, and he wanted to give me a great lifestyle” (353). Peta’s description of James reveals an awareness of the practical needs he can fulfil, namely financial, lifestyle and social status desires. The reader is positioned to think that James was Mr Right all along. However, the epilogue undoes this by revealing that after only six months, Peta moved back to Melbourne to be with Mike, a policeman she met there. This late revelation challenges the reader’s plotting of Peta’s romance to that point.

Van Slooten (2006) argues that chick lit is valuable because it “expose[s] many new twists on age-old questions of romance, sex and power”. Heiss offers a new twist on romance by delaying her romantic betrothals and pairing heroines with unexpected heroes, including those that might be seen as socially problematic in the represented ‘society’. In Avoiding Mr Right, the revelation of Peta and Mike’s relationship is an unexpected romantic twist. Their meeting occurs at a poetry reading soon after Peta arrives in Melbourne. Mike starts talking to Peta at the bar, including a terrible pick-up line, “I’m hot, you’re hot, let’s make fire...” (122). In their brief conversation, Mike reveals he is a police officer.

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27 Philips (2000) critiques single women novels for assessing men through the cultural capital they possess and in terms of their ability to provide a certain lifestyle.

officer and tries another two pickup lines. While the initial chemistry between them is obvious, Peta resists his advances for two reasons: firstly because she is already in a relationship with James and secondly because Mike is a policeman. While Mike sees no problem asking Peta out for a meal, she sees an Aboriginal dating a policeman as impossible, telling him, "A Blackfella dating a cop is like a Jew dating a Nazi. It just can't happen" (124). Peta’s statement refers to the long, fraught history between Indigenous Australians and law enforcement officials. The issue of an Indigenous woman dating a policeman also emerges as a significant barrier in the development of their relationship.

The barrier in this novel is “internal” because, as Regis describes, it is based on the heroine’s “attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs” and prevents the progress of their relationship. Peta has decided that the troubled history of Indigenous-police relations means that a friendship, let alone a romantic relationship, is impossible. The reader is positioned to think that Peta’s barrier is based on a fear that Mike may be discriminatory or unfairly stereotype her. There is also a sense that the social community may not approve of a relationship between a ‘white’ policeman and an Indigenous woman. Despite the apparent social and cultural difficulties their relationship may present, Mike persists in wanting to develop a friendship with Peta and they eventually share a meal together. Some of Peta’s fears are realised as they find they cannot agree on police-Indigenous issues. She later describes the lunch as “hideous” (236) and they do not speak for a long time. When they meet again for dinner later in

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29 Indigenous Australians and police have a long and troubled history. As Haebich (1988) explains, at different points since colonization, police and justices of the peace have been granted “special powers over Aborigines” (87) such as through the 1905 Aborigines Act in Western Australia which attempted to “control all their contacts with the wider community, to enforce the assimilation of their children and to determine the most personal aspects of their lives” (83). Haebich provides a critique of the Act (83-89). In 1991, the final report into the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody was signed. It made recommendations “mainly concerned with procedures for persons in custody, liaison with Aboriginal groups, police education and improved accessibility to information”. “Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody – Fact Sheet 112,” ed. National Archives of Australia (Australian 2013); Anna Haebich, For Their Own Good: Aborigines and Government in the Southwest of Western Australia, 1900-1940 (Nedlands, Western Australia: University of Western Australia Press, 1988).

30 Cunneen (2001) argues that changing the high representation of Indigenous Australians in the criminal justice system in comparison to non-Indigenous Australians depends on changing how Indigenous people and police interact and relate.

31 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 32.
the novel, there is more chemistry between them. Since their last meeting, Mike has educated himself about Indigenous issues, suggesting that he wants to engage in a meaningful dialogue with Peta on the subject. Eventually, Peta considers her relationship with Mike:

And at the end of the day Mike was still a cop, I was still a Blackfella...He was a nice guy: casual and sexy rather than cute...Right in your face Mike, with those ridiculously funny pick-up lines, who called when he said he would. Reliable Mike, that’s who he was. (301-2)

Peta’s reflection expresses the conflict between her romantic attraction to Mike and her instinct which tells her that they are not an ideal match. She realises that his job and her cultural background have not changed however their dialogue about Indigenous issues has made her understand that while he was ignorant of Indigenous issues previously, he has changed.

Even though they have made progress in surmounting Peta’s fear of him as “a cop”, the initial barrier of Peta’s boyfriend remains. She does not act on her attraction for Mike because she has promised James she will return to him and Sydney once her contract finishes. On the eve of her departure, Peta and Mike meet for a goodbye drink. Peta worries she will say or do something that “would only knee-cap me, Mike and James at the same time” (350). She decides to leave, scared she might kiss him. When she goes, he asks “Hey, aren’t you forgetting something?”, when she appears confused, he says, “Me!” (350). When she walks away, he texts: “If I followed you home, would you keep me?” (350). She reveals to the reader, “I didn’t know what to say. I wanted him to follow me home. But then what?” (350). This interaction firmly establishes the attraction and barriers in their relationship. This is what Regis (2003) describes as a “point of ritual death” when “the union [...] seems absolutely impossible”32; Peta is not “free to choose her hero” because she is committed to James. However, the epilogue reveals Peta’s change of heart. Unlike James, Peta admits with Mike, “I wanted to be around him. I didn’t want to send him off with his mates on Sunday” (355). Mike attends “Koori” events with her, not just as “support”, but rather to “be a better man” (355). Mike’s change over the course of the

32 Ibid., 35.
novel, especially his self-education about Indigenous issues suggests that Peta exemplifies what Regis sees as contemporary romance heroines who are “intelligent and strong” and capable of “healing” a hero. Mike’s self-education about important issues means that he and Peta can relate on a level beyond being only “a cop” and “a blackfella”. As well as physical intimacy, she admits that with Mike they “shared intimacy in so many other ways” (356). Ultimately, she reveals, “In Mike, I’d found my soul mate. He had been my Mr Right all along” (356). The late revelation of Mike as “Mr Right” suggests that while romance is important and all of Regis’s essential elements are represented, the barrier of “intercultural relationships” is what “drives” this romance novel. Like Not Meeting Mr Right this novel engages with notions of love and romance, leaving a true romantic resolution to the very end.

Heiss’s third and fourth novels continue the narrative engagement with romance using themes of travel and intercultural relationships. Manhattan Dreaming introduces Lauren Lucas, a curator at the National Aboriginal Gallery in Canberra. Lauren is offered the professional opportunity of a lifetime when she is asked to undertake a curatorial fellowship at New York’s Smithsonian Gallery. While professionally, Lauren has an excellent job and high ambitions, romantically she makes terrible decisions and emotional blunders early in the novel. The glimpse into Lauren’s life via first person narration casts her as similar to feminine narrators that Case (2001) has identified in novels by Richardson and Smollett through to Bridget Jones’s Diary. Case outlines the appeal of feminine narrators, including Bridget Jones, who allow readers “to feel superior to them, to feel that we understand their lives and characters in ways that they cannot.” The first person narration allows readers to see into Lauren’s life, including her mistakes and misplaced emotional energy in her relationship with Adam, a “star” state rugby player. In order to pursue her fellowship in New York, Lauren must leave Adam in Canberra. In Lauren’s case, the “definition of society” as “flawed” or “corrupt” is largely in terms of her relationship with Adam. Lauren is besotted with him even as she reads about

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33 Ibid., 206.
34 Ibid., 32.
35 Case, “Authenticity, Convention, and Bridget Jones’s Diary.”
his indiscretions with other women in the daily newspaper. To readers, Adam is a “dangerous man”, commitment-phobic and manipulative; while he is reluctant to commit to Lauren, whenever she attempts to break up with him he manages to convince her to stay. Thus, society is flawed because it contains men such as Adam and because Lauren convinces herself that she loves him, retaining a misguided belief that they have a future together. Readers see Lauren’s life in a way “she cannot” as Case (2001) suggests of heroines such as Bridget Jones. Readers are positioned to see that Lauren is deceiving herself in her emotional attachment to Adam; until she can emotionally disconnect from him to find new love or he can truly commit to her, a betrothal remains impossible. Readers hope that Adam may change and become her “Mr Right” as they remain in touch while Lauren is in New York; however, like Heiss’s other novels, readers learn of a new suitor at the end.

The juggling of two romantic suitors exemplifies chick lit’s deviation from romance novels that usually focus on one man and one woman. Manhattan Dreaming positions Adam as the presumed hero, however eventually reveals the “real hero” to be Lauren’s colleague at the New York gallery, Wyatt. The choice between multiple potential suitors illustrates Lauren’s freedom to choose a partner. Regis (2003) would see this as evidence of the social trends that have influenced romantic stories, particularly “affective individualism”, where “individual fulfilment” transcends those of state and family, and marriage as based on “companionsate love”. Lauren’s “choice” therefore depends on seeing both men for who they really are. Her work opportunity in New York provides the perfect opportunity to progress her career, distance herself from Adam and create a space for new love. Wyatt is described as a “dark guy with a huge white smile” who “looked like a city-styled cowboy” (122). He reveals he is Mohawk Indian and explains some of their cultural history. Lauren concludes of their meeting: “I liked Wyatt immediately—he was down to earth, smart, funny

36 Lauren is presented as succumbing to the “phallic intensity of the hero”, a hero trait Harzewski (2011) notes is usually found in Harlequin romances. Harzewski, Chick Lit and Postfeminism, 36.
38 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 55-57.
and well dressed, and he was a good sort. I felt at ease with him straight away” (124). However, the primary barrier between them is Lauren’s error in judgement, as she explains, he “was very well presented and hadn’t flirted with me at all, so I assumed he must be gay and knew that I was ‘safe’ around him” (124), “my Native American gay male twin” (156). Lauren’s incorrect assumption that Wyatt is gay prevents her seeing him as sexually attractive or noticing his attraction to her. Thus, communication is a significant barrier to the progress of their romance. In the absence of romance, the novel foregrounds Lauren’s professional quest, particularly her fellowship “full of interesting events, people and work” (156).

The second major barrier to her romance with Wyatt is Lauren’s hope that her relationship with Adam will be renewed. Only after this barrier is removed can a romance heroine such as Lauren be “free” to “choose” her real hero.39 Lauren and Adam continue to communicate sporadically while she is working in New York; she occasionally checks his MySpace page and he eventually visits her. On arrival in the city, Adam meets up with Lauren who happens to be with Wyatt. Lauren explains to the reader how the novel’s two central male characters compare:

Seeing them next to each other was a little strange, and I realised that they were both equally handsome in different ways. Adam was cheeky and rugged and muscley, and Wyatt was earthy, well-groomed and fit. (285-286)

For the reader, Alice’s description belies their suitability in terms of their physical attractiveness. Yet, when Adam criticises Wyatt’s “gayness” (286-7) to Alice it indicates to the reader that Adam is not a suitable romantic partner for her. Adam’s comment is unnecessary and inappropriate in its direction towards Alice’s colleague. Further, the comment suggests that Adam feels threatened by Wyatt. Nevertheless, Adam appears to want to rekindle the relationship with Lauren by presenting her with tickets to the basketball. Lauren wonders if their relationship problems have resolved, believing he has changed (288). Lauren suggests they “do something romantic” such as meeting at the top of the Empire

39 Ibid., 57-59.
State Building. She believes her heartache over him might turn into “something wonderful...” (295). Her hope for romance at the top of the Empire State Building and a more firm commitment from Adam reflects Lauren’s adherence to romantic ideals. In particular, there is a sense that by retracing the romantic acts of Deborah Kerr and Cary Grant in An Affair to Remember (1957) and then Meg Ryan and Tom Hanks in Sleepless in Seattle (1993) in meeting at the top of the Empire State Building, that Lauren may too find enduring love.

Like her “Mr Right” novels, Heiss continues to deviate from romantic expectations, including romantic ideals, in the denouement of Manhattan Dreaming. In a way, Heiss’s novels reflect Harzewski’s (2011) observation of chick lit that it “presents a more realistic portrait of single life and dating, exploring, in varying degrees, the dissolution of romantic ideals, to showing those ideals as unmet, sometimes unrealistic, expectations”. In the case of Manhattan Dreaming’s Lauren Lucas, Adam does not meet as planned at the Empire State Building and thus fails to live up to Lauren’s romantic expectations. His decision to not show up prompts her to reflect on how she had spent so much time recovering from the failed relationship then so easily allowed him back into her life (297). The reader is told that “he” then shows up to the Empire State Building. The reader assumes it is Adam and is told that they kiss and there is “electricity”. As Lauren explains, “it was love and lust and friendship and possibility all in the one kiss” (298). Lauren confides to the reader about her “confusion” before revealing it was not Adam but Wyatt who appeared. Wyatt explains that he knew Adam would not show up because “he’s an idiot” (299) and confesses that he has felt like “an infatuated teenager [...] since the day we met” (299). Lauren reveals to Wyatt that she thought he was gay, which he quickly debunks. In this scene, Wyatt and Lauren declare their mutual affection, and he reveals he “loves having [her] in his life everyday” (301). This novel utilises a false hero and miscommunication to structure the romance plot, challenging romantic ideals and delaying the romantic resolution to the end.

40 Harzewski, Chick Lit and Postfeminism, 40.
Heiss’s fourth novel, *Paris Dreaming*, includes the essential elements of romance yet organises them in a different way to her previous novels. While Heiss’s first three novels delayed revealing the identity of the real hero until the final pages, *Paris Dreaming* introduces the hero much earlier thereby allowing the reader to see the development of the relationship, not just a betrothal in the last couple of pages. As well, this novel is different to the previous Heiss novels by introducing an Indigenous hero. Like the previous novels, *Paris Dreaming* engages with the theme of travelling overseas on a professional quest when heroine Libby Cutmore moves to Paris to work at the Musée du Quai Branly for five months giving educational lectures and tours. There she meets high-powered “blackfella” and “first secretary of the Australian Embassy” (217) Jake Ross. Society is flawed because of a series of terrible romantic experiences that have left Libby heartbroken, bitter and closed-minded. While the trip to Paris is a professional quest, Libby is charmed by the romance of Paris and initially Ames, an attractive poet she meets. Libby and Ames’s brief relationship ends disastrously when she discovers him cheating on her. Like other heroines before her, Libby blames herself for the failure of romance thereby evidencing McRobbie’s view of the postfeminist subject who “self-blames” when “success eludes him or her”. Libby blames herself for her choice of men and subsequently decides she should not date.

Ames is a mere dalliance compared with Libby's relationship with the real hero, Jake. When they first meet, Jake is instantly attracted to Libby telling her she is “absolutely beautiful” (184) and asking her for a date. Libby, however, is resistant. Readers are positioned to view Jake’s professional power as partly why she resists his advances. His characterisation as a powerful diplomat suggests that he resembles other chick lit heroes who are “unquestioned models of masculinity” rather than Guerrero’s (2006) observation of sistah lit male protagonists as “the bad men are always bad and the good men are never

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41 Heiss’s previous novels have non-Indigenous heroes, thus they explore intercultural relationships between Indigenous heroines and non-Indigenous men. Lauren and Wyatt in *Manhattan Dreaming* are both Indigenous though Lauren is Australian and Wyatt is Mohawk.

42 The Musée du Quai Branly is a Museum in Paris that displays art and cultural artefacts from Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas.

43 McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 260.
good enough". Libby initially finds Jake's forwardness unsettling, and Jake is absent for a long time. As her work contract nears its end, Jake reappears and offers her a job at the Australian embassy (219). On meeting again, it is clear they have intense chemistry. However a significant barrier emerges when Libby learns that Jake is married (233). Jake explains that the marriage ended after his then-wife Suzanne, had an affair (234). With the marriage barrier removed, Libby considers her attraction to Jake, telling herself and the reader, “There was no way I could like Jake” (237). She worries that romance will interfere with their working relationship. Moreover, she finds his candid emotional expressions towards her confronting. For example, he tells her:

I think you’re gorgeous...But mostly I find you have a positive energy that’s infectious. I feel like I want to smile around you. There are few people in life who touch us so deeply, so quickly. I know I hardly know you, but you've done it. (241)

This confession sees the pragmatist Libby conclude he is “a crackpot” (241). However, she concedes that her attraction, or as Regis explains “the reason that this couple must marry” is based on a single reason: “on paper he was almost perfect for me” (243). Libby’s conflicted feelings about Jake continue for some time and culminate in Libby running away from a dramatic and passionate kiss between them (250). Libby vows to avoid him however is consumed by the attraction, eventually leading them to enter a more formal relationship that results in Jake declaring his love for her (264). Libby does not return the declaration, instead replying with a subdued “thank you” (264). By the time Libby decides that she loves Jake, a new barrier has emerged when he announces that his ex-wife “is coming to Paris” (277). He then reveals he is still married (not divorced) (278), though emphasises that he has started formal divorce proceedings. Libby feels deceived (279), thinking he does not love her “enough” (281). The emergence of this late barrier causes them to break-up, propelling Libby into a deep depression. Libby seeks advice from her mother who tells her “if you love [...him], tell him...fight for him” (301). On returning to Paris after a short trip to Spain, Libby does as her mother suggests and “fights” for her hero. Readers are positioned to see that communication has been a

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44 Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves": Chick Lit in Black and White," 96.
45 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 33.
significant barrier to the success of Libby and Jake's relationship. Once he explains that he is divorcing his ex-wife, it is clear that she is no longer a love rival. Jake also asks Libby why she did not “declare” her love for him earlier when he told her of his love. Her lack of declaration prevented him knowing her true feelings. Libby’s response is “Of course I love you...you are the love of my life” (312). As Regis (2003) argues, without a declaration of love, a novel is not a romance. The late declaration in Paris Dreaming suggests that, as Regis explains, “the barrier was their inability or unwillingness to declare for each other, and the declaration scene marks the end of this barrier”. Libby’s clarification of her feelings removes the final barriers to romance.

All four of Heiss’s novels include Regis’s essential elements of romance to tell the story of a heroine’s “courtship and betrothal”. However, Heiss camouflages the romantic elements through the first sections of her novels and compresses the development and resolution of romance in the final chapters. Her first three novels see the heroines experience a series of near-miss or downright disastrous romantic relationships before ending up with a Mr Right who is revealed close to the narrative end. The fourth novel Paris Dreaming allows the heroine the experience of a passionate romantic relationship that briefly ends and then resumes at novel’s end. In sum, all of Heiss’s novels are romances; however, romance is often displaced for most of each novel to focus on the heroine’s professional life, travel journey and intercultural dating experiences.

The Indigenous Chick Heroine

This section considers the central characters of Heiss’s novels, particularly her heroines and heroes, in relation to romance and feminism. Heiss’s Indigenous heroines are similar to those in sistah lit, challenging the notion, as Guerrero observes that “women of color don’t exist in urban worlds of glamour”. Heiss’s Koori chick lit exposes readers to “black women who are upper class, couture

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46 Ibid., 34.
47 Ibid., 19.
48 Guerrero, "'Sistahs Are Doin' It for Themselves": Chick Lit in Black and White," 100.
wearing, trendsetting, and powerful, culturally and economically”.49 As I explain below, some Koori heroines indulge in romantic myths about love and romance while others actively shirk romantic relationships. These heroines show they have benefited from women’s rights to education, independence, careers and financial security. However, as Indigenous heroines, their freedoms and choices have also been impacted by the history of colonialism in Australia. Thus, Heiss is careful to remind readers that the freedoms and choices of Indigenous women combine women’s rights and Indigenous rights.50 The Indigenous identities of the heroines complicates a reading of them as postfeminist because they exhibit some postfeminist sensibilities through their shopping and body modification habits while telling the reader they are feminist and expressing some of the “rage” of heroines in feminist consciousness-raising novels.51 Ultimately, they are complex female characters who reflect sometimes contradictory feminist ideas.

Heiss’s four novels use their heroines to engage with notions of singleness, each from a slightly different perspective. As Phillips, Whelehan and Genz have noted, chick lit offers a conflicted representation of single life.52 Singledom allows women to date, have fun and exercise freedom and choice without a man, children or mortgage impeding their wants and desires. However, singledom also entails moments of loneliness, exclusion by “smug marrieds” and reminders about Faludi’s “backlash myths” including “the ticking biological clock”.53 Heiss’s heroines offer different engagements with notions of singleness and romantic fulfilment. For example, Not Meeting Mr Right’s heroine, Alice, decides she needs to actively search for Mr Right if she is to be married before she turns thirty (28). She illustrates Guerrero’s point about chick lit heroines who “seek self-worth” through “institutions of womanhood, specifically

49 Ibid., 101.
50 bell hooks (1984) has written about the double-bind of non-white women. She states that if they support women’s rights, it may not include the racial aspect of their identity. If they support civil rights then it may ignore the power of patriarchal structures and thinking in their lives. As well, [H]ooks’ Ain’t I a Woman (1981) led to a reconsideration of the white, middle-class orientation of the women’s movement.
51 See Whelehan (2005) for a description of “blood and rage” in feminist consciousness-raising novels.
53 Faludi, Backlash: The Undeclared War against Women, 1.

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marriage and childbearing". Alice's realisation suddenly dawns on her after a disastrous school reunion where all the women are married with children, thereby making Alice feel excluded. The illegitimacy of Alice's single status is also reinforced by her mother who suspects she is a lesbian (57). Her exclusion by her high school friends and questions about her sexuality evidences Negra's (2004) observation of conservative culture that seeks to “pathologise single femininity" and encourage women to “retreat” from the workforce to embrace “family values". Although Alice loves her single life, the reunion compels her to decide she wants marriage:

I felt a growing desire to fit in with this group, this new community I'd never been part of. I was part of the Koori community, my local community in Coogee, and the school community (as a teacher, of course, not a parent) — but I'd never been a member of the 'married with children community'. Now I wanted in. (20-21)

Even though Alice is firmly embedded in a number of communities, her inability to fit into one of them pressures her to self-style a “plan" for marriage in the way of McRobbie's (2004b) postfeminist subject. Yet, she also voices second wave feminism in stating: “A man, marriage, career, kids and happiness: I could have it all, I decided. I would have it all" (21). "Having it all" alludes to the goal of reconciling the demands of professional and personal life. The reality of Alice's life is similar to Moseley and Read's (2002) insight in relation to Ally McBeal that while the show attempts to navigate between the two, it presents them as “mutually exclusive". Before Alice has even met "Mr Right" she begins planning the wedding including location, entertainment and a groom who would wear “whatever I told him to" (60). Her imaginings about the wedding suggest a preoccupation for the display and symbolism of the wedding, without thinking of the marriage. Alice thus exemplifies bell hooks' point that many women want a man however they do not want to know love. Her quest to meet and marry Mr Right exemplifies the postfeminist notion of freedom and

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54 Guerrero, "‘Sistahs Are Doin’ It for Themselves’: Chick Lit in Black and White," 97.
55 Negra, "Quality Postfeminism?" Sex and the Single Girl on HBO.
56 McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture."
57 Moseley and Read, "Having It Ally": Popular Television (Post-) Feminism," 231.
58 See Freeman's (2002) discussion of the relationship between fantasy and reality for women when they marry.
choice where marital status is not seen as a quirk of fate but rather an aim or
goal that must be planned, strategized and actively pursued. Her fantasy of the
wedding and belief in “Mr Right” constructs Alice as a postfeminist romantic
heroine who longs for coupledom.

In other Heiss novels, despite their romantic plots, the heroine is unperturbed
by her single status, has actively chosen to be single or has sworn off men
altogether. Harzewski (2011) argues that such representations evidence the
genre’s attempt to engage “realistically” with single life and contemporary
dating rituals.60 For Peta Tully, heroine of Avoiding Mr Right, her move from
Sydney to Melbourne for her career sees her in a liminal position of being in a
long distance relationship, though keen to meet new people and experience a
new city. Peta refuses to take her boyfriend James with her, telling her friends,
“Taking a man to Melbourne would be like taking a sandwich to a smorgasbord”
(2). The suggestion is clear: Peta wants to “have it both ways”. She reflects
Probyn’s (1997) “new traditionalism” in her committed relationship with James
and the promise of a future of marriage and home life.61 At the same time, she
wants to be Holmlund’s (2005) chick postfeminist singleton who “like[s] to
party, dress up, and step out, taking breaks from work to date or shop”.62 It is
clear to the reader that Peta wants to keep James waiting in the wings while she
samples the men in Melbourne. It is clear that Peta is not completely committed
to James and his push for more commitment. She tells her friend Alice that “the
more serious he got, the more unsure I became of myself and of us as a couple”
(3). She explains to her friends that before she went out with James, she “liked
being single” it “wasn’t a drag for me” (3). Rather than fearing singleness, Peta
proclaims that her career is the most important thing: “I had never dreamed
about the wedding and white picket fence...I wanted the power to make change
through government policy. I wanted the high-flyer career and a team of staff—
and a pay cheque to match” (4). To compliment her professional aspirations,
she also explains her view of having children in the future, especially how they
would fit into her life, admitting that she loves shopping and does not want to

60 Harzewski, Chick Lit and Postfeminism, 40.
61 Holmlund, “Postfeminism from A to G,” 116.
62 Ibid.
make sacrifices for children like “married, maternal women had” (4). Like Alice, Peta is presented as having made particular choices about her life and continues to interrogate and explore those choices. In doing so, she reflects Genz’s observation of the postfeminist woman who “inhabits a nondualistic space that holds together these varied and often oppositional stances”.63 Despite Avoiding Mr Right being romantic in structure, Peta is presented as an anti-romantic heroine. The structure of romance housing a seemingly non-romantic heroine suggests a tension between narrative elements.

Heiss’s novels engage with ideas around marriage, particularly by comparing married and unmarried women. Greer (1971) criticised romance novels for their glorification of marriage and not preparing women for the “hard work” they involved.64 However, chick lit represents heroines with the choice to reject marriage altogether as Chen (2010) has noted, and examine “the dissolution of romantic ideals”.65 In Not Meeting Mr Right when Alice attends the high school reunion after deciding she would like to “meet and marry Mr Right”, she decides that some married identities are more appealing than others. At the reunion, for example, she talks to her friend Jen who proclaims that she has joined the “Family Party” (7). While Alice welcomes a conversation that is not about family life, she is shocked that Jen has joined such as conservative political party, asking the reader, “Was I sitting with a mobster’s wife, a John Howard fan, or just a lunatic?” (7).66 Jen reveals conservative key “Family Party” policies include a rejection of female clergy and abortion; however, she tries to appease Alice by stating they do “support a formal government apology for the stolen generations” (8). When Alice asks Jen’s reasons for joining the party, she admits it was “[b]ecause my husband did” (8). Alice confides to the reader that this view of marriage does not appeal to her: “I’d marry a guy with political beliefs for sure, but if his beliefs didn’t match mine—highly unlikely—I sure as hell

64 Greer, The Female Eunuch.
65 Harzewski, Chick Lit and Postfeminism, 40.
66 John Howard was the 25th Prime Minister of Australia between 1996 and 2007. His government was a Liberal-National Coalition. During his time in office, Howard refused to apologize to members of the Stolen Generations, removed "reconciliation" from the government agenda and launched an "emergency intervention" in the Northern Territory directed at Indigenous people.
wouldn’t be crossing the floor in the name of wedlock” (original emphasis, 8). Her conversation with Jen compels her to reappraise her situation, seeing the married women around her as having “lost their own sense of identity” (8). Alice’s comments to the reader indicate that she seeks a romantic partner who shares her political beliefs. As well, Alice touches on a fear that marriage may change her identity and sense of self-possession for the worse. Examples such as this that engage with particular ideals about marriage and singleness, when held against the romance plot suggest that overall the narrative contains contradictions and complexity.

Heiss’s heroines reflect Genz’s (2010) argument that the postfeminist singleton is often represented as a complex being who “discard[s] the notion of a perfect feminine or feminist identity in its embrace of a postfeminist in-betweenness and incoherence as the site of fulfilment”.67 Depending on the situation, her heroines reflect different and sometimes opposing feminist views. For example, Libby Cutmore expresses her support for “women’s rights” as a feminist (9, 213). However, in the book’s early pages, Libby critiques the notion of “having it all” (8) arguing that “I am not convinced we can have everything without some serious trade-offs” (8). Libby asserts that men make choices in the form of trade-offs such as choosing career over spending time with their families (9). The main difference, she states is that “women whinge about it, men don’t” (9). Her friend Denise tells her, “God, the feminists will hate you” (9). Libby’s rebuttal is “I’m a feminist, it’s just no-one ever talks about men and kids and so forth, they just say that women can’t have families and careers. Well, they can’t. No-one can...” (original emphasis 9). Two aspects of this conversation are interesting from a theoretical perspective. Firstly, the position that Libby takes on the ability of women to reconcile their careers with family is suggestive of backlash postfeminism where women must make a choice between home and work. Her rejection of women being able to have a career and a family alludes to the persistent barriers that prevent women fully participating in public life such as Australia’s inadequate child care system. Secondly, the example references the figure of the “feminist” who Denise says “will hate [her]”. McRobbie (2004b)

has argued that postfeminist texts sometimes “invoke” feminism so that it can be “taken into account”. Yet, while Denise anticipates feminist disapproval of Libby’s views, Libby is clear that she is herself feminist. What she suggests is that she is practically assessing the ability of men and women to work and have families outside of gender politics.

Camille Nurka (2002) argues that postfeminism emphasises particular bodily and sexual expressions that respond to myths of feminism including that it was/is “anti-sex” and populated by “man-hating, dungaree-wearing, hairy armpitted, butch dykes and ‘Plain Janes’ angry at the world because they can’t get a man”. Postfeminists exercise freedom and choice through shopping, bodily displays of sexiness and the pursuit of orgasms over social and gender equality. Heiss’s heroines like to shop, to display their bodies and date, however these pursuits do not ameliorate their political awareness or activism. The novels represent postfeminist preoccupations only to undercut those very pursuits. For example, in preparation for a date, Alice undergoes a body modification ritual, involving painful waxing of “brows, lip, chin, bikini” and a facial (199). Alice asks for a chin wax, because she claims, “...I can feel something there, a hard hair, just one. If I can feel it, he’ll be able to feel it as well. Pluck it, wax it, nuke it if you have to, but get rid of the little sucker or it will ruin my night” (200). Alice’s attention to detail and the emphasis on the power of one hair to potentially “ruin” her date borders on the excessive and obsessive. When Alice’s bikini hair is “ripped” from her body (200), Alice asks, “Shit, Kathy, you trying to kill me or what?” (200). While only scant detail describes the wax session, the scene is suggestive of pain juxtaposed with the drive for perfection. For the heroine, her beautifying impulse reinforces the postfeminist importance of surveilling the body and modifying it for display. However, while the act of beautification is reinforced it is not presented uncritically as seen by verbs such as “ripped” and “kill”. Through language and reader positioning such body modification rituals are invoked and questioned.

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68 McRobbie, "Post-Feminism and Popular Culture," 255.
70 Ibid.
Whelehan (2005) found that a major difference between chick lit and feminist bestsellers was the noticeable absence of “blood and rage”.

While many chick heroines hide their discontent and anger under a veil of laughter and self-deprecation, Heiss’s heroines express rage when they are mistreated, particularly by men, disrespected or when they encounter racism. In *Not Meeting Mr Right* Alice becomes angry when she is dumped via e-mail. Her boyfriend refuses to speak to her or answer the many questions she has about the abrupt end to their relationship. She confesses to the reader, “I was helpless. Distraught and helpless. Sad, lonely, confused and PISSED OFF!” (258).

Likewise, Libby Cutmore is furious when she is cheated on by her French poet lover and then by her boyfriend Jake. However, Libby becomes angry in *Paris Dreaming* for other reasons. She becomes angry when she first meets the marketing manager Adrian at her new workplace, the Musée Quai de Branly. As they prepare materials for her exhibition, Adrian denies her the opportunity to see the press release and to insert her own quotes, telling her he is more than capable of writing the text. Libby tells the reader she “felt hot with embarrassment and anger that already I had a white man wanting to write my words” (140). For Libby, being able to write her own press release quotes is a professional right that also carries cultural connotations particularly those associated with having a public voice as an Indigenous person and a woman. Libby’s anger at this situation reflects Miley’s (2006) observation about the potential implications of “white people” creating representations of Aboriginal people in literature. Miley argues that speaking or “writing for” Indigenous people directly impacts how they are perceived, including the potential to reinforce views of them as “Other” and “Inferior”.

Heiss’s heroines are not quiet or docile; they express their discontent and fury when they encounter injustice or inequality. Thus, they do exhibit a rage that arguably is absent from many other chick novels.

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In conclusion, Heiss's novels are romances that represent heroines who express numerous identity types; some embrace romantic ideals while others reject them, some tell the reader they are feminist, even while exhibiting aspects of the postfeminist sensibility. As one book reviewer has noted of Heiss's novels, “Truly engaging books of this type give the reader more than sex, shopping and shoes. Here we have feisty Indigenous women who defy the stereotype of urban, angry and rough, or outback and poor”.73

**Politicising the Romance: Indigenous Cultural Politics**

In this section, I consider the didactic function of Anita Heiss's chick lit to educate readers about Indigenous issues. As I have argued above, all four of her novels are romances; however, they are also politically aware, particularly in relation to women's rights and Indigenous rights. Heiss has argued that she uses chick lit to educate readers about Indigenous culture and issues. Popular fiction offers a way to present important issues in an accessible and understandable format, as she has stated, “very complex issues of cultural identity and interracial relationships [...need] to be simplified because the [issues are] complex”.74 In this section, I examine her four novels as providing an Indigenous perspective of Australian history, government policy and interracial relationships. In Heiss's third and fourth novels the heroines encounter cultural issues specific to New York and Paris including Native American history, the election of Barack Obama and the banning of the burqa. Heiss educates readers about Indigenous issues to ultimately challenge a number of stereotypes about Indigenous Australians and encourage intercultural understanding. Ultimately, the issues presented in her novels demonstrate the ability of romance to be used for consciousness-raising. As Cranny-Francis (1990) has argued of feminist writers appropriating genre fiction, it can be “a powerful tool for their own propagandist purposes”.75

Heiss's four novels work to challenge stereotypical understandings of Indigenous Australians through her characters' interaction with others via their

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73 Higson, "Wagging the Finger Wrongfoots Romance."
careers. The role of the career plot has been discussed in relation to chick lit by Harzewski (2006) and Wells (2006). Harzewski, drawing upon previous inquiries into the romance, argues that “when the romance plot begins to thicken, the heroine’s job that initially imbued her with glamour then becomes temporary”. Harzewski’s point is that exploration of a heroine’s career in romances is often sidelined in favour of the developing romance with a hero. However, in chick lit, Harzewski finds there is a “greater integration” between work and romance. For Wells (2006), chick lit is generally “driven” more by the love plot than the career plot. In Heiss’s novels, more of the plot is devoted to the heroines’ career in education, government or the creative industries and travel than to the “courtship and betrothal”. For example, in Not Meeting Mr Right, heroine Alice Aigner is a history teacher at a girl’s high school. In this role, Alice communicates with young women and the reader about Australian history, especially its colonial past. In one example, Alice is teaching her students about “significant moments for women in Australian history” (66). The girls identify the following dates: “1881—Women are allowed to enrol in the same subjects as men at Sydney University for the first time” and “1901—Women are granted the right to vote” (66). Another student who happens to be “non-Koori” points out that “only white women” received the vote in 1901, whereas “Aboriginal women didn’t get it until the 1967 referendum” (66). Alice confides to the reader her “pride” in this student to “pick up this fact” (67)

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78 It is important to note the differences between the “significant moments” in education for Indigenous Australians and “women” in Australia. According to the Reconciliation Network, in 1848 the Board of National Education decided it was “impractical” to educate Indigenous Australians. In 1883, Indigenous children could be excluded from schools if “white parents” were against them being there. The Assimilation Policy of 1937 then saw education as a way to “assimilate” Aboriginal people “into white society and […] break] connections with their culture and history. According to the Reconciliation Network, Indigenous children had “regular mainstream access” to primary schooling from the 1950s and secondary school from the 1960s. Reconciliation Network, “Education Fact Sheet,” Reconciliation Network, http://reconciliation.org.au/nsw/education-kit/education/
79 According to Stretton (2013), writing for the Australian Electoral Commission, Aboriginal men could legally vote from the 1850s. Stretton explains that the constitution stipulated that it applied to “all male British subjects over 21” which included Aboriginal men. South Australia gave women, including Aboriginal women, the right to vote in 1895 (only Queensland and Western Australia “barred” Aborigines from voting). Stretton points out that few Aboriginals knew that they were entitled to vote, which explains why few did so.
and makes the point to the reader: “I’d once heard feminist Dale Spender say that if a man ever made a sexist remark in public, it was up to another man to correct him, not a woman, and I totally agreed. It was the same with racial issues” (67). The reader, especially the “white” reader, is positioned to support this view. Alice notes that the girls list the achievements of “female historians” where “many had only ever mentioned male historians in previous classes” (68). This history lesson draws together women’s rights and Aboriginal rights to highlight aspects of colonial history that many readers may be unaware of. It also compares and contrasts the varying histories of men, women and Indigenous Australians.

Heiss utilises Alice’s engagement with “history” to consciousness-raise the reader about colonial and Indigenous histories. This is important when one considers Maddison’s (2008) argument that Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians have “failed to properly address past harms and to resolve national sentiment about our history” subsequently meaning those hurts persist in the present. Maddison outlines the “history wars” of the early 2000’s, including Keith Windshuttle’s book The Fabrication of Australian History (2002) and John Howard’s view that a “positive” Australian history should be told. Maddison argues that such accounts sought to discredit or ignore Aboriginal perspectives of history including massacres. Maddison’s discussion captures the contested view of Australian history which Heiss also explores through Alice’s encounter at a history teacher’s meeting (278). Alice attends with the idea that she is “excited about the prospect of meeting new people, even new white people” (279). Clearly expecting most of the attendees to be “white”, Alice decides her mantra for the evening will be “I will be kind and compassionate to all the white people I meet today” (original emphasis, 279). On arrival she discovers unsurprisingly “no brown faces in sight” (279). She begins a conversation with

80 The novel’s mention of Dale Spender may allude to her feminist study of language Man Made Language (1980). Spender argues that our consciousness and view of reality is shaped through language. A language that privilege’s men and their view of the world limits women in numerous ways. Although Spender examines “man made” language, Heiss’s reference may allude to the ways that language constructed by “white” people may limit the consciousness and world view of Indigenous peoples.

“two greying men in suits”, the first of whom introduces himself as “a
descendant of the first people of the area” (280). Alice’s narration, positioning
the reader alongside her, queries his statement, “I was fairly sure he didn’t
mean he was Gadigal…” (280).82 When Alice queries the man outright, he replies
that, “No, don’t know that family. I’m a descendent of the Collinses—you know
the Collins family, that’s Collins with three els” (original emphasis, 280).
Emboldened, Alice asks, “So you’re a descendent of the first family who were
given a land grant after the local Aboriginal clan, the Gadigal, were dispossessed
of their land, then?” (original emphasis 281). The men laugh at her, “as though I
were a child who has said something cute but meaningless” (281). She tells the
reader, “They were starting to piss me off” (281). Alice asks another question,
“Seriously, this is a history association—surely you recognise all history and not
just that which serves the coloniser?” (original emphasis, 281). One of the men
states, “We here at the Eastern Suburbs Local History Association recognise
Australian history, Aboriginal history and prehistory as well” (281). Alice tells
the reader her “blood started to boil…the mantra about being nice to white
people was gone” (281). Alice again queries the logic of their statements:

What Aboriginal history? Everything that happened post-invasion is
Australian history. Aboriginal people didn’t dispossess themselves, they
didn’t poison their own watering holes or place themselves on
government-run reserves and church-run missions. The colonisers and
settlers—the so-called Australians—did that. That’s Australian history.
And as for prehistory, what the hell does that mean? (Original emphasis,
281-282)

Alice here contests a stereotypically “white male” view of history from her
Indigenous perspective. She confides in the reader that she knows, “what he
meant, but wanted to hear him say it” (282). Thus, this example shows Heiss
use of dialogue and the interaction between characters to engage with and
ultimately challenge colonial views of Australian history. With the reader
positioned alongside Alice’s point of view, they see the situation from her
perspective. For “white” readers, this interaction between characters serves a
reflective purpose; by being aligned to Alice’s view, a “white” reader might
reflect on their own understanding of history and how that history has been

82 “Gadigal” are the Aboriginal people and land custodians of the area in and around Sydney.
presented to them. Upon reflection, the reader may renegotiate their own understanding of history to reconsider how they understand Australian “colonialism”.

Heiss’s engagement with Indigenous issues is undertaken through the representation of romantic relationships between heroines and potential partners. As Guerrero (2006) and Merrick (2006) have argued, chick lit contains mostly “white” heroines and their “white” romantic suitors. However, the centralisation of “white” experiences, particularly in relationships, misses the opportunity to examine interracial or intercultural relationships. Heiss challenges this aspect of chick lit because her heroines make dating decisions partly based on intercultural dynamics. Heroines such as Not Meeting Mr Right’s Alice state that they “want him to think I’m the most gorgeous woman on the planet [...] And I don’t want him to adore me because I’m Black. I don’t want to be someone’s ‘exotic other’” (34). The phrase “exotic other” alludes to Edward Said’s Orientalism and when mentioned in Heiss’s novels suggests that some “white” men choose a romantic partner because they originate from a distant or far-removed culture, whether literally or via a perceived distance. In her discussion of non-Aboriginal writing about Aboriginal people, Miley argues that there is a danger in “[r]epresenting the black person as a stereotypical object of fantasy and desire”; for Miley such representations may result in reducing “black people [...] to something more akin to animal than human”. Heiss’s characters reject relationships based on them being someone’s “exotic other” in turn encouraging readers to reflect on their own understandings of Indigenous peoples.

An example of Heiss’s critique of the “exotic other” discourse occurs in Not Meeting Mr Right. The heroine, Alice, goes on a date with a man she has decided to call “Casper”, ironically because of his very pale skin. Her encounter with him begins when she wakes up in his flat after a night of drinking and dancing. First, she notices the messy apartment around her, an Anthony Mundine poster above

the bed and is thankful that “no penetration of any kind [is] likely to have occurred” (136). She flees the apartment with little idea where she is. On arrival at the train station she realises she is in “Blacktown”. On the train home, she ponders Blacktown’s name and history, thereby providing further Indigenous history to the reader. “Casper” (his real name Simon) eventually hounds Alice for a date by sending a very personal and touching letter. The date is a disaster. When Alice arrives, Simon is wearing a “black and white Treaty t-shirt” (159), he is smoking and asks Alice for a “black beer” (160) from the bar. Alice ponders this litany of characteristics: “If he thought he was doing his bit for reconciliation by doing all this ‘Black’ stuff, he was sadly mistaken” (160). Simon reveals that the night they met, he was at “Koori-oke” because he likes “hangin’ out with my people...I’m Koori, can’t ya tell?” (162-163). Alice tells the reader that none of the usual “identifying characteristics”, such as “language” and “shared concepts and experiences”, were evident. When Alice asks, “So who’s your mob”, Simon replies, “yeah well, not sure yet...I only found out six months ago that my great-great-grandmother was Aboriginal...I know I’m a Williams. So I’m Koori too, like you eh?” (163). Besides being furious, Alice provides an internal commentary on why Simon feels “out of place”. She tells the reader it is because he is a “deadset weirdo and a loser. It had nothing to do with Aboriginal heritage” (164). She asks him what racism and discrimination he has experienced and what he knows of “Aboriginal community”. He responds by sitting “stunned, mouth agape, and obviously offended” (165). Alice tells him:

Aboriginality is spiritual, and it’s a lived experience—not something you find by accident and then attach its name to yourself. I’m sick of white people deciding they’re Black so they have some sense of belonging, or worse still, so they can exploit our culture (165).

Alice concludes that Simon was trying to “align himself with a strong Koori woman to help him infiltrate the community and be accepted by the local mob” (166). This dating disaster exemplifies an added complication to romantic relationships for Indigenous women: that they need to be wary of men wanting

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85 Anthony Mundine is an Indigenous Australian light middleweight boxer.
to date them for a host of racially motivated reasons. It also taps into discourses around the definition of “Indigeneity” in Australia.

Interracial romantic relationships offer insight into different aspects of Indigenous history in Heiss’s novels. Miley (2006) explores the value of Indigenous and non-Indigenous interaction and dialogue, stating that “testing images of each other and adjusting their responses” can yield discovery and “comprehension” of Indigenous experience and identity.\(^\text{86}\) In *Avoiding Mr Right* Peta Tully forms an unlikely friendship with a police officer, Mike. When they first meet, Peta is reluctant to pursue “anything of any kind with a copper” (123).\(^\text{87}\) When Peta later discusses Mike with her friend Alice, Alice reminds her that it is the “talking that’s going to be the problem” because Peta is “Black” and works in “policy” (135-6). Another problem that Alice points out is what she refers to as “the whole Black deaths in custody thing” (136).\(^\text{88}\) When they meet for lunch, Mike continues with his corny pick-up lines and Peta makes a joke about “pigs” (141). The lunch goes well until Peta notices Mike is wearing a charity bracelet in support of a policeman who “killed a Black Man” (144). Mike claims he is supporting “due process”. Peta proceeds to lecture Mike, concluding, “So we have a policing and legal system that says it’s worse for a Black man to spit at a white cop than it is for a white cop to kill a Black man and that’s your fucken process” (original emphasis, 144-145). Alice is angry and gives Mike an ultimatum that if he wants to keep seeing her: he must read Simon Luckhurst’s *Eddie’s Country* to “explain the history of relations between the cops and Kooris and then you’ll understand why I’m so angry now” (145).\(^\text{89}\)


\(^{87}\) The relationship between Indigenous people, police and government officials is also explored in the play *No Sugar* (1985) by Indigenous writer Jack Davis. Set in 1920s and 1930s Western Australia, the play examines the “protection” of Aborigines and institutionalized racism through the implementation of government policy.

\(^{88}\) In 1987, a Royal Commission was launched to investigate the deaths of Aboriginal people in custody throughout Australia. The investigation sought to address public concerns about the frequency of Aboriginal deaths in custody and the lack of explanation about why such incidents were occurring. "Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody – Fact Sheet 112."

\(^{89}\) The book explores the death of Eddie Murray, an Indigenous man who died in a police cell in Wee Waa, New South Wales in 1981. As well, it explains the experience of Eddie’s parents who lobbied to have his death investigated. Simon Luckhurst, *Eddie’s Country: Why Did Eddie Murray Die?* (Broome, Western Australia: Magabala Books, 2006).
Mike reads the book and comes to a better understanding of Indigenous and police relations. Later on, Mike asks her how she would feel if he refused to kiss her because she is Aboriginal. In response, Alice says she would think he was a “racist prick” (236). He says: “And fair enough. I would be a racist prick if I said that. But it feels the same when you say to me that you could never kiss a cop. Can you see how discriminatory you’re being?” (236). Peta confesses to the reader: “he was right”. Peta and Mike’s relationship is a narrative device that allows various complicated Indigenous issues to be discussed including Indigenous-police relations. The relationship also becomes a means by which Peta is asked to reflect on her own discrimination against the police. Peta and Mike’s interaction exemplifies Miley’s (2006) point that such interactions can “test” those involved and result in an “adjustment” of responses and attitudes. The development of the relationship between Peta and Mike is shown to be mutually beneficial.

While Heiss’s first two novels examine cultural issues within Australia, her third and fourth novels examine cultural issues specific to North America and France. Through travel, readers learn more about the intersection of Indigenous culture, cosmopolitanism, and overseas culture. In Heiss’s two later novels, heroines travel to New York and to Paris where they are undertaking art related career postings. Lauren Lucas’s year long trip to New York coincides with Barack Obama’s inauguration. The day of the inauguration she goes on a date including a visit to the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. There she and her date, Cash, explore “the history of Black politics and politicians in America” (246). Lauren and Cash “cry” as they watch footage from Obama’s victory speech. Lauren realises that “what Cash and I shared was an understanding and respect as people of colour, who have remained essentially voiceless in mainstream politics. But it didn’t necessarily mean I had to be in love with him” (247). When Obama is sworn in the next day, Lauren wonders if “one day we might have a Black president of the Republic of Australia” (247). Manhattan Dreaming thus allows an intercultural comparison to occur by way of reflection on the importance of Obama’s election and the prospect of Australia one day having an Indigenous leader. Likewise in Paris Dreaming
Libby Cutmore encounters culturally motivated inequalities in France. When researching her trip, she reads information about France’s efforts to ban the burqa and the deportation of Romanian gypsies. When she meets the marketing manager at her workplace, she discovers he is supportive of banning the burqa because he fears “the Muslims are going to take over Europe” (144). When he asks Libby for her view, she says she “share[s] the same views as President Obama: you can’t tell people what to wear, especially if it’s going to stigmatise Islam” (145). Later on, Libby and her colleague Canelle talk about politics while shopping, including discussing the burqa issue. Canelle and Libby state that they are feminists and interrogate understandings of the burqa as “oppressive to women”. Libby asks, “what about women who choose to wear the veil?” (original emphasis, 214). Libby likens wearing the Burqa to “choosing what we wear” to “make a statement about our identity” (214). In this dialogue, feminism is invoked and the heroine attempts to moderate or refine the radical view of feminism that is presented. It is interesting that both women claim to be feminists; yet, they reject a specific view of feminism in relation to the burqa in favour of women exercising “choice”, a seemingly postfeminist view. However, ultimately the novel’s point is that these issues are complex; that there is no single rule for all women.

In conclusion, Heiss’s four novels use interactions between characters and the narrative progression to engage with important contemporary issues, such as those related to Australian ‘history’, relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, racism and government policy. Heiss positions the reader alongside her Indigenous heroines so that they may reflect on their own views and perhaps reconsider perspectives that may perpetuate racism or inequality. The novels use narrative techniques such as characterisation, plot and dialogue to navigate complex issues. Thus, her novels are romances that, like feminist genre fiction, “consciously encode an ideology” which opposes “the dominant gender ideology of Western society, patriarchal ideology”. Arguably, the ideology communicated in her novels also counters the “white” ideology reinforced by Australian cultural history and government policy.

Conclusion

Anita Heiss’s four novels perform a complex discursive manoeuvre that uses plots, characters and themes to engage with gender and intercultural issues. All Heiss’s novels are romances; they employ the essential romantic elements. However, the romantic hero is waiting in the wings for much of each novel, leaving the romantic resolution and certainty until the end where heroines are “free” to choose their hero give the readers a feeling of “joy”. Decentralising romance suggests that while readers experience a happy resolution, it is not the key aim of these novels. Heiss uses her plots and central characters to engage with issues (such as Australian ‘history’, racism, definitions of Aboriginality and black deaths in custody) to educate readers and “smash stereotypes” about Indigenous Australians. Like ‘white’ chick heroines, Heiss’s heroines are concerned with their marital status, bodies, careers, consumptive patterns and relationships with family and friends. Some indulge in romantic myths while others reject them. Heiss characterises her heroines as educated urban professionals who like to shop, date and engage in beauty rituals suggesting they have been constructed through a postfeminist lens. While this re-representation of Indigenous women challenges stereotypes, it also appears to ensnare them within a postfeminist lifestyle tied to bodily display, the pursuit of sexiness and the acquisition of goods. However, Heiss is careful to politicise her heroines with strong views about rights for women and Indigenous Australians meaning that heroines demonstrate moments of the postfeminist sensibility as well as moments of radical thought, speech and action.

The next chapter examines the suburban post-romantic novels, Catherine Jinks’ *Spinning Around* and Rebecca Sparrow’s *The Girl Most Likely*. Both novels feature suburban settings where heroines reflect on their lives. *Spinning Around’s* heroine, Helen Muzzatti, a busy wife, mother and part-time career woman, is faced with the daunting prospect of her husband having an affair. *The Girl Most Likely’s* Rachel Hill is reeling in the wake of an impending divorce after a quickie marriage in the United States. I argue that both novels are romances in plot with heroines who can be read as both feminist and postfeminist. The plots
and characterisation of these novels encourage readers to examine notions of success and having it all.
Chapter Seven: Suburban Post-Romance and Redefining Success in *The Girl Most Likely* and *Spinning Around*

There is more than one type of freedom….Freedom to and freedom from.

Margaret Atwood¹

Introduction

Virginia Woolf once captured her attempts to kill a phantom that stepped between her and her writing in an essay entitled “Professions for Women”. She named this phantom after the heroine of Coventry Patmore’s 1854 poem, “The Angel in the House”. Patmore based his protagonist on his own wife, a woman he thought epitomised the perfect Victorian homemaker. Woolf’s response to Patmore’s poem used terms such as “unselfish”, “sacrificial” and “pure” to describe the spectral character she felt pleaded with her to conceal her intelligence. Taunted by the ghostly presence of Patmore’s verse, Woolf wrote:

[W]henever I felt the shadow of her wing or the radiance of her halo upon my page, I took up the inkpot and flung it at her. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is far harder to kill a phantom than a reality [...] Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer.²

Woolf wrote about this phantom of domesticity in the early twentieth century.³ Yet, the ‘Angel in the House’ and other idealised fictional femininities prevail. How idealised femininities are represented and critiqued is particularly important in the current so-called postfeminist media age. Hall and Rodriguez (2003) have argued that postfeminism is largely a myth and that support for the women’s movement is actually the same or increasing.⁴ However, the largely fictional ‘angelic figures,’ like those referred to by Woolf, remain difficult to kill.

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³ In a discussion of Woolf’s “A Sketch of the Past”, Molly Hite (2000) suggests that Woolf’s own mother “was a prototype of the ‘Angel in the House’”. According to Shannon Forbes (2000), Woolf was ‘disturbed’ by “the memory of her mother as an Angel” until her death.
as they move across and between generations. Arguably, part of the future of the women’s movement depends on how these figures are treated within popular culture, as well as by academic scholars.

Angels, like the one that so infuriated Woolf, lurk in contemporary popular culture, especially in chick lit. The angels that stalk the chick genre are garbed in notions of ‘success’: the successful career woman, the successful girlfriend, the successful wife and the woman who successfully manages to do “it all” (superwoman). Arguably, these types of angels alternate between versions of feminine success and feminist success. Although feminism encouraged women to step out of the shadow of Betty Friedan’s “feminine mystique”, the postfeminist backlash against feminism, as noted by scholars such as Probyn (1997) and McRobbie (2004b), seeks to undo key achievements of feminism including encouraging women to return to housewifedom or to juggle impossible tasks as superwomen. Faced with pressures to rescind the public gains of second wave feminism and disidentify with feminism in the wake of neoconservative politics, particularly in the United States, some women have chosen to return home or as Diane Negra terms it, “retreat”. Other women, especially those facing structural inequities relating to wages or inadequate or expensive childcare, have little choice but to return to the domestic sphere. Would-be superwomen or those who want to “have it all” by way of high flying careers, husbands and children, are faced with sometimes limited supporting structures. Australia, for example, does not have free day-care, let alone “free 24 hour nurseries” as demanded by the Women’s Liberation Conference attendees in 1978 and family-friendly workplaces are in the minority. As well, there

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5 A number of chick lit heroines have aspired to become various angel types including Kate Reddy in Alison Pearson’s I Don’t Know How She Does It trying to be a Type-E woman (everything to everybody) or superwoman including good wife, good mother and good stock broker. Sophie Kinsella’s protagonist Samantha in The Un-Domestic Goddess, an accomplished lawyer, struggles with domesticity.


7 In “Quality Postfeminism?”, Diane Negra (2004) discusses the pressures on women, particularly those in the United States to ‘retreat’ from the workplace.

remains inequitable division of labour in the home and between parents in child-raising and domestic roles.\(^9\)

The Australian suburbs as a setting, enables a meditation on notions of success and contemporary “angel” ideals. Most Australians live in suburbs that surround urban hubs or central business districts. There are conflicting views on the meaning associated with suburban life and its representation. Andrew McCann expresses some of the complexity of understandings of literary representations of suburban life. For some, suburbia is a place of “anxiety”, “banality” and “conformity”; a place to escape from at the earliest moment. In opposition, it is also a place of “privacy”, “conjugal” “increased freedom and belonging”.\(^10\) For women, the suburbs tend to be associated with hearth and home, domesticity and stereotypical roles as wife and mother. Yet, critical assessments of representations of suburban life suggest a more complex interplay between stereotypes, roles and aspirations.

In this Chapter, I consider two chick novels with suburban settings: Rebecca Sparrow’s *The Girl Most Likely* (2004) and Catherine Jinks’ *Spinning Around* (2004). I argue that both novels consider notions of success and having it all for their heroines. *The Girl Most Likely* sees its heroine Rachel Hill return to her parents’ suburban house after leaving her successful career and independent life for a quickie marriage to her American boyfriend. *Spinning Around* sees married mother of two and Complaints Officer at the Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Board, Helen Muzzatti, on the verge of a breakdown when she suspects her husband of having an affair with a mysterious “girl with purple hair”. Both novels are post-romances. Each novel has a parallel plot; Rachel is coming to terms with life as a divorcee and ‘failure’ while Helen is trying to

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solve the mystery of her husband’s affair. Each novel has a colourful collection of characters who assist in examining what success means for these two protagonists. The heroines are presented as flawed, attempting to live up to ideal ‘angel types’ or trying to realise the burden of expectation from their childhoods. The heroes are unconventional in that neither is rich or handsome in the sense of “unquestioned models of masculinity”. Both novels include the elements of romance while using their plots and characters to explore success and having it all. Each draws in stereotypes of success to then challenge and redefine success for their heroines. Overall, I argue that *The Girl Most Likely* and *Spinning Around* fling the inkpot at the angel in the house.

**The Suburban Post-Happily Ever After Romance**

This section discusses the narrative devices and plots of *The Girl Most Likely* and *Spinning Around* to contemplate how the elements of romance are used in a suburban setting. Both novels employ the essential romantic elements; however, they twist the elements to complement their post-romance and post-happily ever after premises. I argue that both novels offer innovative invocations of romance. Both novels, “end on a high” however it comes with a reflection on romance and true love, where each heroine reconsiders their ideas about love. This reflective quality is constructed via a first person confessional comedic style of writing\textsuperscript{11} that allows each heroine to “give an account of the self” and reflect on their situation. The comedy works to counterbalance the difficult confessions and feelings of emptiness or disappointment expressed by each heroine.

*The Girl Most Likely* and *Spinning Around*, with their mainly suburban settings and the circumstances of their heroines, offer new invocations of romance; however, romance is complicated in two ways, firstly, both novels are post-happily ever after romances and secondly, they have suburban settings. *The Girl Most Likely* starts like other traditional romances with a “definition of society”. This sets the context in which a blossoming relationship will develop. Society is

\textsuperscript{11} I follow Foucault (2005) and Butler (2005) in their understandings of confession as a way of “publishing” and “taking account” of the self.
“corrupt” or “superannuated” in a number of ways. Rachel finds herself back living in her parents’ house after her decision to leave her successful career and independent life to get married and move to the United States. This decision has disastrous personal ramifications where the financial and emotional security promised in marriage does not eventuate. For Rachel, the fickleness of relationships is one problematic aspect of the society being defined. As well, the failed marriage negatively impacts her self-esteem and feelings of self-worth because it is bound up with how she defines success. Indeed, the pressure Rachel feels to be a success emerges as a significant flaw in her society because it has become the yardstick by which she measures her personal worth. Rachel reveals her feelings about success early in the novel, a monologue revealing that she thought she was “the girl most likely to succeed” (10), the girl “destined to be something” (26) “supposed to have the life that goes with the Ikea catalogue”(28). Rachel’s comments indicate a kind of burden of expectation that she would succeed and “be something”. The allusion to Ikea implies the kind of ideal domestic life that the home furniture catalogue pictures suggest. The reader becomes Rachel’s confidante about her real situation; that her life has taken a turn for the worse.

During fits of despair and depression about her life and impending divorce, Rachel encounters romance in the suburbs when she meets her neighbour Matthew. The meeting and attraction for Matthew and Rachel is neither instant nor mutual; instead, they develop a slow friendship before being romantically attracted to each other much later in the novel. Their meeting is comic. Rachel is trying to play “Jessica’s Theme”, a song from the feature film *The Man from Snowy River*, on the piano. She convinces herself that successfully playing the song with no mistakes will mean she is not a failure and “still in control...still the same old me...still achieving” (35). When Rachel begins playing, she discovers it is more difficult than she imagined. She practices until her fingers ache and to the point that she has nightmares about how badly she is playing. One day while practicing, she hears someone else not far away playing the song flawlessly. Soon after, a new metronome appears on her doorstep with a note.

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including an e-mail address. She decides to send her thanks to the sender and enters into a flirty correspondence with the mystery “piano stalker” (45) who she learns is someone called Matthew Harding. At the end of their emailing, Matthew decides to visit her. Just before receiving Matthew’s e-mail that says he is coming to visit her, Rachel has been playing dress up with a “big taffeta, strapless” (75) high school formal dress and so much makeup, she tells the reader, “I look like a hooker. An 80s hooker. I am the poor man’s pretty woman” (75). When Matthew arrives, Rachel fears answering the door because she does not want him to see her dressed the way she is. Desperate for a reason not to answer the door, she explains that she is “sick with scurvy”. Matthew peers through the bay window on the side of the door (which Rachel has forgotten about) and sees her sitting by the door all dressed up. She scrambles to her feet in fright and inadvertently “flash[es] [her] undies” (83) at him before telling him to go away. From her outfit to her scurvy to flashing her underwear, this scene is entertaining and comic while presenting Rachel as emotionally vulnerable. Their chemistry or “attraction” is demonstrated by their witty repartee. The reader is positioned to see them as potential future romantic partners. Their e-mails and brief conversation reveal they share similar interests in popular culture and have similar senses of humour.

The ‘real’ meeting between Rachel and Matthew occurs later that day when she and some friends go to the local pub. Ordering drinks at the bar, Rachel turns around when someone says, “So I hope that’s an orange juice you’re ordering…Scurvy Lady” (87). Embarrassed, Rachel turns to see Matthew looking “a little ordinary. Less than ordinary. Pedestrian, even” (87). Rachel is affronted by his presence and still embarrassed from their earlier encounter. She turns the humiliation on to him, by telling him he has something stuck in his teeth, to which he replies:

Sure. Sure I do. I know that. I put it there deliberately as an icebreaker. Give us something to talk about. But now that it’s served its purpose I should probably ditch it. Or maybe even save it for the next neighbour I try to befriend. I think it’ll work a treat on Margaret at number 43. (87)

Rachel responds, “Does she play the piano too? Or is it just me that you’re bugging?” (88). He quips, “Triangle, actually. And scurvy’s not a problem for her.
She has leprosy issues. So, don’t you go thinking you’re special” (88). The attraction, like other romantic novels, as Regis notes, is based on “sexual chemistry” and “shared goals”. Matthew is curious about Rachel’s reason for trying to play “Jessica’s Theme” and offers her piano lessons as he has played since he was five years of age (89). He tells her that giving her lessons “would be a good distraction” (90) from his studies, implying that there is more happening in his life than he is revealing. When Rachel eventually asks Matthew for lessons, he adds a condition: before each lesson he can ask her a question about herself because he finds her so difficult to get to know (95). Rachel immediately fears he will ask uncomfortable personal questions such as the number of people she has been to bed with; her introspective narration shows the reader that this is one of her biggest fears. However, much to Rachel’s relief, Matthew asks her playful popular culture questions such as, “what was Skippy’s surname on Family Ties?” (101). In this case, Matthew appears more interested in the limits of Rachel’s knowledge of popular culture than asking uncomfortable personal questions. With each lesson, Rachel finds herself looking forward to seeing Matthew, having her tuition and thinking about what to wear (119). To reader's familiar with the chick lit and romance genre, Rachel’s anticipation of her meetings with Matthew is code language for “I am attracted to this man”.

Alongside the growing attraction between them is anti-attraction because Matthew is getting too involved in Rachel’s life. Having returned home from a shopping trip, he puts his hand up to her face and “strokes her hair” (152). Rachel thinks he is going to kiss her, but in fact he is only removing a leaf from her hair. She asks him “what the hell are you doing?” (153) before they have a brief fight. Later when Matthew invites Rachel to his house for a meal of spaghetti bolognaise, there is a brief moment of intimacy when they wipe tomato sauce off each other’s face; however, Matthew quickly changes the subject suggesting that they do Rachel’s tax return. The narrator controls the intensity of attraction in these examples, in some cases just when the attraction

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13 Ibid., 33.
is becoming clearer and more certain, the narrative takes a u-turn which creates tension and carefully guides the reader’s expectations.

Despite their attraction, Matthew and Rachel encounter barriers to their relationship. The biggest barrier is miscommunication and misunderstanding. Although they like each other’s company, neither has told the truth about their backgrounds and current situation. From Rachel’s confessional writing, the reader learns her secrets: she married her American boyfriend Troy, is about to get divorced and regards herself as a failure. This is something only her best friend, Zoe and “a lady called Ruby who sat next to me on the flight home from Vegas” (15) knows, thus making the reader a privileged confidante. Rachel avoids telling Matthew and her parents about the reality of her life. The secrecy is a barrier preventing Rachel entering a ‘real’ romantic relationship with Matthew. However, Matthew has a secret of his own. Reader’s familiar with the romance plot will immediately suspect he is hiding something. Although he has not lied to Rachel, he has not told the truth: that his mother has dementia and he, with the help of a “pretty blonde nurse”, cares for her. Matthew and Rachel’s romance is delayed by their inability to communicate openly and honestly with one another.

The “point of ritual death” occurs when Matthew discovers the truth about Rachel’s impending divorce. By this time, Matthew has explained his home life, including caring for his mother. Rachel has numerous chances to mention Troy and the imminent divorce. Matthew discovers her secret at the worst possible moment, soon after he and Rachel have promised they will “always be honest with each other” (254). Rachel’s best friend Zoe unintentionally reveals Rachel’s marital situation leading to Matthew making a hasty exit from the novel with only two chapters remaining. While readers are sympathetic to Rachel’s situation, she has violated her friendship with Matthew. She attempts to remedy the situation by writing a “Dear Matt, I’m married” letter explaining everything, apologising and explaining her difficulty admitting the truth of her life to herself. Ultimately, she concedes she “screwed up” (274) and that she “cares” about him. Three days later she has heard nothing and assumes the worst, that
he “can’t forgive [her]” (275). This point of ritual death sees their friendship and potential romantic relationship in jeopardy.

The point of ritual death gives way to the recognition scene, as Regis explains, when the story yields “new information that will overcome the barrier”. For Rachel there are similarities between her relationship problems with Matthew and the denial of her marriage and impending divorce. She recognises her mistakes and self-deception, seeing that it hinders her relationships with others. After admitting her mistakes, she experiences relief and realises she is “happy” (276), “things are going to get better” and she is “surviving” (276). The recognition encompasses her feelings about herself and the relationship with Matthew, giving way to their reunion. The final elements of declaration and betrothal leave the reader with hope that their romance will blossom while resisting complete certainty. In the novel’s final scene, Rachel and Zoe watch Alex (the child that Rachel baby-sits) in a concert. After the concert, Rachel spots Matthew in the crowd and shouts out to him. He cannot hear her above the noisy crowd so Zoe hoists her onto the stage. Rachel attracts his attention by humming the *Mork and Mindy* theme song on the Indooroopilly Shoppingtown PA system (281). Matthew stops, laughs and approaches the stage. Rather than a serious formal declaration, Matthew and Rachel revert to their witty dialogue filled with popular culture references. Matthew suggests her humming “should be more legato” (281). He then continues, “But I know someone who’s an expert at theme songs who’d be willing to give you some free lessons. You know. Just to help you get up to speed” (282). She asks, “What’s the catch?” (282), while taking her hand and responding, “No catch […] Assuming you can remember the theme song to *Eight is Enough*” (282). *Eight is Enough* is a television series about a happily married couple who live a full, rich life with their eight children. The allusion to the television show signifies an unspoken declaration and presupposes their life together. Although there is no kiss or spoken declaration, the hand holding as they leave the shopping centre suggests a symbolic and public “betrothal”. The final scene suggests they now know each other and have resolved their communication issues. *The Girl Most Likely* is a

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14 Ibid., 36.
post-happy ever after story that examines what can happen after an impulsive marriage. Plot-wise, the novel employs the essential elements of romance to question Rachel’s hasty marriage. The conclusion avoids committing her to a new formal relationship such as living together or marriage. The hopeful though subdued ending suggests that Rachel’s personal journey has been more important than securing new love. In this case the object of romance, as Philips has observed, is therefore not a “male erotic partner”, but “the heroine herself”.¹⁵

Like *The Girl Most Likely*, Catherine Jinks’ *Spinning Around* examines life after a happy ending. *Spinning Around* is premised on exploring life after a woman has obtained what is colloquially referred to as the “three M’s”: marriage, mortgage and minors. Protagonist Helen Muzzatti has a husband, career and two children as well as a part-time job. The initial flaws in society hinge on Helen’s suspicion that her husband Matthew may be having an affair. However the affair is part of a wider picture of Helen’s life, her status as a working mother and wife suggesting constant business and pressure to be organised and together. Juggling these aspects of life is represented as a daily challenge for Helen, who via the narrative reveals her fears she is not living up to expectation. Her inadequacies about motherhood and domesticity are reinforced by other women in her midst including her high-flying friend Miriam and Mandy “the whole food mother”.

The novel is structured in seven chapters, each representing one day in a “crazy, out-of-control week” (back cover). Following the suggestion that Matthew is having an affair in the first chapter, Helen reflects on the meeting and progression of their romantic relationship to marriage. The early stages of Helen and Matthew’s relationship is told retrospectively via first person narration as though Helen is “giving an account” of their history in the hope of finding clues for their current predicament. She reveals that they met at a bar in King Cross, “a classic case of opposites attracting” (18), him a “hairy”, “tattooed” bar tender from Newcastle and her “a North Shore girl from Killara” (18). She

likens herself to the "sleek blonde Anglos, with their small ears and delicate gold jewellery and pastel sportswear" at the local deli (18). Helen is on a hen’s night in Kings Cross when she starts chatting to Matthew. He asks for her phone number which she refuses to give. They bump into each other later and have a coffee together, where Helen learns that despite his efforts to hide it, Matthew takes six sugars in his coffee. He suspects his overuse of sugar will detrimentally impact his masculinity however Helen assures him "your secret’s safe with me" (22). Helen concedes to the reader that after they joke about his use of sugar, “I was hooked. I was landed” (23). As she explains, within a month, “we’d run through the entire, predictable cycle: dinner, movie, bed, breakfast, endless phone calls, picnics, weekends away, meet the parents, shared parties, expensive birthday presents” (21). After Matthew meets Helen’s parents she decides he is “The One” (29), telling the reader, “he did everything right” in listening to her mother talk about her garden and her father talk about his book collection (28-29). In particular, Helen notes, “When I heard him wondering aloud if my mother would approve of paisley prints, I realised suddenly that he was The One...Only a man with a truly lovely nature would have breezed through that party, ignoring snubs and finding things to admire” (29). They marry soon after, Helen telling the reader, “God, it was a beautiful wedding” (31). The only blight on the memory is her mother’s comment to her about being sure of Matthew’s level of “commitment” (32). Told retrospectively, this betrothal represents a happy ending before the current narrative. Helen’s narration provides the background that led to the current story as well as a reflection on signs of the impending doom.

After detailing the progression of Helen and Matthew’s relationship to betrothal, *Spinning Around* returns to its premise: the question over Matthew's fidelity. Doubts over fidelity and in turn the certainty of marriage, engages with wider discussions within chick lit about the viability of happy endings and "happy ever after". As Hunting (2012) has noted, chick texts “discursively
engage” with post-happily ever after. In *Spinning Around* despite presenting their relationship developing as a case of “opposites attract” to form a companionate relationship, the new piece of information creates a post-betrothal barrier for this couple to overcome. On top of Helen’s other responsibilities as a mother, friend and complaints officer at the Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Board, a potentially cheating husband is enough to push her to the brink of collapse. While she could just ask Matthew outright about the mystery woman, their lives are so busy that Helen struggles to find a suitable moment. In desperation, she hires a private detective to follow him. While the detective seems like a good idea, it creates another complication in Helen’s life. At one meeting for a progress report on Matthew’s behaviour, the detective kisses Helen’s hand and without saying anything, leaves their meeting (197). That evening Helen is desperately waiting for Matthew to arrive home so they can talk about what has really been happening. It is eventually revealed that Matthew has not been having an affair. The “girl with purple hair” is his daughter from a previous relationship. Matthew reveals that he thought Helen was having an affair after “running into” the detective (214). Matthew explains that he only recently discovered the daughter he had never known who he says is a “junkie” who “turned tricks” (216). He describes his reasons for not telling Helen that “Everything was so tough on you, and now this. A stepdaughter? A fuckin’ junkie? You didn’t deserve it” (original emphasis, 217). He admits that he thought Helen was “losin’ it” and wanted to protect her from another complication (217). Helen admits that she feels she is “falling apart” (228) however he tells her he thinks she is the one who “holds it all together” (original emphasis, 228). She asks him for “more help” particularly if he could “just put your own underpants in the laundry basket, without me asking...well, that would mean a lot” (229). Matthew smiles and agrees in response, leading Helen to inform the reader that it is “a happy ending” (229). This novel contains all the essential elements of romance, including a metaphorical re-betrothal, where the marriage is saved.

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16 Hunting (2012) explains that while *Sex and the City* is geared towards finding romance and love, *Cashmere Mafia* and *Lipstick Jungle* "can be understood as discursively engaging with the afterwards of “Happily Ever After” (192)."
The Girl Most Likely and Spinning Around include the elements of romance using confessional comedy. Both stories are post-happily ever after, The Girl Most Likely the aftermath of a quickie wedding heading for divorce and Spinning Around a fairly happy marriage thrown into disarray at the prospect of a cheating spouse. Both novels contain the essential romantic components however they also probe ideals and expectations of love and marriage including “happy ever after” and “the one”.

Complex Heroines and Unconventional Heroes

In this section, I examine the characters of The Girl Most Likely and Spinning Around. The heroines reflect complex contemporary identities as discussed by Genz (2010) and Riley (2008).17 Riley argues that young people deploy different identities depending on the context. This is reflected in chick lit, heroines exhibit different identities, including aspects of feminism and postfeminism, in varying contexts. Rachel Hill and Helen Muzzatti demonstrate this point. Both heroines are also countered by foil characters and complemented by heroes who defy the expectations usually associated with stereotypical romantic and chick heroes. I argue that the characters of these suburban novels engage with stereotypes associated with the romance novel, speaking back to concerns for women and men in a postfeminist age.

The Girl Most Likely’s Rachel is a heroine who moves between feminist, postfeminist and romantic identities. The novel’s opening scenes see Rachel ‘opting out’ of professional work to fulfil her romantic destiny. She gives up her “dream” job that she “would be mad to ever leave” (159) and her apartment to move to the United States to be with her ‘dream’ man, Troy, who she has just secretly married. The reader is positioned to think that although the prospect of a new country, man and life is attractive for Rachel, it is a naïve decision, not one that a mature, well-grounded woman would make. The reader thus questions Rachel’s actions including why, with her family in Brisbane, she is the

one to move and not Troy. Moreover, the reader is curious about why she leaves her career to marry someone she barely knows.

When reader’s first meet Rachel she appears down on her luck. Rachel’s initial situation is designed to engage the reader sympathetically. In an effort to assuage her feelings of distress and emptiness, Rachel engages in postfeminist expressions of identity. As Camille Nurka argues in “Postfeminist Autopsies”, postfeminism is defined by the search for agency in pleasure, sex(iness) and consumption. Judith Williamson in the “Politics of Consumption” suggests, “buying and owning in our society, offer a sense of control”. Control is exactly what Rachel seeks through a sequence of purchases she makes near the start of the novel. Moreover, she uses consumerism, her body and a one night stand to express her feelings at the same time that she wants to regain some control in her life. She explains to the reader:

I buy the entire series of Tai-Bo tapes and something called the Hairdini Magic Styling Wand. I dig out Patricia’s Bedazzler and shoot rhinestones all over five tea-towels, an apron, an old t-shirt and some tracksuit pants. I become addicted to Open Learning, stay up every night to watch Letterman and finally work out what Kenneth Copeland’s Hour of Power is all about. I sleep a lot and eat a lot. And I feel like crap. But I’m married crap so that at least raises me one notch above the type of poo that can’t find a husband. (11)

The ‘Tae-Bo’ tapes promise to modify and strengthen the body while the Hairdini promises to create amazingly sophisticated hairstyles. However, Rachel does not experience the transformative promises offered by the goods. Instead, her body evidences her loss of control over her spending and ultimately her life. After inviting her best friend Zoe over to her house, Rachel realises that:

I have answered the door in my Fido Dido ensemble, complete with sheepskin slippers. And there’s a distinct possibility that the corners of my mouth are caked in baked bean stains. (13)

In this instance, Rachel’s appearance is opposite to the sexy postfeminist body.

18 Nurka, "Postfeminist Autopsies."
In another example, Rachel attends a friend’s engagement party where she decides she needs “a drink or two to survive the evening. Survive my old uni crowd. The crowd who thinks I’m still working on the magazine. Still with Troy” (168). Although Zoe warns Rachel about “peaking too early” (169) with her drinking, Rachel ends up drunkenly telling people about her split with Troy and that she is writing her first novel (170). She goes from being the “’I-love-youse-all’ life of the party” to the ‘nobody-loves-me/my-life’s-screwed’ depressed drunk” (171) crying behind the BBQ. Jason, the party host’s seventeen year old younger brother finds her there and the reader is told they “pash” (172). The next day, Rachel is mortified to learn from the “cobblers pegs”21 in her underwear that she has had sex with Jason. Rachel wonders what went wrong and “self-blames”. According to McRobbie (2004b), women who internalise failure and “self-blame” often do so without considering the role of inequitable social structures in their lives. In Rachel’s case, marriage has disproportionately impacted her compared to Troy. She is the one who has sacrificed her career and independence for the relationship. She has also indulged in postfeminist impulses associated with consumption, the body and sexual behaviour that have failed to make her feel better. In the early stages of the novel, the reader is positioned to see that Rachel has opted out of independent professional life and seemingly paid the price in her loss of identity.

Through the narrative, Rachel experiences a number of transformative experiences that impact her in positive ways. Firstly, in the absence of her professional career she finds a modest job nannying a six year old child named Alex. Rachel has a healthy respect for Alex who can “burp hello...read newspaper headlines backwards and...skip really, really fast” (19). Rachel knows that one week into the nannying, Alex “tolerates my presence and treats me with suspicion and I do my best to remember that she likes the chocolate not apple & cinnamon Poptarts” (20). What started as a job for Rachel becomes a mutually beneficial intergenerational friendship.22 Rachel steps into a quasi-

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21 Cobblers pegs are a type of weed found in tropical environments such as Queensland.

22 In many chick lit novels, protagonists are surrounded by women of the same generation. Intergenerational relationships, including generations above or below that of the heroine, are less common.
mother role by taking Alex to school in her mother’s absence, while Alex provides an escape from her worry about Troy and the divorce. Because of this mutuality, their relationship exemplifies caring for oneself through and via the care of another. With Alex, Rachel shows the reader that she is capable and competent in contrast to the depressed, impulsive Rachel of her solitary monologues. Eventually Rachel realises that, “getting close to Alex was never one of my goals and yet it’s given me more satisfaction and taught me more than anything else that was on that decade-old list [of goals to achieve before age twenty-eight]” (280). Rachel’s relationship with Alex therefore influences her understanding and recalibration of success.

Rachel also finds value in inspiring and assisting other women to contribute to their local communities. For example, Rachel attends a briefing for a beauty pageant that her mother has entered her in. Although being married makes Rachel ineligible for the competition, she is desperate for money and determined to de-register to claim the refunded entrance fee. At the “entrant get together” (33), she is asked to “give the girls some tips on getting publicity” (69) for their fundraising endeavours since all they have is an “archaic” and “badly written” (70) booklet. Rachel speaks to the entrants for an hour, fielding their questions. She explains to the reader that many of the entrants are “thin” and “look like they’ve gone to deportment classes” but are by no means “bimbos” (71). Moreover, most of the women have a personal connection to the charities they fundraise for. Subsequently she admits to the reader, “well it makes you want to get involved. Pitch in. Because that kind of stuff seems important. More important than me sitting on my arse watching telly” (72). Alongside her modified view of the competition and the entrants, she reflects on giving the group tips on publicity:

I gotta admit that I’m feeling pretty good up here. With an audience. I’d forgotten what this feels like—running something. Organising people. Feeling knowledgeable and on top of things. Feeling useful. (72)

See Foucault (2005) for a more detailed exposition about the “care of the self”.

23 See Foucault (2005) for a more detailed exposition about the “care of the self”.
Through sharing knowledge Rachel finds alternative outlets for her anxiety and self-doubt. In her experience of helping other women, her stereotypical view of beauty queens is challenged.

Like Rachel, Helen Muzzatti of *Spinning Around* is a complex heroine. Through flashbacks readers see her in two main ways, firstly before marriage and motherhood and then in the midst of marriage and motherhood on the verge of a potential separation. Helen measures her life in high school reunions, saying:

I remember the ten-year reunion. At least, I remember me at the ten-year reunion. I had twenty thousand dollars in the bank, a great figure, a trendy haircut, an impressive and secure job, fantastic clothes and a phenomenally sexy boyfriend.

Now I’m overweight, in debt, dowdy and unshaven. My hair looks awful. I’ve got minced hands, a part-time job that I can’t enjoy because I feel too guilty about it, and a husband who seems to be cheating on me. (original emphasis, 4)

This description offers a subtle critique of pre- and post-marriage life for women. Before marriage and motherhood, Helen had independence, financial security, pride in her appearance and secure employment thereby resembling the postfeminist single woman of other chick lit novels. The narrative however constructs her post-marriage persona as one who has suffered rather than benefitted.

Helen is also shown to have different abilities and confidence levels in different contexts. At home, she worries about her children and her ability to be a good mother. While work is “a breeze” and “a walk in the park” (96):

Once upon a time I would become quite stressed when six different things landed on my desk in the space of ten minutes. Now I take it in my stride, because after all, the people who put them there aren’t tugging at my skirt, bashing their files on the desk or threatening to wee all over the carpet...Nowadays, I’m in the habit of working very, very quickly. I’m used to grabbing a spare ten minutes here, a spare half an hour there, to complete tax returns, write letters, or balance chequebooks. I’m not used to having hours and house of uninterrupted time to do anything. (original emphasis, 96)

She describes herself as something of a “spy” who has escaped from the “maternal wilderness” of the suburbs to the city (95). Helen is therefore
constructed as a complex character with different strengths and weaknesses in different contexts and has changed considerably through time. This view of Helen supports my argument that chick heroines are rarely static, rather heroines are constructed as having multiple identities that grow and change.

Foil characters are used to emphasise and diminish particular characteristics of Rachel and Helen. Chick lit has its share of characters that are friends of the protagonist and thereby often reinforce the heroine’s behaviours and values. As well, love rivals often appear and are constructed as opposites of the heroine. *The Girl Most Likely*’s Rachel compares herself to the Miss Brisbane entrants in particular who she describes as “X-rays with lipstick” (67). When she gives her publicity tips presentation to the group, she finds her views challenged:

Are they thin? Sure. Do they all look like they’ve gone to deportment classes? Yep. But are they bimbos? Nowhere near it. Instead, they ask intelligent, thoughtful questions. It becomes pretty clear that the majority of girls who have entered the Miss Brisbane Awards are doing so for reasons other than tiaras and cloaks. (71)

Rachel’s involvement in the Miss Brisbane Awards offers her the opportunity to share her knowledge, become engaged with community development and fundraising for worthy communities. In *Spinning Around*, Helen’s insecurities are fed partly by her comparisons to other women including Miriam her friend who manages to match her bags and shoes, as well as a fellow parent known as “Mandy the whole food mother”. Mandy is constructed as an ideal mother type in that she parents three children with no television and grows her own vegetables (7-8).

*Spinning Around* and *The Girl Most Likely* have two unconventional heroes. A number of chick lit authors have faithfully reproduced the Darcy-esque hero of romance: tall, dark, handsome and rich. Others, as Harzewski notes, represent men as one-dimensional, in the “background” or “shadow figures”, some with issues such as violent tendencies or sex-related problems.²⁴ Harzewski attributes the sidelining of heroes to the narrative point of view, one that focuses on the heroine and her inner world. In *Spinning Around* and *The Girl

²⁴Harzewski, *Chick Lit and Postfeminism*, 33-34.
Most Likely, the central male characters, Matthew Muzzatti and Matthew Harding respectively challenge conventional representations of the chick hero. Matthew Muzzatti, Helen’s husband is described pre-marriage and post-marriage. Pre-marriage he is constructed against the expectations of Helen and her parents where he “was a tattooed, dope-smoking, shaggy-haired musician from Newcastle” (18). Matthew and Helen meet when he is bar-tending in Kings Cross. Originally, Helen avoided Matthew’s advances, assuming “he probably scattered his telephone number about like grass seed” (21). However she discovers his “rather aggressive appearance was totally misleading” (20), in particular “the tatts, and the missing tooth, and the easy familiarity with King’s Cross slang” (20). He wore “black jeans and T-shirts” but only because he “couldn’t be bothered washing his clothes much, and discovered that stains aren’t so obvious on black” (24). The reader is positioned to imagine Matthew as something of a boganish hero. When they marry he works as a sound engineer at the ABC, where “the pay wasn’t exactly stunning, but the benefits were good” (31). This initial sketching of Matthew suggests that in no way is Helen “marrying up”; he is neither rich nor conventionally good looking. Rather, she realises that his “generosity of spirit” and “truly lovely nature” were the most important indicators of him being “The One” (29). Post-marriage, when Helen begins to suspect his infidelity, some of his “annoying habits” amplify: his penchant for impulse buying of CDs they cannot afford, his drum kit that “fills up vast tracts of our sunroom” (original emphasis, 39) and his “house-keeping deficiencies”. In Spinning Around, readers find an unconventional hero who challenges the dominance of phallicly intense heroes in the wider romance genre. In The Girl Most Likely Matthew Harding is also an unconventional hero in looks, work and background. When they first meet, Rachel describes him as just “some ordinary guy” (82) in his twenties. Gradually it is revealed that he is a student studying his honours degree, he plays the piano and is the full-time carer for his dementia ridden mother. As a student he is therefore a low-income earner. While for romance heroines, wealth and physical attraction based on good looks can fuel the developing relationship, The Girl Most Likely uses a mutual love of popular culture as the basis for their attraction. Character-wise,
Spinning Around and The Girl Most Likely construct complex heroines and unconventional heroes for their suburban stories.

Success and ‘Having It All’
In this section, I critically analyse The Girl Most Likely and Spinning Around’s engagement with notions of “having it all” and “success”. “Having it all” became the catchcry of a generation of women who benefited from the women’s movement of the 1960s and 70s. Helen Gurley Brown became famous by writing the bestselling Sex and the Single Girl (first published in 1962) and working as editor in chief of Cosmopolitan. In the 1980s she wrote another text aimed at even the humblest ‘mouseburger’. Brown’s Having it All (1983) offered methods for marital and work success. The term “having it all” became and continues to describe the mutual aims of many Western women: to have a good marriage, children and career. One of the aims of fiction, especially feminist fiction, is to consider and reconsider such ideals and aims. In The Girl Most Likely, Rachel demonstrates that ‘having it all’ does not necessarily mean having a high-powered job and husband. For her it is the process of aspiring to, achieving and losing success then developing new dreams and ambitions. For Helen Muzzatti, she has marriage, motherhood and a part-time career; yet would by no means describe it as perfect. This section explores the themes of these novels in relation to success and having it all, particularly their suggestions that success in associated with individual identity, self-esteem, satisfying work and someone to share your interests with.

In both novels there is an interplay between notions of success and notions of failure. Rachel used to be “the girl most likely to succeed”; her current circumstances in the narrative present suggest she has failed. Like her counterpart in Bridget Jones, aspirations towards perfection haunt Rachel Hill. Similarly to Bridget Jones’s Diary, Rachel’s narrative is full of symbols and references to perfection and success constructed through North American popular culture including television shows, music and magazines. According to

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Angela McRobbie, young women are encouraged to have a “plan”, self-govern and “self-monitor”\textsuperscript{26} or enact “female individualisation”.\textsuperscript{27} McRobbie explains that her use of the term “female individualisation” emerges from sociological debates surrounding the self in “late or second modernity”. This period is where, “young women are […] now ‘dis-embedded’ from communities where gender roles were fixed. And as the old structures of social class fade away, and lose their grip…individually are increasingly called upon to invent their own structures”.\textsuperscript{28} In Rachel’s case, she grew up in a society that told her she was “likely to succeed” and so she formulated a list of things to achieve before turning twenty-eight. She established her career and decided to marry a man, who she thought was “the one”. She chose to give up her job, apartment and family to move to the United States to be with him. Yet, when the success she aimed for does not eventuate, she blames herself. Sparrow unravels Rachel’s success, revealing the difficulty women face maintaining the outward appearance of success through different life events such as marriage and divorce.

Helen Muzzatti in \textit{Spinning Around} regards herself as successful in work but bordering on being a failure as a mother and wife. As I mentioned earlier, Helen’s past, present and future are interwoven in this novel. Before marriage, she appeared to have all the hallmarks of feminine and feminist success: she looked good, had a good career and money in the bank. Post-marriage she has had to sacrifice some of that success to have children. When she and Matthew finally resolve the mystery of the “girl with purple hair”, Helen admits that she felt scared asking Matthew whether he was having an affair in case he just walked out on her (228). She then says, “I don’t know what’s happened to me” (228) to which he tells her “Are you kidding? Hel, you’re the one who \textit{holds} it together” (original emphasis, 228). She has shown the reader that more honesty in their relationship is needed as well as more assistance with the children and running the household.

\textsuperscript{26}McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture,” 260.
\textsuperscript{27}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{28}Ibid.
Children do not form part of Rachel's vision of success. In a way, her decision to not have children is one afforded by the gains of the contemporary women's movement that legalised contraception and abortion, meaning women could “choose”. Elyce Ray Helford (1999) argues that young women have been:

Encouraged by the media and dominant threads of American history to value individualism and downplay communal efforts and activism, to see the American Dream as entirely attainable to those who just work hard enough.²⁹

The mentality that the ‘dream’ is accessible to those who “work hard enough” clearly ignores factors such as class, ethnicity and sexuality and it ignores individual abilities, personalities, life circumstances and many other factors. Sparrow explores the limitations of pursuing such a dream through Rachel’s transition from wanting and having ‘the dream’ to understanding better who she is including finding her own role and place within her community. Through flashbacks, while cleaning her childhood bedroom Rachel reveals her past and traces her construction of ‘success’. References to popular culture, including gender specific toys, contextualise Rachel’s childhood in the 1980s. The young Rachel rejected suggestions of motherhood but embraced university, career and marriage. She says:

The truth is that when other girls [...] were playing with Baby Alive or Barbie, I was writing plays or playing Frogger on the Atari or trying to catch bees with an old tea-towel or building cheese mazes for local skinks [...] I was doing a million things, none of which involved nappies or formula or little pink plastic shoes. And the more time I've spent with my friends who have children, the more I thought they were a pain...Babies just seemed like a hassle. All the crying...tears...poo. I've never really been big on kids. (18-19)

References to ‘Baby Alive’ and ‘Barbie’ symbolise a femininity associated with mothering and caring. In contrast to playing with dolls and “pink plastic shoes”, Rachel is depicted as something of a tomboy: active and intelligent, playing with boy’s toys. Later Rachel embraces markers of “female success”³⁰ including going to university and developing a career to become “magazine Features Editor,

³⁰ McRobbie, “Post-Feminism and Popular Culture.”
honours graduate, golden girl” (157). In her career, Rachel represents the promise of feminism to provide women with goals and ambitions that can be realised through social changes that allow women to pursue education, careers and independence.

For Rachel and Helen, marriage appears to be the life event that has upset their trajectory towards success and having it all. For example, Rachel’s marriage to Troy is presented as a choice she has flippantly made. She admits that she treated marriage as something of a game where she says, “[I] said my part of the script. With my fingers crossed behind my back. As if that would prove that I didn’t mean it—that this was all just a game” (159). Through a flashback, Rachel reveals with regret, the tackiness of her wedding which included their vacation to Las Vegas and seeking out an Elvis impersonator to officiate over the ceremony as a joke. Rachel confesses to the reader:

I was never a bride. I got married in shorts and a T-shirt and I never wore a wedding ring and I never had a bridesmaid and I never had a gift registry or a honeymoon or wedding presents. And now I’m about to get divorced. And I never got to be the bride to begin with. I get the black mark against my name but I never got the fun stuff. The presents, the attention, the dress. The bit where you got to tell people you were married. (148)

This reflection reveals Rachel’s expectation of marriage typified by the consumer symbols such as the ring, dress, display and community awareness of the marriage. For Rachel, these are symbols within her society of a real marriage in which people commit to each other. At this time, Rachel has not completed her quest; she has not been honest with herself and others about her predicament. As Rachel reflects on her life, she understands her role in the ‘failure’ of the marriage that was built on the perceived expectations of others:

I got married because I thought I loved Troy [...] his working visa in Australia had expired and the only way [we] could be in the same city was if we were married. Our relationship had started to fray at the edges. But, you see, I had already told everyone that he was ‘it’. This was ‘the guy’, ‘the one’. I wanted to be married. Twenty-seven seemed like a good age to me to tie the knot. And Troy was exactly the type of guy I saw myself being married to [...] And I suppose that I wasn’t prepared to have a failed relationship to my name. I was Rachel Hill, magazine Features Editor, honours graduate, golden girl. I could fix anything. So I guess that I thought marriage was the answer. (157)
In this statement, the reader learns that Rachel is now overcoming the barriers to romance (in its fullest sense). Despite her knowing the relationship was “fraying”, she felt marriage was “the answer”. She says:

Like the last coloured wedge in Trivial Pursuit, I thought marriage was the one piece I didn’t have and that once I slotted it in with the others, had the box set, the champagne would pop and the bells would ring and happiness would arrive in the mail alongside my credit card bill. (258)

The failure of Rachel’s dream offers new opportunities, trajectories and experiences in her life such as being Alex’s nanny, meeting Matthew and being involved with the Miss Brisbane Awards. Ultimately, after leaving her dream job, Rachel’s new experiences and appreciations are different to her professional accomplishments.

Marriage for Helen Muzzatti also demarcates a time when she regarded herself as successful and independent and the narrative present where she feels worn out, stressed and a failure at everything but her job. While marriage is questioned in this novel when Matthew is suspected of having an affair, it is also redeemed when Helen realises that miscommunication was the main problem. Her marriage to Matthew is presented as giving her strength and helping her through difficult situations such as her high school reunion, the concluding event of the novel. There Helen encounters the stories of success and failure of her classmates. In conversation with them, she says she was “absolutely astonished...at what they had to say” (241) as they reflected on their changed bodies after having children, the horrors of IVF, miscarriages, difficulties experienced in their careers, postnatal depression and catering to a husband’s self-esteem. Helen realises that, “They felt that they had achieved something...What’s more, they felt I had achieved something” (original emphasis, 243). She lists all of the aspects of her life that she feels she has achieved and concludes:

When I stop and reflect on my life as a whole, it occurs to me that I’ve pretty much got where I wanted to go. I guess I’ve just lost sight of the forest for the trees, on occasion [...]. All things considered, I’m not such a hopeless, disorganised slob after all. (243)
Through her reflection of the past, present and future trajectory of her marriage, Helen recalibrates her understanding of her life and her achievements within it.

Through the developing relationships with others, Rachel Hill also comes to a new understanding of success and having it all. Rachel winds up nannying for Alex, playing the movie theme song on the piano, helping with the Miss Brisbane Awards and being honest with her parents and Matthew. Together these provide alternative modes of self-definition and offer new ways of cultivating a sense of purpose and contentment. Certainly, she may not have her glamorous, well-paid career but, as she reflects:

> Every time I won an award or notched up some great achievement I thought I was securing my place at the top of the line. Where the amazing people are. I was told I could do anything. Be anyone. Have it all. But now that I’m here, loitering around the finish line, I wish someone had defined exactly what ‘all’ was... Why does the definition of ‘having it all’ revolve around things you acquire, rather than the way you feel about yourself?

There’s no mention of the joy to be found in eating cupcakes with a six-year-old. Or tending to a garden and coaxing an orchid into bloom. Or writing truly bad erotic fiction that you think is a masterpiece. (258)

She goes on to realise that perfection exists in short moments. To aspire to have constant perfection or success is unrealistic.

In conclusion, *Spinning Around* and *The Girl Most Likely* challenge myths of success and having it all. Helen’s narrative describes herself before and after her marriage. She regards herself as having lost the professional success and independence she had before she married and had children. Moreover, she feels that her attempts to be a good wife, mother and worker are doomed to failure. Rachel expresses the history of her feelings around success including the childhood pressures she internalised. Although she resisted motherhood, she felt pressure to look for success in her job and marriage. When both fail, her redefinition relies on more simple roles that give her meaning and help her transcend the failure. In the face of an increasingly individualistic society,
Rachel's redefinition relies on her valuing her relationships with those around her.

**Conclusion**

*The Girl Most Likely* and *Spinning Around* ultimately challenge narrow conceptions of success and having it all. Both employ the elements of romance to structure the stories of their heroines. However, notions of love and marriage that emerge in each novel appear to be in conflict with the romance plot at different times. This undulating harmony and disharmony exemplifies some of the conflict and contradiction of postfeminist texts. The novels share a post-happily ever after premise that sees the heroines dealing with the afterwards of marriage. Rachel Hill and Helen Muzzatti are both constructed as complex heroines. Introspective narratives reflect on the past, present and future events and aspirations of each heroine, particularly their romantic relationships and their understandings of success and having it all. Rachel redefines success and having it all through her job as a nanny and her involvement with the Miss Brisbane Awards. Helen, through her interactions with others, comes to value her life, despite its imperfections. Both women are complemented by unconventional hero types who are modest, nice guys rather than the traditional romance hero who Dubino argues is “always older, taller and richer than the heroine”.31 These novels emphasise full, honest relationships and “being” and “doing” over “having”.32 Overall, *Spinning Around* and *The Girl Most Likely* attempt to “fling the inkpot” at stereotypical representations of success and having it all.

The next chapter examines romance and feminism in two novels by the so-called queen of rural romance, Rachael Treasure, her first novel *Jillaroo* (2002) and its sequel, *The Farmer's Wife* (2013). I argue that the first novel faithfully reproduces the elements of romance. The sequel however undoes the romantic certainty of the first novel, probing a very dark “happily ever after” and the

32 Erich Fromm (1979) explores the notion of to "have or to be" arguing that 'being' is more rewarding than 'having'.

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tumultuous breakdown of a once happy relationship. The novels’ heroine Rebecca Saunders is a complex character who enacts a range of identities from feminist, to a performed postfeminist, to a pre-feminist farmer’s wife. The novels offer a powerful representation of rural gender issues, while maintaining the structural elements of romance.
Chapter Eight: Gender Inequality and Rural Romance in Rachael Treasure’s Jillaroo and The Farmer’s Wife

They blamed me, but I didn’t want her to come; [the bush] was no place for a woman.

Henry Lawson

[Rural Romance] is [a] real genre now. It has come of age.

Penguin Books Australia Publisher Ali Watts

Introduction

Rachael Treasure’s first five novels: Jillaroo (2002), The Stockman (2004), The Rouseabout (2008), The Cattleman’s Daughter (2009) and The Farmer’s Wife (2013) have pioneered the writing of mainstream contemporary rural chick romances (also affectionately known as ‘chook lit’) in Australia. Treasure is the most popular local rural romance writer; reportedly her first three novels have sold more than 260,000 copies. Her popularity can be attributed in part to her passion for her subject and her vast experience of rural communities. Working as a rural journalist in Tasmania, Victoria and Queensland for ABC

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1 In her study of national character in relation to women and the Australian bush, Kay Schaffer examines “no place for a woman” as a ‘common refrain’ reflecting the perceived incompatibility of women with rural life in a short story written by acclaimed Australian poet Henry Lawson from his collection Short Stories and Sketches: 1888-1922. For a discussion of women’s representation in relation to the bush see Chapter Three of Schaffer’s (1989) text.


3 Treasure has also written a screen play Albert’s Chook Tractor for SBS TV, a non-fiction e-book about dog training called Dog Speak and a collection of short stories, The Girl and Ghost-Grey Mare (2011). She was awarded the title of Tasmanian Rural Woman of the Year in December 2006 which included a $10,000 bursary that she used to write Dog Speak and create a DVD. She has also published Fifty Bales of Hay, a collection of rural erotica inspired by the bestselling Fifty Shades of Gray novels. See Janette Brennan, “A Woman of Many Talents,” Tas Regions, March 2007.


5 Juliet Flesch (2004) in From Australia with Love: A History of Modern Australian Popular Romance Novels, discusses a number of rural romances by Lucy Walker published during the 1950s and 1960s featuring women transgressing the gender expectations of the day. They include women who run large properties or work as rouseabouts, shearers and even loggers.

Radio and The Rural Press taught Treasure much about the writing process. In a 2009 interview with Sun Herald’s Antony Lawes, Treasure stated, “I wanted to be an author who had studied the craft, lived that life where you’re expected to perform daily with words and write to deadlines and meet them”. Alongside building her abilities with wordcraft, Treasure described how journalism enabled her to meet farmers and hear their experiences of life on the land. Such encounters inspired her to write stories that represent important rural issues. Treasure’s desire to use storytelling to raise awareness about rural issues has been heightened by her life experiences. These experiences appear to have contributed to her evocative depictions of life in country Australia thereby bringing a certain authenticity to her novels, an authenticity that has become a key characteristic of the ‘chook lit’ genre, as noted by journalist Caroline Baum. Treasure combines romance narratives with gutsy heroines, sweeping landscapes, colourful characters and important contemporary rural issues. As one book reviewer noted, so engaging are novels like Jillaroo, “By the end of them you yearn for a ute, a pair of boots and wide open spaces”.

Treasure’s employment of the rural setting marks a further shift away from the urban centred novels of much of the chick genre. Deborah Philips discusses British “aga-saga” novels and rural romances from the 1990s. She notes in these novels, the prevalence of “middle class and middle aged” heroines and the “foregrounding of domestic life and [...] a rural setting”. As Philips implies, such novels offer a somewhat romanticised representation of country life where heroines long to “transform herself” by disrupting their everyday life

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8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
11 Treasure is a fifth generation rural Tasmanian (Darby 2009). She has a degree in rural business from the Orange College in New South Wales and has worked as a jillaroo. Currently, she lives on a property in Tasmania with her children, four dogs and four horses (Baum 2011).
12 Ibid.
13 See for example Prestt (2011) and Ellwood (2009).
either by briefly leaving a marriage and children, or just relocating themselves physically.¹⁶

Australian rural romances differ vastly from the “aga-saga” and the British rural romance. The application of the term ‘rural’ is somewhat different when applied to the Australian context. According to Graeme Davison, the ‘rural’, the focus of Treasure's novels, occurs in the “intermediate place” between city and “bush”.¹⁷ Unlike the city or suburbs, the rural has specific “socio-demographic characteristics” including the number of people who live in an area or town, the types of “economic activity” or the ways that the land is used for “agricultural, pastoral or other primary industries”.¹⁸ These socio-demographic characteristics sit alongside what Davison terms, “socio-cultural characteristics”, including the particular kinds of “social relationships and values”.¹⁹ Rural areas tend to have low population density; the primary activities generally relate to farming and communities tend to be built around family relationships.

While scholars note that the uses and understandings of the term ‘rural’ are highly contested, it is a helpful way to describe Treasure’s novels, particularly Jillaroo and The Farmer’s Wife, the focus of this chapter.²⁰ In both novels, the ‘rural’ means remote living on cattle stations or crop farms away from cities and in some cases, away from towns. The word ‘rural’ signifies some of the daily realities faced in the context. In Australia, families own and run ninety percent of farm enterprises while an increasing number of farms are managed by local and foreign owned corporations and agribusinesses.²¹ Whether family or corporation run, some rural enterprises function more efficiently than others.

¹⁶Ibid., 98.
¹⁷Graeme Davison, "Rural Sustainability in Historical Perspective," in Sustainability and Change in Rural Australia, ed. Jacqui Dibden and Chris Cocklin (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2005), 40.
¹⁸Alan Black, "Rural Communities and Sustainability," in Sustainability and Change in Rural Australia, ed. Chris Cocklin and Jacqui Dibden (Sydney, Australia: University of New South Wales Press, 2005), 22.
¹⁹Ibid.
²⁰Ibid., 22-24.
Surviving and living a productive life on the land is largely related to a range of challenges including gender inequality, the increasing incidence of male suicide, environmental degradation due to the clearing of natural vegetation, salinity and overuse of pesticides and chemicals, climate change including droughts and floods, and financial pressures such as debt and bank repossession. Through narrative conventions, particularly plot, character and theme, *Jillaroo* and its sequel *The Farmer's Wife*, combine romance fiction with a number of critical rural issues.\(^{22}\)

This chapter argues that Treasure’s novels *Jillaroo* and its sequel *The Farmer's Wife* together exemplify feminist romance, albeit from slightly different perspectives. *Jillaroo* shows the developing relationship between its heroine Rebecca Saunders and her love interest Charlie Lewis. *The Farmer’s Wife* however is a post-happily ever after story that hinges on the disintegration of a once happy, companionate love. *Jillaroo* includes all of Regis’s romantic elements; however, *The Farmer’s Wife*, although exploring romantic possibilities for its heroine after the dissolution of her marriage, defers from a betrothal in the sense of Regis’s vital element and therefore from a strictly romantic ending. Thus, narrative-wise both novels engage with romance, yet read as two parts of a longer story, I argue that they only partially commit to the certainty of the companionate union of a hero and heroine. In terms of feminism, both novels engage with gender issues, particularly gender inequality, in rural Australia. *Jillaroo*, particularly via the construction of its heroine, Rebecca Saunders, represents the structures that insure men retain power in a rural environment. *The Farmer’s Wife* is about Rebecca’s personal experience of wifedom and motherhood in what has become a dysfunctional relationship with Charlie Lewis. Both novels are encoded with a strong feminist ideology and construct a clear feminist reading position. I argue that *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* can be read as feminist romances because they demonstrate a political awareness of contemporary gender issues, enclosed within the familiar structure of romance. In particular, *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* use narrative strategies to challenge discursive practices that produce and

\(^{22}\)Ibid.: 1.
maintain hegemonic masculinity; both novels construct key female characters as active resisters of oppressive masculinity and portray the difficulty of male characters as they struggle to live up to stereotypical masculine subjectivities. Overall, *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* draw together romance, a rural setting and feminist critique of gender inequality to inspire readers, especially women, to challenge traditional gender roles. The novels therefore exemplify feminist romance that, like feminist genre fiction, as Cranny Francis asserts, “radical[ly] revises [...] conservative genre text[s]”.23

**So Much for Happily Ever After: Plotting Rural Romance**

This section examines the plots of *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* in terms of romance and feminism. *Jillaroo* is very much the quintessential rural romance. It sees its heroine on a personal quest to gain knowledge and experience to restore her beloved family farm alongside a romantic quest to find companionate love. Although *Jillaroo* ends with the certainty of companionate love, the premise of its sequel, *The Farmer’s Wife*, reminds readers that happy endings capture a moment where, as Regis suggests, a couple is “happy for now”. The book cover of *The Farmer’s Wife* states the premise: “She got her fairytale ending—but life had other plans...”. Published eleven years apart, *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* raise questions about feminist and romance plots. This section examines both plots and the meta-plot they create. *Jillaroo* examines the heroine’s navigation of the patriarchal context while *The Farmer’s Wife* represents her navigation of a toxic marriage and crumbling personal life. I argue that plot-wise, these novels offer examples of feminist romance.

Rural romances such as *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* faithfully reproduce romance while simultaneously questioning its very structure including the ‘happily ever after’. In *Jillaroo*, Rachael Treasure employs the traditional romance plot “to tell the modern version of rural stories”.24 Unlike traditional representations of rural Australia that tend to neglect women and their contribution, *Jillaroo* shows strong women in a contemporary setting

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instigating positive change for themselves, others (including animal stakeholders) and the environment.\textsuperscript{25} \textit{jillaroo} spans ten years in the life of its heroine Rebecca Saunders. In the first chapter, Rebecca expresses her wish to take over the running of the family farm, Water’s Meeting, from her father, mainly to fix the “mess” he has created. Patriarch Harry Saunders believes that woman’s place is as a wife, mother and off-farm worker, telling Rebecca:

\begin{quote}
No daughter of mine is going to make a so-called career out of farming. There’s no future in it...Your best bet is to go do a teaching or nursing course, then you can marry a nice farmer who isn’t up to his neck in debt or paying his way out of a bloody divorce. (Treasure 2002: 6-7)
\end{quote}

Society is defined and organised around power inequalities between men and women. Such inequalities are voiced through male characters like Harry who believe in patrilineal inheritance where farms are passed from father to son. Harry would rather “lose the lot” than see a woman in charge.\textsuperscript{26} Rebecca flees Water’s Meeting in search of knowledge and experience to one day return to assume control from Harry and restore the farm.

During her self-imposed exile, she meets the dark haired, green eyed larrikin, Charlie Lewis, at a B and S Ball while he’s performing a daring drunken stunt completely naked. Their attraction is instant: Rebecca notices his “tall, muscled frame” and “big wanger” (80), feeling a “tingle of desire run through her” as she thinks about his “damn good body” (80). Falling at her feet, he says, “I think I love you” (81) before his mates carry him away into the night. This meeting scene includes three of Regis’s romantic elements: the meeting, attraction and declaration. The combination of these elements in one scene marks the beginning of an intense relationship. The day after meeting at the ball, they share a fleeting “river kiss” before the narrative whisks them back to their normal lives where they are separated geographically.

\textsuperscript{25}See Liepins (1998).
\textsuperscript{26}Margaret Alston uses the term “patrilineal inheritance” to describe the practice of sons inheriting farms from their fathers, a practice she describes as “ensur[ing] that farms are owned and controlled by men.” Margaret Alston, \textit{Women: The Hidden Heart of Rural Australia} (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1995), 7.
Even when they overcome distance mid-way through the novel to enter into a proper romantic relationship, Rebecca's unfulfilled quest to restore the family farm remains. The narrative includes metaphorical deaths such as the death of Rebecca's parent's marriage. The farm is dying at the hands of Harry, with its slow creep of drought and neglect. Both metaphorical deaths presage the true point of ritual death, when romance seems most unlikely. When Rebecca's brother, the shy and insular Tom, commits suicide, readers start to wonder if Rebecca will ever complete her quest, be free from the barriers and be able to "choose her hero". Tom's death devastates the family, particularly Rebecca, while inspiring the recognitions that ultimately lead to the romantic resolution.

Upon Tom's death, Harry forces himself to change, swearing off alcohol and starting the long process of fixing the dilapidated farm. When he loses his arm in a machinery accident while fixing fences, Rebecca's chance to return home and fulfil her quest emerges; however, it briefly comes at the cost of her relationship with Charlie. Charlie refuses to stay with her on Water's Meeting, preferring to live a vast distance away with his own parents on their crop farm. At this point, Rebecca has chosen her quest and her farm over love because before she can be truly 'freed' she must restore her beloved farm.

In the absence of love, Rebecca sets to work completing her quest. Without Charlie, her father and brother Tom, she is forced to undertake much of the farm restoration singlehandedly, at times feeling the bank debt "would crush her" (439). She embarks on an ambitious project to reverse the farm's debt by producing quality organic beef and undertaking community building through a farm producer cooperative. Eventually, after restoring the farm's financial and ecological health, an exhausted Rebecca admits she needs help and allows her rural advisor to advertise for a cropping manager. Unhappy living with his parents, Charlie applies in response to the ad and is later revealed as the successful candidate. At last, Rebecca has fulfilled her quest to restore the farm and is now in a position where she can "choose" love. Rebecca and Charlie are freed to live in companionate love on Water's Meeting, now "their place" (468). The ending is similar to other romances, as Cranny-Francis notes, that offer "a utopian projection which expresses a critical evaluation of the contemporary
patriarchal order”.27 With Charlie securing the job, he and Rebecca equally share the farm’s responsibility, work and risk. However, the hermetic seal of this “utopian” ending is broken by the sequel, The Farmer’s Wife.

The sequel begins some ten years after Jillaroo’s conclusion; marriage, two children, the death of her father and the demands of farm life have eroded Charlie and Rebecca’s supposed “utopian” relationship. At thirty-eight years of age, the once vibrant Rebecca now has “deep worry lines on her forehead”, her blonde hair is now “dry and brittle on the ends” and she has “bags of puffy skin” under her eyes (3-4). She is also “always mad” and “always sad” (10). Charlie, the once “sun-kissed god” (6), has thinning hair and a “rotund belly” (11) from years of unhealthy food, soft drinks and abundant beer. Society is “flawed” and “superannuated” in that Rebecca, has been boxed into stereotypical roles as farm wife and mother. While her relationship and marriage to Charlie started off ‘equally’, motherhood has forced Rebecca to withdraw from managing the farm to stay at home because, as Charlie tells her, “[s]omeone’s gotta do the house stuff” (10). Rebecca has also suffered untreated postnatal depression. The remote location of the farm also means that it is difficult to obtain support and help. Even though her father has died, readers see that men still control Rebecca’s life. Charlie, like Harry before him, has mismanaged the farm to the verge of environmental and financial catastrophe. What is most destructive and flawed in this updated society is Charlie and Rebecca’s relationship.

In The Farmer’s Wife Charlie is now cheating on Rebecca and treats her with contempt and violence. Rebecca still hopes that her relationship with him is salvageable until she discovers his infidelity. She confronts him and tells him to leave, in the process revealing to him that she is pregnant. Charlie does not believe that the child is his and they fight. In this scene, Charlie’s transition from hero to villain is confirmed: he attempts to rape Rebecca then violently slams her into the kitchen cupboards before punching her in the face. Moreover, after he has fled the farm, Rebecca discovers Charlie’s other brutalities: he has shot her much-loved elderly dog Stripes and “butchered” her horses (201). His

violence mirrors Harry’s behaviour in Jillaroo when he murders his dogs, not even stopping to bury their corpses. In playing out the last days of her relationship with Charlie, readers learn that Rebecca is also dealing with the loss of self that has resulted from marrying “a carbon copy” of her father (202). The end of her relationship with Charlie is a point of ritual death; the romance is gone, the marriage is dead and in a way, the Rebecca of Jillaroo, has metaphorically died too.

Amidst the chaos of her remaining months with Charlie, Rebecca meets a potential suitor, her new neighbour Sol Stanton. Their meeting occurs near the start of the novel, before much of the last awfulness of Rebecca’s relationship with Charlie. Sol stumbles upon Rebecca on the side of the road after her car has broken down. Their meeting is partly comical because Rebecca is returning from a “sex-toy” party wearing “tarty shoes and fishnets” (48). The narrative describes Sol as “classically handsome” and “like a mysterious traveller you’d find on a European train platform in the 1930s” (47). Rebecca finds him “not dissimilar in aloofness and grumpiness to Jane Austen’s Mr Darcy” (50). When he gives her a lift back to his property, Rivermont, she balks at what she sees as his “distasteful” and “excessive display of wealth” (50). As the narrative continues, readers learn that Sol is a piccolo player in an overseas orchestra with a voice like “chocolate” (50). Numerous barriers complicate the progression of Rebecca and Sol’s relationship. At first Rebecca believes Sol to be married to Yazzie, the woman who also lives at Rivermont. This first barrier soon falls when readers learn that Yazzie and Sol are siblings. The second and more difficult barrier is her marriage to Charlie. Until Rebecca can rid herself of Charlie permanently, there is no room for new love. The third barrier, once Charlie has left Water’s Meeting is the farm itself. With their marriage in tatters, Charlie and Rebecca become embroiled in a fight over who owns the property, which is eventually sold. The true point of ritual death occurs when the Water’s Meeting homestead burns down, metaphorically signifying the hopelessness of Rebecca’s situation. With no marriage or farm, Rebecca decides to go to the United States with her children to work on an environmental education project. As she is about to depart, Sol, who has been noticeably absent through the last
chapters of the novel, arrives and announces that his family's company has purchased Water’s Meeting away from the clutches of a mining company. Rebecca and Sol’s declaration of love soon follows. It is however unspoken to each other but told to the reader, the narrator revealing as they hug, “In that moment, she knew: she loved this man” (384). When they kiss “deeply”, the narrator notes that it too is “with love”. Sol intends to regenerate the land, using an innovative “grassland carbon sequestration” (385) method and build an environmentally friendly house. He tells her that she and her children will be “very welcome there” (386). At first Rebecca panics, because she now realises that she “adores” Sol. However, she knows that she must go to the United States. Sol is reassuring, not “dream[ing] of stopping her” (386) and emphasising that, “This is a long-term project...for both of us. And we shall see what happens between us, sí?” (386). This scene marks multiple recognitions; Rebecca and Sol are in love with each other, Water’s Meeting will be saved and regenerated and lastly, Rebecca’s future appears to be full of hope, particularly the hope of her American adventure and a blossoming relationship with Sol. Their betrothal is therefore multi-layered with layers beyond simply the pairing of two lovers. Certainly, there is the implicit suggestion of a partnership and union between Sol and Rebecca. However, there is also the prospect of Rebecca’s reunion with the land she loves in the future. Most importantly though, Rebecca has restored herself; she has started to recover from her relationship with Charlie and is again finding inner peace. In the sequel, while a loving relationship with Sol is important, the goal of the heroine is not to find a “male erotic partner”. Rather, the goal and object of romance is first and foremost “the heroine herself”.28

Read together, Jillaroo and The Farmer’s Wife, suggest much about the romance plot. Jillaroo exemplifies an ideal kind of romance where a heroine and hero meet, experience an intense attraction, face and overcome barriers that prevent them being together before embarking upon a happy union. The Farmer’s Wife however is not as certain in the betrothal because, while readers see that there is much potential for Rebecca and Sol to be together, Rebecca is about to embark on a journey to the United States and Sol is about to begin the

restoration of Water’s Meeting. Regis may describe *The Farmer’s Wife* as a near-miss romance in the sense that Sol and Rebecca, while linked and “in love”, are not and will not be physically together as the novel ends or in its immediate aftermath. Indeed, this sequel undoes the romance created in the first novel to “discursive[ly] engage with the afterwards of ‘Happily Ever After’”.\(^{29}\) Treasure’s *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* remind readers that the happy ending is a moment in time when the relationship appears solid and happy; yet, happy endings do not always mean “happily ever after”.

*Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* can be read as stories about Rebecca Saunders’ quest. In the first novel, Rebecca quests to gain the experience and knowledge to take over the family farm from her father and return it to its original glory. Alongside the romance plot, there is a feminist plot where Rebecca has to navigate the patriarchal context. In *Jillaroo*’s ending Rebecca finds love and companionship; she has also fulfilled her quest. She takes over the property from her father, heals the land and returns it to productivity and profit. In *The Farmer’s Wife* though, again Rebecca is disenfranchised. She has had to relinquish control of the farm to Charlie and her father after having children. Both men have “ploughed” and “fertilised”, again degrading the land and sending the farm to the brink of bankruptcy. Her toxic and violent relationship with Charlie adds another dimension to the awful situation. As in *Jillaroo*, Rebecca must again work to restore equilibrium and peace to her life; she must stand up to the new disenfranchisement, violence and her philandering husband. At the end of *The Farmer’s Wife* Rebecca’s betrothal to Sol is not certain; rather Rebecca gets herself back together by holding true to her beliefs and convictions.

In *Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition*, Gayle Greene emphasises the importance of challenging the romantic ending, one where “the love story allows women one end: her ‘end’ both in the sense of the ‘goal’ and ‘conclusion’ is a man”.\(^{30}\) In Rebecca’s case, certainly she is reunited with her

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\(^{29}\) Hunting, “Women Talk: Chick Lit TV and the Dialogues of Feminism,” 192.

man which is the romantic reading of the narrative; however, she has also
disrupted the patriarchal cycle of patrilineal succession, facilitated change in
her father from the violent patriarch to being a family and community minded
citizen and provided a space for Charlie to exist outside the patriarchal thinking
of his own family. Rebecca has therefore facilitated “transformation of closed,
‘vicious’ circles to liberatory cycles” which Gayle Greene argues is a
“transformation of the fixed structure of the past to open, processive forms that
accommodate change”.31

**Tough Women Undone**

Tough, healthy and alert, they can cook or sew, do fancy-work or farm-
work, dance, ride, tend cattle, keep a garden, break in a colt. They are the
stuff that a fine race is made of—these daughters of bushwomen.

Sue Kossew32

It was the start of the chick-lit era and you’d be reading about these girls
who worried about their nail polish and shoe shopping. It just didn’t
really speak to me.

Rachael Treasure33

In *The Feminist Bestseller*, Imelda Whelehan, drawing upon Erica Jong, argues
that blood and rage were common motifs in second wave feminist fiction
whereas in chick lit they are noticeably absent.34 *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife*
are light on blood but are certainly filled with moments of rage. In *Jillaroo* in
particular Rebecca vents anger and frustration towards her father Harry for his
brutality, incompetence and sexism. Her rage peaks after her brother Tom
commits suicide, her father has a machinery accident, the family farm is
devastated by drought and mismanagement and her lover Charlie abandons
her. Rebecca expresses her rage through wanton destruction, obliterating the
“massive pines” (399) that surround the Water’s Meeting farmhouse.

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31 Ibid., 16.
33 Lawes, ”Living National Treasure.”
34 On the final page of *The Feminist Bestseller*, Imelda Whelehan notes that while pregnancy and
pregnancy scares are common in chick lit, menstruation and the rage present in canonical
feminist novels remain largely absent. Whelehan, *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the
Single Girl to Sex and the City*, 219.
Afterwards, she manoeuvres a tractor to gather the dead trees for a “mass burning” (399). Her choice to fell then burn the trees suggests her intention to exorcise the darkness and ghosts encircling the farm. The next day, Rebecca wakes up to the “golden morning light” flooding through the homestead windows and restored view of the mountains (399).

*The Farmer’s Wife* also sees Rebecca rage at the impossible circumstances she finds herself in. After discovering Charlie’s affair and requesting he leave the farm, he beats and attempts to rape her, eventually fleeing in the wake of his own horrific behaviour. At first, stunned by Charlie’s brutality, Rebecca becomes fuelled by the realisation that she “would no longer be a farmer’s wife” (202). She seeks quick revenge on Charlie’s beloved new and expensive disc plough, which the narrator emphasises “represented everything that had hurt her and her land” (204). Rebecca rams it into a silage pit, burying it with a yell of “fuck you, arseholes!” (204). These scenes demonstrate Rebecca’s rage and power to destroy symbols of her oppression. If chick lit heroines have any rage at all, as Imelda Whelehan has noted, it tends to simmer under a veil of anxious self-deprecating laughter.35 Rebecca however, is not the stereotypical cosmopolitan or urban chick heroine. Her rage is expressed through radical, extreme action and expelled in the pursuit of change. Rebecca’s actions reflect the rage, if not the blood, of second wave feminist writing.

*Jillaroo’s* Rebecca Saunders’ is not a chick postfeminist heroine who longs to shop, date and display her body; she is a feminist heroine. Aspects of her characterisation are reminiscent of second wave feminist fiction, however her contemporary context and complex gender construction, ultimately make her an example of a (third wave) feminist heroine. She demonstrates Gayle Green’s assertion a novel can be termed “feminist”:

> For its analysis of gender as socially constructed and its sense that what has been constructed can be reconstructed—for its understandings that change is possible and that narrative can play a part in it.36

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35 Ibid.
Rebecca's characterisation challenges fixed binaries of sex and gender, challenging stereotypes associated with femininity and masculinity, particularly those associated with the rural context. Rebecca expresses her femininity, such as when she dresses up for special occasions. However, Rebecca subverts stereotypes associated with femininity, raging at the injustices around her and is tough in “body, action, attitude and authority”.37 The characteristics associated with toughness enable her negotiation of spaces usually reserved for men such as stockyards and cattle stations. Her fluid movement between particular gendered performances exemplifies masculinity and femininity as unfixed and not predetermined for men and women.

Rebecca challenges fixed gender binaries by performing femininity through her physical appearance, body and behaviour. Three examples demonstrate the doing and the undoing of feminine gendered performances. In jillaroo, in preparation for the B and S ball, Rebecca engages in an evening of feminine adornment including painting her nails and donning a “short red dress” (72). The narrator pre-empts all this by stating that, “Rebecca wasn’t the kind of girl who usually had time to paint her nails, or would even bother. But she had the feeling tonight would be special” (63). Even her male room mate Dave notices her effort, making fun of her nail polish, suggesting, “You’re keen to get a bit, judging by those nails...You planning on breaking the drought tonight?” (71). These markers of Rebecca's femininity polish are undercut and challenged by her need to complete her station chores including riding a four-wheel bike to kill a sheep and feed the offal to the pigs. The narrator reveals:

Bec's nails looked so out of place on the handlebars […] They reminded her of the cover of a Jackie Collins novel, not that she’d ever bothered to read one [preferring] kelpie training manuals and the Department of Agriculture’s guide to building better sheep yards. (67)

The narrator is dismissive of popular women's fiction, namely the bonkbuster, while reinforcing her difference to many other women through her interest in dog training manuals. Rebecca shows the fluidity of gender attributes as she

performs gender in stereotypical and non-stereotypical ways.\textsuperscript{38} The slippage between the ritualisation of beauty and the day to day reality of station life including death, blood, guts and dirt unsettles stereotypical gendered identity. In another example, when Rebecca appears in her short red dress, Dave wolf whistles (72). The wolf whistle suggests Rebecca’s attractiveness as a result of her transformation using beauty products and rituals. The narrative however undercuts her attractiveness to the male gaze by having Rebecca respond, “Cheers, buddy,” as she opens a can of beer to drink (72) a behaviour aligned to stereotypical Australian masculinity. Rebecca’s response, in words and behaviour destabilise her as an obedient conformer to stereotypical femininity.

In \textit{The Farmer’s Wife} readers meet a changed Rebecca, some years after marrying Charlie and having two children. At the start of the novel, Rebecca is on her way to a sex-toy party with her friend Gabs. At age thirty-eight, Rebecca fears she has become a “bitter old woman”, deeply troubled and depressed. Gabs however is something of Karlyn’s (1995) “unruly” woman an often voluptuous, boisterous character who uses humour to usurp male authority.\textsuperscript{39} Rebecca only discovers the party’s fancy dress component, much to her horror, when they arrive. Gabs produces a hastily assembled costume for Rebecca: “a sequined silver skirt trimmed with feathers, an orange boob tube, red high heels and a packet of fishnets” (17). While Rebecca changes her clothes, Gabs reveals her own sexy outfit of “black-and-red bustier, her white bosoms spilling up over the top of the lacy cups” mismatched with her “farmer’s singlet tan lines” (19). She tells Rebecca that her husband “goes nuts for me when I dress up” (19). In response, Rebecca mentions the lack of fun in her relationship with Charlie and the way her body has changed since motherhood. With her hairy legs and “flubbery stomach” (20), Rebecca expresses her worry that Charlie might not notice her looks anymore (20). This scene exemplifies the doing of gender, where the women with their bodily insecurities and post-baby bodies, “dress-up” and ultimately “reveal the artificiality of femininity as the “normal”


\textsuperscript{39} Kathleen Rowe, \textit{The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter} (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).
state of women”. Their party outfits appear to be excessively feminine in a somewhat theatrical way as they take sexiness in the form of skimpiness to its extreme. The combination of their attempt to embody a kind of drag with the perceived post-partum shortcomings of their bodies suggests a complex representation of gender norms and stereotypes. Rebecca and Gabs flaunt their bodies, despite their awareness of its shortcomings while also questioning the norms of ideal femininity that the body should be thin, beautiful and flaws should be hidden. Rather than suggesting that the clothes evidence a kind of gender performativity, the clothes in this scene and others in the two Treasure novels indicate that norms and stereotypes of femininity are being engaged with and thrown into confusion.

Rebecca’s gender performance challenges stereotypical understandings of what women can do. Moreover, she challenges the traditional limitations of the female body to take up as little space as possible. As Young (1990) argues, many women have tried to minimise the space taken up by the body to avoid overt objectification or other threats, such as the ultimate threat of “bodily invasion”, rape. In Jillaroo and The Farmer’s Wife Rebecca’s character challenges attempts to confine the female body at different moments in the narrative. In Jillaroo, Rebecca is largely constructed as a “tough” character. She counters the tendency to make the female body small and invisible by making her body active and seen. Rebecca is tough in body with “golden brown” (71) arms, shoulders with “lean muscles” (72) and “cracked”, dirt-encrusted skin. These features evidence her ability to undertake hard station work. She is tough in her actions and attitude, displaying “little or no fear, even in dangerous circumstances” such as when her father threatens her and her dogs, and when she is bullied at agricultural college. She exercises superior judgement as tough women do, when she decides to leave Water’s Meeting to prevent her father murdering her dogs and to accrue knowledge and experience vital to restoring

41 Iris Marion Young (1990) has noted that in everyday life, women’s bodies are encouraged to take up as little space as possible (155).
42 Ibid.
the farm. Rebecca has authority which Inness (drawing upon Sennett) describes
as “assurance, superior judgement, the ability to impose discipline, the capacity
to inspire fear”. Authority is integral when trying to inspire and lead others.
Rebecca develops her authority and superior judgement by learning about
farming, agriculture and natural husbandry methods. She demonstrates this
knowledge in action when she puts her highly trained cattle dogs to work on
the farm, at show-trials and in stockyards. With the help of her dogs and her
hard station work, she earns men’s respect and trust. Moreover, she enters
‘men’s’ spaces, usurping male authority because her dogs assist in working
quickly and efficiently. Subsequently, in Jillaroo Rebecca challenges limiting
stereotypes of what rural women can do and where they can go. She enters sites
such as livestock saleyards, pubs and farm organisations, sites that are usually
the domain of men. According to Alston and Campbell, these rural spaces are
where knowledge is constructed, particular truths “become privileged” and in
turn “ensur[es] that a male view of the world dominates”. Rebecca’s non-
stereotypical gender performances, designed to maximise the use of the body,
demonstrate that gender is not fixed and that the understanding of these sites
as domains of male hegemony, like the constraints binding the gendered body,
is a construction that can be resisted, challenged and changed.

In The Farmer’s Wife however, Rebecca has changed. In becoming the “farmer’s
wife” she has found herself interpellated into a traditional role of the
“garrisoned” rural woman. As Rebecca explains, when she married Charlie it
started as “a shared dream”, however:

Then the babies had come. And life had changed. She found herself
driving off to play group and doctors’ appointments and ladies’
fundraising lunches while the men punched sheep through yards, their
world obscured to her by dust (18).

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44 Sennett as quoted in Inness, Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular
Culture, 26.
45 See O’Mahony (2014) for a more expansive analysis of the representation of human-dog
relationships in Jillaroo. O’Mahony, "Teaching an Old Dog New Tricks?: Ethics, Human-Dog
Relationships and Gender Inequality in a Rural Australian Romance."
46 Margaret Alston, "Gender Perspectives in Australian Rural Community Life," in Sustainability
and Change in Rural Australia, ed. Chris Cocklin and Jacqui Dibden (Sydney, Australia:
University of New South Wales Press, 2005), 143.
Her physical exclusion from the men’s world has meant an exclusion from farm decisions and practices. The markers of toughness she had in Jillaroo have now faded, that is until, the marriage finally falls apart and Charlie leaves the farm. Rebecca is subsequently reinstalled as farm manager. She discovers that the bank will foreclose on the farm unless some immediate and strategic decisions are made. She decides to sell the machinery and manage the grazing animals and crops in a more holistic and ecologically sensitive way. She also earns an off-farm income working at the neighbouring stables. Soon after, when she attends a Ute Muster, she reflects on her physical changes since resuming farm work:

She no longer felt lumpy, mumsy and self-conscious about her body. The work on Waters Meeting and in the fodder shed meant her arms were toned and strong again. Her baby belly was barely showing over the top of her leather belt. She looked a little thick in the waist but that was it. She was in good shape and her cleavage was something to gasp at, rounded with pregnancy hormones [...] she looked fit and gorgeous. (229)

This description reinforces the way Rebecca changes in relation to her authority and in relation to her body through the two novels. The return of her strong, toned body parallels her return to controlling Water’s Meeting and her own destiny alongside that of her children, the animal stakeholders and land in her care.

**Fragile Men and the Eco-Hero**

Through characterisation, Jillaroo and The Farmer’s Wife position readers to reflect on different types of masculinity including both ideal and problematic forms. Jillaroo encourages readers to be sympathetic to the men in Rebecca’s life because of the context in which they live. Rural Australia is “dominated” by masculinity as Margaret Alston argues.47 Both novels interrogate contemporary rural patriarchy and masculinity, particularly exploring how patriarchy oppresses men who in turn oppress women, animals and the environment. Men in Jillaroo’s rural setting suffer under a range of masculine subjectivities, including the hypermasculine patriarchal father (Harry), the gentle, artistic

47 Ibid., 141.
brother (Tom) and the hero trying to be the “good son” (Charlie). In *The Farmer’s Wife* these masculine subjects are further investigated alongside the emergence of what I describe as the “eco-hero”, an ideal hero type who is presented as the best match for the powerful heroine Rebecca. *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife* punish and reject hypermasculinity and violent men, showing characters breaking away from conventional social scripts particularly those that have been intergenerationally transmitted to them by their fathers. In *Jillaroo* both Harry and Charlie become more emotionally integrated and empathetic. This change is facilitated and supported by the women around them. The evolution of male characters in *Jillaroo* demonstrates that hegemonic masculinities can be contested and men can change towards gentler masculine subjectivities. *The Farmer’s Wife*, especially in relation to Charlie, shows that this can be reversed by fate and circumstance. Overall, the two novels invite readers to consider patriarchy’s impact on men, a system not of their individual making and argue for the need for change.

*Jillaroo*’s primary patriarch, Harry, is a traditional farmer who runs the Water’s Meeting farm. He resembles the lone hero of the Western genre who exhibits hypermasculine qualities including violence, cruelty, silence, anger, lack of empathy and inappropriate displays of emotion. Such a hero is silent and emotionally repressed. *Jillaroo* attributes Harry’s display of hegemonic masculinity to the rural context with its limited roles for men, the intergenerational transmission of the farm from his father, the pressures of family breakdown, economic uncertainty and environmental change. For example, narrative flashbacks show that Harry’s father was a poor role model; he did not show affection: “Never had he heard a kind word or any praise from his old man” (12). However, Harry’s father exhibited a strong communion with the environment and was a “natural” stockman who helped cultivate such

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48 Beasely (2008) emphasizes the importance of acknowledging different kinds of hegemonic masculinities while Coldwell (2009) in his review of theoretical literature examining Australian rural and agricultural masculinity suggests that there has been an overreliance on hegemonic masculinity as a theory to examine masculinity in a rural setting.
knowledge and animal husbandry in Rebecca. Harry however had no such relationship with the land (13). Subsequently, Harry is excluded from a relationship with his father and Rebecca. It is therefore no surprise that Harry acts the way he does. Harry's behaviour is made worse by the fraying relationships he has with the rest of this family. While in the past, rural women would stand by their men, with no hope of escape or divorce, social and cultural changes mean women like Harry's wife Frankie and his daughter Rebecca have the option to leave if they wish to. Both refuse to be enablers of Harry's violence, standing idly by while he mismanages the farm and abuses those around him. In their absence, his dysfunctionality becomes even more pronounced.

One of the determining features of Harry's decline is his powerlessness. He acts defensively with violent words when he feels threatened, including telling Rebecca he will shoot her dogs. Unlike Cranny Francis's observation that romance novels eroticise violence, Harry's dangerous violence positions the reader to disidentify with him. While Harry does not hesitate to threaten or criticise, in contrast he is unable to speak when gradually his family members leave the farm. The omniscient third person narrator allows readers a momentary glimpse into Harry's mind as Rebecca departs. To Harry, her exile is history repeating itself; it is the same as when Rebecca's mother Frankie left:

On the day [Frankie] left she ranted to him about his lack of love, and all the while, trapped in Harry's mind, were words which would not come out. He’d wanted to say, “Don’t go, Frankie.” He’d wanted to talk it through. He loved her. He would sell up for her. But the words wouldn’t come. The words never came. He just stood still and watched his wife drive away.

His fists clenched by his side, Harry’s body began to shake in slow waves. A hoarse expulsion of air from his lungs turned to shuddering sobs. He put a big hand to the splintery doorframe to steady himself and covered his eyes as if to ease the shame. The shame of hurting Rebecca so much. The shame of crushing his sons. He was losing his family. Losing his land.

(15)

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Harry is a man incapable of expressing love and care for others, yet, the reader is positioned to see that it results from an intergenerational transmission of emotion or its lack thereof from an undemonstrative father to his son. With no outlet for his frustrations, Harry becomes depressed and turns to alcohol, further hastening his loss of self and his grip of reality. Harry reflects Alston and Ni Laoire’s observation that threats to dominant masculine subjectivities such as being the breadwinner in rural contexts can be seen as threats to the subjectivity of the individual. In Harry’s case, his inability to control others and the farm precipitates his physical and mental decline.

Harry’s years of poor management have detrimentally affected the farm to the point where Rebecca repeatedly tells him he risks “losing the lot”. This refrain of “losing the lot” parallels Harry’s futile attempt to retain control. According to Mayer (1995), “losing a farm is more than losing a job. It is a way of life or a vocation [...] for a farmer all is lost, job, home and perhaps that of many previous generations’ livelihood and very sense of self”. The immense pressure of “losing the lot” therefore is associated with the material loss of the physical space as well as more abstract symbols of family heritage, independence and a long relationship with a particular parcel of land. In Harry’s case, his behaviour, not entirely of his own making, has alienated him from the environment, community, family and also from his own hopes, dreams and ambitions. He embodies the limitations and frailties of patriarchal masculinity. While his behaviour and treatment of others positions readers to view Harry as an antagonist in the story, an understanding of his history and the social pressures of the rural context prompts readers’ sympathy. Viewed in a larger context, Harry is a character vulnerable to limiting masculine subjectivities and the waning fortunes of farming. Harry represents, what Ruth Liepins argues is one of the main gendered narratives associated with rural life, that “Tough men farm” which in itself is a form of “hegemonic masculinity on the farm”. This

52 Alston, "Rural Male Suicide in Australia," 4.
narrative ultimately, “reflects the myth that agricultural work requires men’s strength and skills”. As Alston argues:

The dominant form of masculinity has benefitted men through good times, allowing them to preserve power and influence and pass it to their male heirs. What is evident in current times is that this dominant, rigid form of masculinity and men’s reduced ability to identify as the ‘breadwinner’ has damaged men’s sense of self.

In Harry’s case, his loss of self has ruined his relationships and suggests a bleak future for all around him.

*Jillaroo’s* younger male characters, Tom and Charlie, are positioned negatively in relation to prevailing hegemonic masculinities. Tom is the main victim of patriarchal masculinity in the novel, struggling under dominant expectations of rural men, while wishing he could fulfil his dream of attending art school. Rebecca describes him as having the eyes of a “collie-dog”, “quiet and gentle” (30). The narrative recounts a day in Tom’s childhood when he was home sick from school and given paper and crayons by his mother. He produced pictures of the ocean and a garden that were so moving they made her cry at his surprising natural artistic talent (19). His father however, with his power to determine Tom’s future (19), mercilessly destroyed the pictures. Harry’s response suggests that artistic expression is an unacceptable behaviour for a young country male, a view later reinforced when Tom is at high school. His teachers labelled him “arty” (30), yet he “soon learned to hide his talents” (30) when his male classmates sensed his “differences” (30). Tom does not have the chance to properly explore his artistic side because Harry “demands” he stay and work on the farm (30). His gentleness is further emphasised when he cannot defend himself, requiring Rebecca to step in to prevent other children and their older brother Mick bullying him. Tom exemplifies Lorene Gottschalk and Janice Newton’s argument that restricted definitions of masculinity are prevalent in rural areas, confining men to narrow roles. In their study of rural homophobia, Gottschalk and Newton argue that behaviours that defy the

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55 Ibid.
56 Alston, "Rural Male Suicide in Australia."
dominant masculinity are often negatively associated with femininity.\textsuperscript{58} While Tom is not gay, his artistic ability and thus ‘difference’ prompt a response in Harry designed to reinforce the gender status quo.

While some characters, including Frankie and Rebecca, break away from hegemonic social scripts and leave the family and, in this case, the farm, Tom is caught and held by the pressure to conform to dominant masculine subjectivities. Even when he grows up, with his family gone, except for his depressed alcoholic father, Tom finds it impossible to leave. This reflects what Ni Laoire describes as the gendered nature of mobility in rural areas which is tied to patrilineal inheritance and masculine expectations.\textsuperscript{59} Tom stays at the farm because of his empathy towards his father’s depression and his own despair: “Tom found himself frozen with fear, a deep fear of the outside world. It overshadowed the fear he had for himself and the fear he had for his father” (254). His decision to stay, endure his father’s decline, suppress his own dreams of art school and his affectionate feelings for Rebecca’s friend Sally, eventually culminate in Tom’s suicide. His suicide reflects a growing occurrence in rural Australia for young men.\textsuperscript{60} Page and Fragar’s (2006) study conducted between 1988 and 1997 found that one Australian male farmer commits suicide every four days.\textsuperscript{61} The study pointed to numerous contributing factors including loneliness, “social isolation” and relationship breakdown, illness, mental health problems especially depression and access to self-harm devices such as guns, financial or business problems, “reluctance to seek help” and “a more functional attitude toward death”.\textsuperscript{62} Tom’s suicide, the point of ritual death in \textit{Jillaroo}, prompts the reader to think about this dark reality of rural life, particularly the

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} See Ni Laoire (2001).
\textsuperscript{60} According to a National Rural Health Alliance fact sheet from 2009, rural men in the 15-24 age group are nearly twice as likely to commit suicide in comparison to men who live in urban centers. In very remote areas, this figure jumps up to six times more likely. See "Suicide in Rural Australia", ed. National Rural Health Alliance Inc (National Rural Health Alliance Inc, 2009).
\textsuperscript{61} Page and Fragar’s (2006) study found that the rural rate of male suicide was much higher than the wider Australian population and that the rate of suicide increased towards the end of the study. Page and Fragar as cited in Fiona Judd et al., "Understanding Suicide in Australian Farmers," \textit{Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology} 41, no. 1 (2006).
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.: 1.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid.: 1-2.
contributing reasons and the impact it has on family members. His death is also the catalyst for the other characters to change, especially Harry.

Like Tom, Charlie is constrained by traditional masculine subjectivity. On one hand, Charlie is a traditional romantic hero with his handsome looks and charm. He is also a typical rural bloke, working the family crop farm by day and on weekends blowing off steam at the pub or a B and S Ball. He drives a ute and has a deviant larrikin streak. For example, when he leaves the family farm for a weekend away, he uses a weekend badboy alias of ‘Basil’, the extroverted side of his personality. Basil is a daredevil and ladies’ man. These are behaviours that Campbell and Phillips would deem “aggressively masculine” in the context of rural life. However, Treasure undercuts Charlie’s “aggressively masculine” behaviours by revealing a dark underside. On return to the Lewis farm, ‘Basil’ disappears to reveal a young man constrained by his parent’s conservative expectations. Charlie comes from a Catholic family with parents who have traditional expectations of men and women; his dad is the domineering farm boss and his mother the farm wife. His parents have narrow expectations of him and the kind of woman he should marry. Although in his twenties, an age when many Australians are independent, the interconnected style of family farming means he has little choice but to comply with their expectation that he contribute to the daily running of the farm. Although his manual contribution of cheap labour is welcome, every bright new idea he has for improving their farm is rejected by his father. This underestimation of his contribution sees Charlie’s bitterness and resentment grow to the point where he longs to tell his parents he dislikes being treated like a child and wants some proper time off rather than the occasional weekend away. For example, the weekend he meets Rebecca at the B and S ball, he returns to a frosty reception from his parents. As he stumbles into bed with a hangover and bruises incurred from his daredevil stunts, his mother henpecks him for his dirty clothes and informs his father he has returned. His father, with his “furious eyes” and “huge hands” that grip “into his flesh” (103), pulls him from the bed and tells him to “get dressed

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64 Hugh Campbell and Emily Phillips, "Masculine Hegemony and Leisure Sites in Rural New Zealand and Australia," in Communication and Culture in Rural Areas, ed. Penny Share (Wagga Wagga: Centre for Rural Social Research, 1995).
and get out to the machinery shed now!” (103). While Charlie attempts a feeble explanation and apology, his father tells him to “pull himself together” and “take a bit of pride in yourself” (104). The actions and words of Mr Lewis typify an angry domineering father who will not allow his son the adult responsibility of implementing his new ideas and methods on the farm while castigating him for acting immaturely. Clearly both parents disapprove of Charlie’s behaviour; at the same time, they do not recognise his personal needs of independence and respect. In Jillaroo Charlie is constrained by the stereotypical gender roles which are reinforced by his parents.

Treasure uses Charlie and his relationship with Rebecca to critique his parents and their traditional expectations. In particular, this is shown through Charlie’s parent’s disapproval of Rebecca’s tough femininity. For example, before arriving at the Lewis farm with Rebecca, Charlie knows she is the antithesis of the woman his mother imagined him marrying. The reader sees Rebecca narrated through Charlie’s eyes, as they arrive at the farm: she is “brown as a berry” with her tanned strong arms and shoulders (268), dressed in a “soft blue singlet, a chunky leather belt and her old faithful cowboy boots” (268); her hair blowing wildly in the wind (268). While he thinks she is “sexy”, he knows his mother expects him to marry a “nice girl”, someone “who would take care of not just him, but his washing, his meals, his garden and his children. Not a girl like Bec who was independent and ‘couldn’t be fussed with frills’” (268). At the farm, while Mrs Lewis converses politely with Rebecca, Mr Lewis barely speaks to her (276). Rebecca tries to contribute to the farm work; however, Mr Lewis “refuses to give her a job” (308). That is until the peak crop harvesting period sets in and her heavy machinery licence becomes useful to him. Charlie does not confront his father about this unequal treatment of Rebecca, further exemplifying the powerful grip his parents, particularly his father, have over him. It might also reflect his own ingrained gender stereotypes that resurface in The Farmer’s Wife when he and Rebecca are married with children. In this context, like others, Rebecca’s involvement in traditional male activities presents a threat to masculinity yet it also reveals much about the characterisation of the hero. In
*Jillaroo* the reader is positioned to see Charlie as bearing the weight of his parent’s expectations while also being an ideal match for Rebecca.

Treasure uses characters such as Harry and Charlie to challenge the status quo and reveal the possibility of "break[ing] away from conventional social scripts." For instance, in trying to rule through violence and enforce outdated gender expectations, Harry pays a high price. Tom’s death and his scrawled message, “will this make you see dad” is the catalyst for Harry’s life change. He quits alcohol and begins working the farm again. Although this initial change is positive, the narrative denies him the chance to completely affect change when he loses his arm in a machinery accident. His amputation, a symbolic castration signifying the vulnerability of the patriarchal position, renders him physically incapable of running a farm. Through losing his arm he is forced to shift from the lone, self-reliant figure to a gentler masculine subjectivity and self-in-relation to others. With Harry physically unable to work the farm, Rebecca returns and Harry continues to reconstruct himself. Further actions indicate his shift in character: he asks Rebecca for a puppy to train (441), having earlier killed his own dogs. He also begins work for Landcare (443), thereby connecting him to the wider community and signifying his transition from the “tough man who farms” to more of a community leader advising others about how to care for the environment. The novel implies he has even attracted the interest of local single women (443) indicating his emotional recovery from his divorce. Harry evolves through *Jillaroo*’s tragic sequence of events, changing his hypermasculine patriarchal ways and reintegrating into society. Harry represents many Australian farmers battling to find their place in the world while suggesting that even the most stubborn patriarch has the potential to change.

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Through *Jillaroo*’s narrative, Charlie also breaks free from the cloying limitations of his family and their traditional expectations. After Harry’s accident, Charlie goes to Water’s Meeting with Rebecca to inspect the farm and start restoration. However, soon after they arrive, Charlie’s parents call him back to the Lewis farm. Charlie defensively tells Rebecca it will “take a lifetime to fix [the] mess [at Water’s Meeting]” (393) and uses it as an excuse to abandon her. Rebecca decides to stay at Water's Meeting rather than return with Charlie to his parent’s farm. She tells him her view of the situation, “you don’t have anything at home. Your dad controls it all and your mum controls you!” (395). She accuses him of projecting the same ideas that disempower him onto her:

You're starting to sound as sexist as our fathers...You're just like all the other bastards! You think I don't have a right to work the land, but because you're a man, you do! You're entitled to your bit of flat, chemical-and-salt-infected dirt, but I'm entitled to my rundown, destocked bit of mountain country. (396)

Once back with his parents, a “cloud settled over him” and he falls into a “decline” (456). The end of his relationship with Rebecca, as well as the return of his brother, the “golden boy” (457) of the family, leads Charlie to feel his “passion for the [family] farm slipping away” (457). Such experiences create change in Charlie towards an endorsement of feminist ideals, of equality and opportunity as they apply to Rebecca. While he cannot change his parents, he recognises how patriarchy, family, gender and rural expectations position him. In *Jillaroo*’s denouement, he works alongside Rebecca, forging an egalitarian partnership where they share the responsibility, running and risk of the farm and signifying he has distanced himself from conventional gender roles.

Leaving the Lewis farm and returning to Water’s Meeting disrupts the intergenerational patrilineal inheritance and outdated gender stereotypes showing that Charlie has changed and is different to his father. Charlie, in his relationship with Rebecca at the end of *Jillaroo*, reflects what Ruth Liepins observes is a “new masculinity in farming” she ascribes the acronym “SNAFS” (sensitive new age farmers) where “men can be positioned as masculine through association with objects and structures that have a contemporary
history quite different from past farming arrangements”.67 Such roles see men valuing new technologies such as computers, sharing resources and being involved in caring work including shared property ownership and advocating alternative practices such organic or biodynamic farming.68 Charlie’s departure from the Lewis farm and reunion with Rebecca in an equal role signifies the man remade and the hope for better female/male relationships. It also emphasises alternative versions of masculinity that have the power, as Liepins suggests to “unsettle the ‘tough men’ story”.69

From a third wave perspective Jillaroo challenges limiting concepts of masculinity, especially hegemonic masculinity, which have a negative effect on the male characters. As Christine Beasley (drawing upon Michael Kimmel 1997) has noted, “masculinity is invariably invisible in shaping social relations”; it appears the norm.70 Thus, any attempt to “render gender and masculinity visible offers a challenge to existing power relations and their continuing reiteration”.71 As well, alternative representations to the “tough men farm” style of masculinity can provide counterpoints that open up meaning and create alternate discourses. Jillaroo’s representation of central male characters that reject destructive aspects of masculinity suggests that men can be men, yet need not be violent, aggressive, domineering or sexist. Indeed, the narrative progression shows these characters are capable of change, thereby illustrating Greene’s argument of feminist fiction in relation to the social construction of gender that “what has been constructed can be reconstructed”.72

The Farmer’s Wife however unpicks some of these positive shifts to masculine subjectivities in Jillaroo. Even though Harry was a “new man” at the end of Jillaroo, the time-shift of ten years to the start of the new narrative reveals that Harry has died in the interim. For Rebecca, the ghost of the violent domineering

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67 Ibid.: 375.
68 Ibid.: 376.
69 Ibid.: 375.
71 Ibid.: 87.
72 Greene, Changing the Story: Feminist Fiction and the Tradition, 2.
Harry still haunts her. In *The Farmer's Wife* readers associate Rebecca's memory of Harry with her new reality of being the wife of a man who reminds her too much of her late father when he was at his most cruel and domineering. As I have explained previously in this chapter, Rebecca's only option is to separate from Charlie.

*The Farmer's Wife* introduces a new proto-hero. While readers would be forgiven for thinking that Charlie was the perfect match for Jillaroo's Rebecca, in the dying moments of their marriage Rebecca and the reader realise that Charlie has transmogrified into a version of her father. He has used her withdrawal from farm life to tend hearth, home and children to literally run the farm into the ground. Readers are positioned to see Charlie as a failed-hero and villain. However, for the novel to be a romance there must be a new hero. Sol Stanton, the wealthy neighbour, serves as a foil for Charlie. Sol, a Spanish piccolo player, is cultured and worldly, wealthy and industrious. He is also a conservationist. Sol reveals to Rebecca that he has outbid a mining company for Water's Meeting and "plans to rehabilitate the property and use it as a study for grassland carbon sequestration to bolster the agricultural sector and the environment" (original emphasis, 385). He tells Rebecca he bought the property because he did not want a mine next to his own estate, but also because he is "committed to regeneration of land—not destruction" (385). Rebecca is excited about Sol's purchase of Water's Meeting because he has saved the property from the clutches of miners and will restore the soil after years of mismanagement: "Ecstasy flooded through her very soul that the beautiful property where two rivers met would now be taken care of by a man like Sol" (385). He plans to build an “eco-house” “made from the land, self-sufficient”, not on the site of the old now burned down homestead, but in a new place overlooking the river. Rebecca knows she must go to the United States to work for Andrew Travis, a rural land management specialist, and Sol does not try to stop her. Instead he merely welcomes her and the children anytime, leaving their futures up to “the stars” (386). She briefly imagines the future inclusive of Sol, the children, the animals and land, concluding with this image: “in her mind’s eye, she saw it all. And in that moment, she knew she was already, and
always would be no matter where she was, home” (387). In Sol, Rebecca appears to have found a companionate match who shares her love for the land and an ecological vision for the future. Sol provides a foil to Charlie and a new ideal hero-type for the rural novel.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that Rachael Treasure's *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer's Wife* represent examples of feminist romance. Both novels have the essential elements of romance. However, the hermetic seal of the happy ending in *Jillaroo* is undone by the premise of *The Farmer's Wife* where the once happy relationship between Rebecca and Charlie has now disintegrated. Because Rebecca is a shrewd and determined heroine, she redefines women's contribution to rural life while also showing the gender dualism of the context. While Rebecca's character and actions clearly model feminist thinking, the novels are feminist in their treatment of deep inequalities that rural men experience through their interpellation into hegemonic masculine practices; the novels clearly show that hegemonic masculinities detrimentally affect men and their relationships with women, animals, the community and the environment. Through the narrative form, specifically plot, character and theme, *Jillaroo* develops its central and minor characters to show that gender is a construction that can be “reconstructed”. *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer's Wife* demonstrate chick lit's capability in using the essentials of romance to reflect contemporary feminist thinking that motivates and inspires women readers while contributing to social and cultural change.

The next chapter shifts setting to Western Australia's far north where two novels by Loretta Hill are set. *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat* engage with feminism and romance through the stories of heroines who work in male dominated mining and construction sites. I explore the romantic and feminist dimensions of the plots of each novel and argue that examples of sexism and discrimination are firmly bound up with the romance. I examine the way that each heroine deals with workplace sexism and discrimination. The novels are romances by Regis’s (2003) definition and in
relation to the essential elements that comprise novels of the form. Both heroines can be read through feminism and postfeminism. Overall, I argue that these novels are internally contradictory between their plots, characters and key themes.
Chapter Nine: “Booze, Blokes and Brawls”: Confronting the Masculinist Mining Discourse in Loretta Hill’s *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat*

Mining’s tumultuous history evokes images of rootless, brawny and often militant men, whether labouring in sixteenth-century Peru or twenty-first century South Africa, but women are often ignored or reduced to shadowy figures in the background supporting male miner family members. Where were women in the mining world?

Laurie Mercier and Jaclyn Gier

I adore the Pilbara and the people who work and live upon its majestic beauty. But the Pilbara can take as much as she can give.

Loretta Hill

Introduction

This chapter focuses on two ‘red dirt’ romances by Western Australian author Loretta Hill. The terms ‘red dirt romance’ or ‘red dust romance’ have been used interchangeably by book reviewers and journalists to describe a certain kind of contemporary Australian romance. The term first emerged in discussions around the popular Australian film *Red Dog* (2011), the adaptation of Louis de Berniérès’ novella of the same name (2001). The Pilbara is widely known for

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1 The phrase “Booze, Blokes and Brawls” is drawn from an article about the geography of violence and masculinity particularly in mining and resource sectors. K. Carrington, A. McIntosh, and J. Scott, "Globalization, Frontier Masculinities and Violence: Booze, Blokes and Brawls," *British Journal of Criminology* 50, no. 3 (2010).
2 Laurie Mercier and Jaclyn Gier, "Reconsidering Women and Gender in Mining," *History Compass* 5, no. 3 (2007): 995.
the colour of the earth, as described in the *Lonely Planet Guide*, “The rugged red-dirt Pilbara [is] a vast region of arid land with a parched skin and a big heart of iron ore”.

While the ‘red’ dog is undeniably the star of the *Red Dog* book and film, the relationship between his owner, John, and Nancy, a secretary at the local mine, provides the romantic narrative that has surely inspired the ‘red dirt romance’ moniker.

Shortly after the release of the film *Red Dog*, author Loretta Hill published her first two novels. With their settings in Western Australia’s remote far north where mining sites abound, her novels *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* (2012) and *The Girl in the Hard Hat* (2013) are, like *Red Dog*, described as ‘red dirt romances’ because they use north-Western Australia’s red-dirt landscapes for the developing relationship between two lovers. Red dirt romances are a sub-genre of chick lit because they have a contemporary setting, are female authored and published after the mid-1990s. Hill’s novels are different from *Red Dog* however in the representation of the female lead’s work life. *Red Dog*’s female lead worked in a “pink collar job” and represented stereotypical femininity. In contrast, Hill’s novels with their contemporary setting represent strong heroines working in male dominated environments including construction and mining sites. There they must negotiate the gender politics of these remote contexts where men can outnumber women seventy to one. Such representations thereby challenge historical assumptions that mining, engineering and construction are the domains of men.

Loretta Hill writes from the perspective of a woman who has worked as an engineer in Western Australia’s Pilbara. She was born and raised in Western Australia, graduating from university with an engineering degree. Soon after, she found herself working on a remote Pilbara mining site. In a “Meet the Author” event held in Fremantle in February 2013, Hill recounted how she

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7 The back cover of *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* reveals that Lena is one of five women in a camp of 350 men.
8 See Goff (1946), Layne (2009) and Mills (2011) for discussions of women’s historical contributions to engineering.
decided to become an engineer as a “backup plan” while she waited to be discovered as a writer.\(^9\) Before *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat*, Hill wrote romance novels under the pen name “Loretta Brabant” for Avalon books.\(^10\) In an interview with Western Australia’s *STM Magazine*, Hill explained that her first trade fiction novel emerged from e-mails to family written during her time working in the Pilbara.\(^11\) While Hill states that her novels are “not autobiographical”, they are clearly coloured by the Pilbara’s landscape and her firsthand knowledge of the machinations of Western Australia’s mining industry.\(^12\) Her novels represent a small slice of mining life in Western Australia’s north and the resource boom of the early 2000s.\(^13\)

This chapter examines Loretta Hill’s *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat*, in relation to feminism and romance.\(^14\) The Chapter focuses on how sexism and sex discrimination specific to the red dirt context are represented through the narrative elements of plot, character and theme. I apply Benokraitis’s (1997) definition of sex discrimination as “the unequal and harmful treatment of people because of their sex” including its three main types “blatant, subtle and covert”.\(^15\) Both of Hill’s novels perform the task of feminist romance to employ a familiar narrative structure to engage with issues of gender inequality including sexism.\(^16\) They are romances in plot and theme, illustrating Regis’s definition of romances. When read through the romantic elements, the inequality of women in this context becomes apparent: the society is one defined by rampant sexism while the developing romantic relationship

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\(^9\) Loretta Hill, 2013.
\(^12\) "Mine of Inspiration," *Canning Times*, 24 January 2012.
\(^13\) Hill explained to journalist Tiffany Fox about the importance of her novels to readers: “I think it is very important that we have stories set in WA, particularly to do with mining because there are so many people who work in that area and it is the backbone of our economy”. Tiffany Fox, "Inspiration from Pilbara," *The West Australian*, 28 February 2012.
\(^14\) In 2014, Hill’s third novel, *The Girl in the Yellow Vest* was published in Australia. The novel is not discussed in this Chapter because it is set in Queensland, therefore not strictly a “red dirt” setting.
\(^16\) See my discussion of Cranny-Francis’s theory of feminist romance in Chapter One.
contains examples of obvious and subtle forms of discrimination. Moreover, the romance plots are complemented by professional plots where each heroine must overcome a range of obstacles, including discrimination, to successfully complete a project or meet a strict deadline. Both heroines, Lena Todd of *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* and Wendy Hopkins of *The Girl in the Hard Hat*, appear reluctant romantic heroines; neither is initially interested in embarking on a relationship. When they eventually concede to their romantic desires, again the context, namely the male dominated work force, provides impediments to their progress. Both heroines have complex gendered identities; they are physically attractive like other chick lit heroines, however also display some of the characteristics that Sherri Inness (1999) has attributed to “tough women”.\footnote{Inness, *Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture.*} Both directly confront sexual harassment and gender inequality in the workplace, therefore standing up for themselves and women in this context.

I argue that sexism and sex discrimination are evident in the plots, characterisation and themes of the novels. However, my analysis reveals that the novels do not send a consistent message about sexism or sex discrimination. Although the novels are romances in structure and theme and are open to a feminist reading position, they are not feminist romances as defined by Cranny-Francis. There is no evidence to suggest they were written from a “self-consciously feminist perspective” nor do they question the sexism entangled with the romance plot. Rather, as this chapter argues, *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat* are romances that challenge dominant representations and stereotypes in Australia about women working in male dominated professions such as engineering and male dominated contexts such as mining and construction. Both novels use the romance format to make women’s contribution to engineering and mining visible and address some of the sexism that plagues these professions.\footnote{Michelle Madsen Camacho and Susan M. Lord, *The Borderlands of Education: Latinas in Engineering* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2013), 5.} The novels are romances open to a feminist reading; however, they reinforce postfeminism through the heroines’ individual actions and choices rather than emphasising the value of
affirmative action or other official complaints processes that are designed to free workplaces of gender inequality.

**Romantic and Professional Plots in the Red Dirt**

This section examines the romantic and professional plots in *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat*. I argue that both novels are romances that are structured around Regis’s essential elements.\(^{19}\) However, the Pilbara setting and the male-dominated worksite add a new twist to romance where the essential elements are encoded with sexism and sex discrimination. The society is defined as oppressive because the women are working in a male dominated environment and industry. There they face discrimination and disrespect seemingly because they are women. Even the heroes direct subtle and blatant forms of sexism and discrimination towards them. This occurs in their initial meetings and as their attraction develops. Alongside the romantic plot, each heroine has a professional plot where she must earn the respect of her co-workers, bosses and clients. Since both heroines develop relationships with men who they work with, the progression of romance is bound up with their professional lives. This section argues that the shift in setting to the “red dirt” profoundly impacts the romance plot and the professional development of both heroines.

Loretta Hill’s novels contain Regis’s essential romantic elements. As Regis (2003) has argued, there is huge variability in the romance form where essential elements can be fashioned in many ways, “doubled, amplified, diminished, echoed, made as comic or serious as the context requires”.\(^{20}\) In both Hill novels, the setting determines the progress (or lack thereof) of the romance for each heroine. Some of the problems with this setting are mapped in the early chapters of *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* where the first romantic element, the “definition of society” which highlights society’s “flaws” or “corrupt” aspects is represented.\(^{21}\) The heroine, Lena, begins the novel like many of her urban chick lit compatriots. She is a city chick, who “thrives on

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\(^{19}\) Regis, *A Natural History of the Romance Novel*, 14.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 205.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., 31.
cocktails and cappuccinos” (back cover). When her boss asks her to move to the Pilbara as part of her training, Lena is placed in a typical fish out of water situation. At first, she is reluctant to go, admitting that she loves her city life including shopping and nightclubs (1). However, she is motivated by her professional aspirations as a newly graduated engineer keen to prove her worth. Lena views the request as a “test”, telling her friend Robyn, “It’s all part of my initiation. They’re trying to find my limits. I have to prove I can do this. I have to show them I’m a good engineer” (4). Lena’s comment reflects long-held stereotypes about women in the profession. Historically, female engineers have had to prove that they belong in the engineering profession and then they have had to show they make “good engineers”. Lena’s comment suggests that she is aware of this history and the need to prove she belongs.

Society does not “oppress” Lena because she is asked to work in the Pilbara; rather, Lena is excited about the prospects and challenges of the new project and environment. Society is oppressive because of the remote work site’s patriarchal culture and her “tokenism” as a female engineer. As Frehill (1997) notes, female engineers are often “tokens” because they are a minority in a male dominated field. Frehill explains that as “tokens” female engineers are “under pressure to conform to both professional engineering standards [...] and societal standards of acceptable femininity”. This tokenism is evidenced when Lena arrives on site. She becomes a “token” woman because she is one of only a handful of women and also because she is attractive. Although single, Lena has decided she is uninterested in embarking on a romantic relationship with any

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22 “Fish out of water” scenarios occur in other chick novels including McInerney’s A Taste For It where heroine Maura Carmody suddenly finds herself conducting wine tastings in Ireland when her brother suddenly withdraws from the trip. The Devil Wears Prada also places its heroine Andrea, an aspiring journalist who is relatively ignorant of fashion and women’s magazines, into a women’s glossy magazine office under a demonic boss.

23 Bix (2009) examines the attitudes towards women in engineering from “Engineeresses” to “Girl Engineers” to “Good Engineers”. She argues that in the post-war period women had to fight for entry into university courses in the United States. After that came the task of convincing “doubters that women could be good engineers” (18). Amy Sue Bix, "From "Engineeresses" to "Girl Engineers" to "Good Engineers": A History of Women's U.S. Engineering Education," in Women in Engineering: Pioneers and Trailblazers ed. Margaret E. Layne (Reston, Virginia: American Society of Civil Engineers, 2009).

man on the site. Lena’s single status combined with her rejection of romantic gestures directed at her by her new co-workers only adds to her tokenism: the men simply think she is “playing hard to get” and become even more persistent.

Lena’s “tokenism” as a woman and as an engineer is reinforced when she meets her “hero” and client Dan Hullog six days after she arrives on the site. According to Regis, the meeting between a heroine and hero is a vital ingredient in the progression of romance. The “meeting” is often bound up with attraction which “establishes for the reader why this couple must marry”.25 In Lena and Dan’s case, the reason they “must marry” is built around intense physical attraction and the suggestion they are opposites in power and experience in the context. After being confined to the office and administrative work well below her capabilities, Lena decides to “rebel” and drives to the end of the jetty where minerals are being transferred to waiting ships. There she is accosted by a man who does not work for her company. Unlike the several hundred other men on the site, this man is unusually attractive with a “masculine voice” and described as “drop dead gorgeous, tall and broad shouldered” (32). He questions a nearby site worker as to why Lena is on the jetty and then steadies her when there is a loud bang as a pylon is driven into the ocean nearby. Unprepared to go on the jetty, Lena has forgotten to bring earplugs (33-34). He calls her “you silly girl” (34) before berating her for not taking proper safety precautions. Afterwards she regards him as “the jerk I met on the wharf” (38). This meeting carries some of the tension found in canonical romances such as Pride and Prejudice. Like Elizabeth and Darcy, Lena and Dan experience attraction mixed with conflict and tension. In Lena’s case, Dan treats her in a condescending and sexist manner. At first he does not speak directly to her, assumes she is part of the site “administrative staff” and then infantilises her by calling her a “silly girl”. Thus, in this meeting, Dan is blatantly sexist, treating her as inferior and expressing a need to protect her from the dangers of being on the jetty.26 Part of Lena’s attraction to Dan then becomes her desire to disprove his assumption she is

25 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 33.
26 This is an example of what Benokraitis (1997) terms “subtle sex discrimination” particularly in the form of “subjective objectification” where women are treated as “children, possessions, or sex objects” and often “punished like children”. Benokraitis, Subtle Sexism, 17.
“silly” and clueless. Lena feels regret about their first meeting, especially when she discovers that he is the project client and also shame that she was on the jetty alone without a purpose or any safety training. As the narrator states, “every time Lena thought of their first meeting, she cringed” (41).

For Lena and Dan, their growing attraction carries some of the tension from their meeting. Initially, they share a physical attraction suggestive of “sexual chemistry”27 and reinforced through their encounters at the gym, the beach and pub. However, as Lena is the project engineer and Dan the client, their attraction is dampened by professional conflicts. The third person narration reveals Lena’s internal conflict over her intense attraction to Dan and her observation that he is “a perfectionist with impossible standards” (42). In one instance where attraction meets professional conflict, they coincidentally meet at the gym. Lena watches him while he is on the running machine, the narrator noting the way “his masculinity hit her like a smack in the face” (51). When they talk, he accuses her construction team of not making steady progress and tells her that they need to go faster to meet the project deadlines. She responds, “I am off duty, you know. I didn’t expect to be accosted in the gym” (52). He then looks her body up and down, and tells her, “You know, you shouldn’t walk around so scantily dressed. You’re not in Kansas anymore” (53). Lena is automatically defensive and angry telling him, “I don’t think what I wear is any of your business” (53). This interaction progresses the romance plot by affirming their attraction and fiery chemistry while portraying Dan as sexist and paternalistic. His behaviour and attitude towards Lena implies that while he may be attracted to her personally, professionally he has little, if any, respect for her. Further, his condescending attitude and attempt at appearing a protective fatherly figure is off-putting to the heroine and the reader. The narrator explains Lena’s professional predicament: “He was insufferable,

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27 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 33.
28 Dan’s allusion to The Wizard of Oz and not being “in Kansas anymore” implies that he sees her in the character of the child protagonist Dorothy. This allusion is another example of Dan engaging in Benokraitis’ “subtle sex discrimination” through “subjective objectification”. Such treatment suggests he does not respect her as a woman or a professional engineer.
domineering and completely arrogant. And yet pleasing him was now her number one priority” (54).

Despite their attraction, the work setting combined with personal barriers prevents Lena and Dan’s relationship moving beyond mere attraction. Regis explains that “internal” or “external barriers” “often drive the romance novel”.29 One sizable barrier to romance is Dan’s lack of confidence that she can lead her team to meet the project deadlines. Moreover, both Lena and Dan each have a ‘big secret’. Lena’s secret is that her previous romantic relationship was with one of her university engineering lecturers. When Lena decided to end the relationship, her lover revealed that she only passed his subjects because he manipulated her grades. Thus, for much of the novel, Lena believes that her degree is a sham, that she lacks the necessary qualification to be an engineer and therefore feels she needs to prove herself and her worth on the site. This is Lena’s significant internal barrier and the foundation of her personal quest. The lecturer’s revelation exemplifies Benokraitis’s (1997) “covert sex discrimination” in the form of “intentional sabotage” that is designed to “undermine or undercut a woman’s position”.30 Lena is therefore plagued by self-doubt and a lack of confidence. Until she proves to herself that she is qualified and belongs on the construction site, she struggles to confidently perform her role and is therefore not free to “choose her hero”, though in the meantime it does not stop her being attracted (and simultaneously repulsed) by him.

Dan has his own big secret and internal barrier which helps to “drive the romance novel”.31 Being the project’s boss and client, there is an air of mystery surrounding him. Initially, it is unclear whether Dan has a girlfriend. Like other chick heroines, the novel implies that a girlfriend or wife would be a significant barrier to a romantic relationship.32 Heroines repeatedly appear to want to be

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29 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 32.
30 Benokraitis, Subtle Sexism, 12.
31 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 32.
32 For example, novels such as Bridget Jones’s Diary, Paris Dreaming and The Girl Most Likely initially suggest that the hero already has a wife or girlfriend, thereby making him unavailable for a relationship with the heroine.
the most important, if not the only woman in a hero’s life. Lena quickly learns that “another woman” is not Dan’s secret. Rather, it relates to his past and his relationship with his family. While a seemingly benign secret, he is initially reluctant to discuss it with her.\textsuperscript{33} Attempting to be friends with Dan, Lena “probes the edge of this secret” in some of their conversations, inquiring why he does not take regular rest days in the city. Dan replies, “They don’t need me at home” (99). Rather than revealing the “secret”, Dan later responds in a condescending and sexist manner. For example, Lena presses the point until he tells her, “don’t try to fix me Madame Engineer. I’m not one of the camp drongos who’ll let you play Freud to get in your pants” (original emphasis, 100).\textsuperscript{34} She responds that she “isn’t trying to fix him” and then asks, what his problem is.\textsuperscript{35} Dan’s response is blatantly sexist:

My problem is this...you are the least experienced person on this site and you don’t seem to know it. You want to be taken seriously but you organise fishing trips, steal flags and parade around in your underwear. You’ve got no life experience, no prudence and no ability to see beyond your own little bubble. You’re naive, stubborn and reckless. And the only reason you’ve had it so easy so far is because you’re so damn good looking (101)

Dan is clearly attracted to Lena, though he sees her as posing a significant risk to the workplace. Moreover, he states that she is where she is because of her appearance, which is deeply offensive and discriminatory. Reminiscent of Elizabeth in \textit{Pride and Prejudice} when she notes Darcy’s arrogance and haughtiness, Lena’s rejoinder is:

Thank you very much for that illuminating review of my character, but it’s not as if you’re Mr Perfect. Sure, you’ve got heaps of experience, but no understanding of people. You want your men to respect you, but instead you’ve got them looking over their shoulders to make sure you’re not on their back. You’re domineering and obnoxious and you

\textsuperscript{33} His secret is that he is currently mid-way through a court dispute against his parents and family and related to the death of his younger brother.

\textsuperscript{34} In \textit{The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots}, the men on the worksite soon contrive the nickname “madame engineer” for Lena. The use of “madame” in her nickname taps into the historical perception of women engineers as the exception and “tokens”. To use “madame” reaffirms the fact that she is a woman to emphasize her difference from the norm which is seen to be men. See Bix (2009) for a more detailed discussion of women in engineering from “engineeresses” to “good engineers”.

\textsuperscript{35} According to Regis’s (2003) theory of the romance, contemporary heroines have to “tame the hero” or “heal him” or “do both” (206). It could be argued that Lena’s attempt to find out Dan’s secret and provide emotional support to him is equivalent to her attempting to “heal” him.
have no ability to see any point of view but your own. And, just to set the record straight, I have not had it easy! (101)

This mutual character assessment reinforces their attraction, fieriness and contempt for each other. She confronts him because he does not seem to want to be her friend and he later says, to the contrary, "...I'm protecting you [...from] me, you fool" (217). Even this statement suggests a subtle form of paternalistic sexism where Dan hides a dangerous side that Lena should be wary of.

Towards the end of the novel comes a quick succession of recognitions and new barriers that attempt to stymie the romance between Lena and Dan. As Regis explains of the “recognition” element of romance, “what is recognized and when it is recognized vary enormously” and largely depend on whether barriers are internal.36 Lena's internal barrier created by believing that her ex-lover falsified some of her university marks is felled when she learns that he did not do this; she earned her degree through her own persistence and hard work. The felling of this barrier removes some of Lena’s confidence issues including that she is a fraud. Dan’s barrier is founded on his guilt over the workplace death of his own brother. Dan’s parents and brother’s widow blame Dan for his brother’s death and he deals with a court case during his courtship of Lena. The felling of this barrier occurs when the court decides Dan was not to blame. The narrative implies that Dan’s sexist and condescending behaviour is partly due to the court case including the imputation that Dan is not a responsible workplace supervisor. The resolution of the case suggests that he has been “healed” and that Lena has played a role.

The essential romantic element of the “declaration” of love occurs on the evening after the court ruling. Regis notes that the declaration can be placed anywhere in a novel which “helps create the variety of plots within the set of possibilities open to the romance novel”.37 Both Lena and Dan are on leave in Perth. After a difficult day in court, Lena cooks Dan dinner at her apartment and they end up falling asleep on her couch. As he leaves the next morning, he

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36 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 37.
37 Ibid., 334.
mumbles, “I love you...Madame Engineer” (306) believing her to be asleep. As he walks out the door, she says to herself that she also loves him. Only Lena and the reader know that the feeling of love is mutual.38

Although the internal barriers have been removed, a new external barrier or a “circumstance that exists outside of a heroine or hero’s mind” emerges late in this novel. This new barrier further delays the progression of romance.39 Again the professional and personal come into conflict and impact Lena and Dan’s relationship after they share a moment of heated passion. One of their colleagues sees them and spreads rumours of their tryst. The men at the work site do not approve of the match and it causes infighting and problems with team dynamics producing the “point of ritual death” when a happy resolution seems unlikely.40 Lena’s response is to avoid Dan and throw herself into work (264). Carl, her boss, accuses her of “fuck[ing] the men in the head by going out with [Dan]” (265). Carl’s comment here intrudes into Lena’s personal life and suggests that her decision of who she dates should be considered because of its effect on “the men”. It is another example of blatant sex discrimination because Lena is singled out as a woman and treated “unequally” in a “visible” and “intentional” way.41 The behaviour of Carl and the men more widely implies that they are somehow stakeholders in Lena’s personal life simply because she is one of a few women on the site. The final barrier and point of ritual death thereby draw together the way that Lena is discriminated against by individuals and the group because she is a woman.

The felling of this barrier leads to a metaphorical betrothal, where the heroine freely “chooses her hero”.42 Lena decides that she no longer wants to put “work first” before a relationship and that “people’s opinion be damned” (338–9). She confronts Dan in the site mess hall in front of all the other male staff on the

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38 The UnDomestic Goddess also includes a declaration where only one of the couple is aware that a declaration of love has been made. In this example, Nathaniel declares his love for Samantha, however she is so caught up in her thoughts she does not hear it. The reader and the hero know that he loves her, however she remains unaware.
39 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 32.
40 Ibid., 35.
41 Benokraitis, Subtle Sexism, 7.
42 Regis, A Natural History of the Romance Novel, 37.
project; her purpose is to discuss their relationship. In a scene reminiscent of the final moments of the film *An Officer and a Gentleman*, Dan kisses Lena in front of everyone, not caring what they think. In response the men are “stamping their feet” at the couple. Lena’s colleague, Radar, tries to silence the maelstrom by shouting, “SHUT THE FUCK UP!” (340). Once he has the mess hall’s attention he says, “gentlemen...I present to you, Mr and Mrs Cape Fuckin Lambert” (340). Symbolically, Radar’s use of “Mr and Mrs Lambert” indicates a literal betrothal between Lena and Dan even though they have not actually married. This public announcement of their relationship means they no longer need to hide or worry about the gossip and interference by their workmates. Both Lena and Dan have decided that their personal choices are more important than the approval or opinions of their co-workers. It seems that the men approve of the match. However, the use of “Mrs Lambert”, like her nickname “Madame Engineer”, reinforces Lena’s sex difference as a woman on a male dominated worksite. In this case, *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* contains examples of sexism and sex discrimination evident across the romantic elements and therefore throughout the progress of this romance.

In *The Girl in the Hard Hat*, the sequel to *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots*, the focus shifts from Lena to a new character, Wendy Hopkins, the site’s new health and safety officer. *The Girl in the Hard Hat* builds the essential romance elements around the central characters of Wendy and Gavin. Like the previous novel, the society is defined as “corrupt” or “superannuated” mainly in relation to the context. Like Lena, Wendy Hopkins is working on a remote construction site in Western Australia’s Pilbara. Unlike Lena, Wendy is accustomed to working in remote male-dominated environments. As an Occupational Health and Safety Officer, she is used to working with people unwilling to change their habits or work safely. Wendy finds the “society” of this construction site hostile because of two events that happen before and at the start of her employment there. Firstly, Wendy’s uncle arranges her employment with the project client, Dan Hullog. However, with no work to offer her, Dan arranges for Wendy to work with the project contractors. Because of this initial confusion over where

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43 Ibid., 31.
Wendy works, the men employed by the contractors assume that Wendy is “a spy” from the client’s organisation. Secondly, within days of her appointment, Wendy discovers that her fellow Occupational Health and Safety Officer is an alcoholic who spends most of the workday asleep at his desk. She raises her concerns with Carl, the project leader, the man is fired and Wendy is installed in his position. Subsequently, her male co-workers become even more suspicious about her role and motives, creating significant difficulty for Wendy. This setting is oppressive because Wendy must make the site safe even though the men do not want her there nor do they want to change their work habits.

In this difficult context Wendy meets and is attracted to one of her colleagues. As Regis explains, attraction occurs because of “sexual chemistry, friendship, shared goals or feelings, society’s expectations, and economic issues”. In Wendy’s case, her attraction to Gavin is founded on intense sexual chemistry. Wendy meets Gavin, a piling engineer on the site. Gavin was a minor character and a false hero for Lena in the first novel. In The Girl in the Hard Hat, Wendy and Gavin’s meeting is infused with tension and laced with an undercurrent of sexual harassment. After arriving at the worker’s camp, Wendy goes out jogging and sees a “very good looking man” with “sandy brown hair, soulful brown eyes and a healthy tan” in the car park (original emphasis 36). She decides that she does not want to be distracted by the handsome stranger telling herself, “she didn’t have time for romance” (36). He follows her as she runs, causing her to assume he is stalking her. She jogs to a lookout, encounters him again and there he says, “hey gorgeous” (37). Scared that he may have less than honourable intentions, the narrator states that she “THWACKS” him “full against his jawline” (37). In response he asks her, “what the hell did you do that for?...I’m not here to hurt you” (37). After only a brief conversation Wendy admits through the narration her attraction for the man and the reasons why she should not act on it; she concludes that, “She didn’t need a psychic to tell her that those love-you-today leave–you tomorrow eyes were Trouble with a

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44 Ibid., 33.
45 Like Lena, at first Wendy is a reluctant romantic heroine.
capital T” (38). He asks her whether she wants to practice her self-defence again and decides to kiss her “in provocation” (38), the narrator explaining “while he took her mouth, he didn’t touch her” (38). To Wendy, “it was the most unexpected, outrageous, incorrigible thing that anyone had done to her” (38). She punches him in the face, feeling “almost guilty” (38). He tries to explain that he followed her to ask her on a date (39) but admits he feels that he “kind of botched it” (39). When she replies “yeah you did”, he leaves. From that moment, Gavin is besotted with Wendy while she feels embarrassed. This scene establishes the meeting and the intense attraction between them. Wendy initially fears that Gavin will harm her, perhaps rape her, and despite preemptively defending herself, he violates her metaphorically by “taking her mouth”. This moment appears to engage with notions of “no meaning yes” alongside revulsion and fear versus attraction and pleasure. While Wendy should be repelled, she admits that she enjoyed Gavin’s kiss for a few moments. The scene suggests that because of Wendy’s attraction to Gavin and the playful aspect of their meeting that his kiss “in provocation” meant no harm and should not be read as sexual harassment. However, it could be argued that sexism represented as romantic is still sexism.

Wendy and Gavin experience complex internal and external barriers that prevent them realising their attraction for each other. Internally, Wendy has “attitudes, temperament, values, and beliefs” that prevent her embarking on a relationship. Abandoned by her father as a child, the reader surmises that Wendy is reluctant to become romantically involved because she fears being abandoned. Indeed, her meeting with Gavin leads her to conclude that he is a “love you today, leave you tomorrow” kind of lover, exactly what she wishes to avoid. Until he can prove he is not like that, it will be difficult for the romance to progress. Gavin’s barrier is both internal and external. He is running from a dangerous criminal and fears telling the truth about himself or his life to a

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46 Wendy’s conclusion about Gavin suggests that she suspects he may be a “dangerous” man, definitely not one interested in a long-term relationship.

47 It could be argued that the attraction versus revulsion continues the tradition of *Pride and Prejudice* where Elizabeth and Darcy seem physically attracted yet dialogue causes their revulsion towards each other.

prospective lover. He also does not want to place a girlfriend or partner in danger. Therefore an external situation has combined with internal fears to create a barrier and thus, Gavin has reverted to shallow fleeting affairs. For much of the novel, despite their attraction, Wendy and Gavin battle these barriers. Until they are overcome, romance is delayed.

The point of ritual death, when the happy ending is “most in jeopardy”\(^{49}\) is bound up with the recognitions, thereby felling the barriers that keep Wendy and Gavin apart. These essential elements centre on the cyclone that threatens the community towards the end of the novel. Wendy has fulfilled a professional quest to meet the expectations of a safety audit of the site and prepare it for cyclone season. As a storm bears down on the community, Wendy’s cyclone plan is put into action and the site is evacuated. Everyone but Gavin is accounted for at the evacuation centre and Wendy insists on searching for him. She is stopped by her uncle, who also works on the site and he confesses that he is actually her father. This realisation fells Wendy’s internal barrier centred on her fear of abandonment, however it does not resolve the “point of ritual death” centred on Gavin’s disappearance. Wendy soon discovers that Gavin’s delay has been caused by a violent confrontation with the criminal who wishes him dead. Wendy manages to find and free Gavin then seek shelter at the site before the cyclone hits. It transpires later that the criminal is killed during the cyclone, thereby removing Gavin’s barrier to romance. Gavin no longer has to hide or run scared. Like Wendy, he can begin to trust others and enter relationships authentically. Thus, in felling the barrier, Gavin’s behaviour towards women as something of a lothario is explained and he is reformed.

Both endings or ‘betrothals’ in Hill’s novels are metaphorical. There is no marriage. Lena and Dan end The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots as a new couple. In The Girl in the Hard Hat, readers learn that Lena and Dan experience ups and down in their relationship, however the epilogue reveals that they have become engaged (339). In The Girl in the Hard Hat, the betrothal is also metaphorical, rather than literal with Wendy and Gavin entering a relationship and deciding

\(^{49}\)Ibid., 35.
to take a holiday together. Gavin asks Wendy if she will accompany him to Melbourne so he can introduce her to his family (342), a significant commitment for Gavin. Both novels have the essential elements of romance; however, these are bound to the context and the treatment of women as “tokens” or minorities. I have argued that the novels, especially *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots*, see the essential romantic elements as engaging with sexism and discrimination that women experience as engineers or in working in mining or construction environments. It could be argued that despite both heroines experiencing sexism and discrimination directed at them by their heroes, the fact that they eventually enter relationships with them suggests that sexism is eroticised within the elements of romance in these two novels. However, in following Regis’s theory of the romance, both heroes, Dan and Gavin, exhibit their sexist behaviour early in the novels and arguably change before novel’s end. The men both change their mind when the women have proven their abilities. Moreover, the reader is positioned to view the heroines as contributing to the “healing” of the heroes and explaining away their early indiscretions.

**Heroines Trying to be Tough in a Man’s World**

In this section, I examine the protagonists of *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat* in relation to romance and feminism. Both heroines are shaped by the three social trends that Regis argues, “meet and clash on the pages of romance”. I argue that the heroines are constrained in their romantic pursuits by “affective individualism” and notions of “companionate love”. This relates to the context in which their relationships occur. While both novels contain a romantic structure and explore the three social trends, the heroines exhibit varying characteristics that can be deemed feminist or postfeminist, including their desire to work and succeed in male dominated workplaces, alongside their tendency to address workplace harassment in their own way.

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50 This title of this section is drawn from reviewer Tiffany Fox’s (2012) comment that Lena Todd, heroine of *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots*, “is forced to prove to everyone just how tough a woman in a man’s world can be”. Fox, “Inspiration from Pilbara.”

Both heroines display the qualities of Sherri Inness’s “semi-tough” heroine.\textsuperscript{52} Even if toughness is not represented through a muscular or a physically strong body, Lena and Wendy are tough in “action” and “attitude” and, when given the chance, display their “authority”.\textsuperscript{53} Their displays of toughness challenge stereotypical expectations of femininity and assert that these women can stick up for themselves and fulfil their professional goals, even in a context not traditionally occupied by women.

The three social trends found in romance impact Lena Todd and Wendy Hopkins in interesting ways. As Regis argues, the three social trends of affective individualism, property rights and companionate love “meet and clash on the pages of romance”.\textsuperscript{54} Affective individualism is the individual’s right to make their own decisions and decide what makes them happy.\textsuperscript{55} Companionate love and marriage is a union based on “mutual comfort and support, including love, between spouses”.\textsuperscript{56} Property rights are the legal entitlement to own property and not have a family’s wealth determined only through marriage combined with the distribution of wealth and assets between men.

Both heroines are impacted most prominently by “affective individualism” and “companionate love”. In \textit{The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots}, Lena is an affective individual who makes her own decisions and chooses her own pathways through life without having to consider her family or other people.\textsuperscript{57} There are no legal restrictions on Lena to own property. As an engineering graduate, the reader surmises that she has the education and qualifications to secure a well-paid job and afford property. The desire for companionate love is the one social trend which Lena should be able to express, but finds difficult. As their attraction develops, Lena and Dan feel impeded by the restrictive camp life

\textsuperscript{52} Inness, \textit{Tough Girls: Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture}.
\textsuperscript{53} See Inness (1999) and her four characteristics of “tough women”: body, action, attitude and authority (24-27).
\textsuperscript{54} Regis, \textit{A Natural History of the Romance Novel}, 55.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 56.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{57} Like gothic novels such as Jane Austen’s \textit{Northanger Abbey} and Ann Radcliffe’s \textit{The Mysteries of Udolpho} and other chick lit novels such as \textit{The Devil Wears Prada} and \textit{Me, Myself and I}, Lena’s family are noticeably absent from the plot.
because he is the site manager and project client while Lena works for the contractor. These circumstances are complicated by animosity between the men who work for the contractor and those who work for the client. Even though Lena and Dan should be able to be together, one significant barrier that delays the romance is the workplace tension caused by the mere suggestion of their relationship. It is only when both decide they do not care what others think, that they can “choose love”. In this case the unique social context and professional situation impedes their romance.

In *The Girl with the Hard Hat*, Wendy Hopkins, like Lena Todd is free to own property if she chooses and make choices about how she lives her life, specifically for her own happiness. Wendy and Gavin struggle to kick-start their relationship because of their own internal issues. After being abandoned by her father as a child, Wendy finds it difficult to trust men. Gavin identifies that Wendy is a woman best suited for a long term relationship however he does not think that is what he wants. In these two novels readers therefore find restrictions to companionate love and affective individualism that really should not exist.

The characterisation of the heroines, Lena Todd and Wendy Hopkins, illustrates the evolution of the romance heroine from paperback romances through to chick lit texts. Loretta Hill’s first novel, *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* features the newly graduated engineer Lena Todd in her first remote work placement with her new employer. Lena is, at first, made out to indulge in pleasures usually associated with postfeminism. As Holmlund has suggested of the “chick postfeminist”, “some like to party, dress up, and step out, taking breaks from work to date or shop”.

58 In the first chapter, Lena’s love for such postfeminist urban pleasures is apparent. When she is asked by her boss to work in the Pilbara, the narrative reveals, “Lena liked the city. She liked the nightclubs. And she loved shopping” (1). This very statement conjures an image of Lena as a postfeminist singleton in the style of characters from *Sex and the City*. However, this impression of Lena is almost immediately undercut when it

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58 Holmlund, "Postfeminism from A to G."
is revealed that she is an engineer, a profession stereotypically dominated by men. Lena weighs up the pros and cons of the work opportunity, the narrator summing up her reservations:

She'd be leaving all her friends behind. She pictured parties booming without her. No one glancing up from their cocktails to ask where she was. No one looking at the door to see if she had arrived. The scene cut unhappily to her sitting under a gum tree in dirty clothes, fanning herself against tropical heat. Her hair, unrecognisable—fuzzy and teased to an enormous height by the weather. (3)

She worries about going to the Pilbara and "never coming back" (2). Her concerns represent the postfeminist sensibility in that she worries about being excluded from her social milieu, not being seen, not being missed and that her looks will change for the worse.

Holmlund's definition of the postfeminist appear impossible to uphold if Lena moves to the Pilbara; there will be few opportunities to "shop" or "dress up". However, Lena sees the chance as an opportunity to become a "good engineer" (2). As Lena's narrative explains, she feels that she has "too much to prove—more than the other engineers who didn't wear skirts and clips in their hair. She could be as good as any of them; and here was her chance to show it" (3). Her view reflects Bastalich's (2007) finding that female engineers are under more pressure to prove themselves as competent and technically capable than men.

Thus, Lena is initially constructed as resembling a postfeminist singleton however this is challenged by her career as an engineer. Subsequently, this example suggests a slippage between different feminist identities. Rather than seeing her only as exhibiting the postfeminist sensibility, this slippage suggests

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59 This impression of Lena challenges some views of female engineers. As Bastalich et. al. (2007) has noted, "We live in a world in which a 'woman engineer' is an oxymoron; in which women engineers might understandably wish to avoid any association with femininity, carrying as it does traits rejected by the masculine—'emotional', 'non-technical', 'non-mechanical' and 'non-inventive'—connotations that contradict the grounds upon which professional esteem and competence are founded" (389). At first, Lena retains her physical expressions of 'femininity'.

60 Frehill (1997) argues that because women are seen as "token" in the engineering profession, they often experience intense scrutiny. While "men's errors could be hidden", women find that "even the slightest mistakes were noticed" (118). Frehill suggests that because of this scrutiny, "some token women" respond by "overachieving" (118).

that her identity is fluid and contextual. In her case, she chooses her professional ambitions as an engineer over urban (postfeminist) pleasures.

Both Lena and Wendy are treated badly when they first enter the remote work site. Their treatment is attributed to the fact that they are women and then in relation to what they wear. Camancho and Lord (2013) argue that women in male dominated industries, engineering especially, often try to minimise their gender difference to men purposely to “fit in”.62 In Lena’s case, when she arrives on site, everyone turns to stare at her. The narrator reveals Lena’s thoughts: “Her perfectly respectable shorts” suddenly “felt inappropriately short and her smart business shirt much too fitted and much too pink” (14). Moreover, when she announces she is the new engineer, the men respond sceptically, with her boss telling her, “Get yourself a uniform and boots—steel-capped. Tie up your hair and—...I don’t suppose there’s anything you can do much about the rest of it” (17). Lena’s city-sculpted attire is not appropriate for a dangerous worksite. The next day Lena decides she “didn’t want to be constantly playing second fiddle to her sex” so she changes her clothes to “her oldest, droopiest pair of cargoes”, “boring ponytail” and “no make-up” to become “plain, frumpy and utterly unworthy of a second glance” (21-22). Her attempts to “fit-in” and undo signs of urban femininity suggest that she wants to make her body invisible; or rather, she wants to be seen as an engineer rather than a “token woman”. Lena's decision to dress differently suggests that she is aware of the physical signs and norms of gender and decides to reduce evidence of femininity to fit into the context.

The fluidity of gender is demonstrated in these two novels in several ways. Inness (1999) explains that “toughness” is expressed through body, action, attitude and authority. For Inness, representations of “tough women” challenge the dominance of male heroes in popular culture.63 Hill’s two heroines experience moments of toughness in attitude, action and authority suggesting they are “semi-tough”. For example, when Wendy arrives at the site reception to

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be allocated accommodation, locally known as a “donga”\(^{64}\), she is met by “the resident bully...a woman in her late forties, with her feet on the desk...She had knotty hair and a rather unfortunate face that settled into a resigned expression around dry cracking lips” (29). The woman accuses Wendy of being a “spy” and acts like a “bitch”, telling her, “The name’s Ethel, by the way, girlie” (29). Wendy’s response demonstrates her toughness in attitude and action:

> Just so you know Ethel, I’ve been around the block a few times and I don’t take shit from anyone. So get your feet off the desk, put that nail file away and get me a bloody donga now! (original emphasis, 29).

Wendy attempts to exert power over the nonplussed Ethel, who readers are positioned to view as a workplace rival. Ethel has no desire to assist Wendy. While readers see that Wendy can stand up for herself if the situation warrants it, in this case it backfires and Wendy finds herself living in the “palace donga”, accommodation that is so broken, it is virtually uninhabitable. Despite the small number of women on the site, Ethel’s behaviour suggests there is no guarantee of camaraderie.

Toughness is one of the ways that Lena and Wendy navigate their professional plots. Lena Todd’s story centres on her orientation to the male dominated context and leading a team of men to extend the jetty. As a health and safety officer, Wendy must initiate change on the site and see the site through a major cyclone, despite the reluctance of the men. There are moments when the romantic and professional plots of both heroines intersect and come into conflict, providing the heroines an opportunity to demonstrate tough action, attitude or authority. For example, Wendy is on the jetty when an accident occurs, injuring Sharon, the site bus driver. Wendy immediately launches into action, securing the jetty, preventing any further danger or damage and arranging an ambulance to transport Sharon to hospital. Even though Wendy has demonstrated calmness and superior judgement when the men seem too shocked to act, she blames herself for the accident, “Too busy watching whales and Gavin’s gorgeous smile” (original emphasis, 169). Her work colleague, Chub,

\(^{64}\) A donga is a small transportable building that has been refitted with basic furniture for accommodating site workers. Most remote and mining site camps have communal bathroom and kitchen facilities.
tries to assuage her guilt telling her “the men here are saying they have never seen anyone act with such a clear head” (169). For Wendy, this incident earns her the respect and trust of those on the site.

In Lena’s case, when the men on the site find out about her relationship with Dan, she encounters blatant sexual harassment including quips such as “she must love a whipping in bed, that one” (261). Furthermore, when the jetty building project is delayed and her team experiences enormous pressure to hasten their work, in a group meeting Gavin suggests that they should, “Get Lena to talk to [Dan] about it. She might be able to swing us an extension [...] Pardon the pun [...] If she’s got some sort of influence over the bastard, I say we use it” (267). In response, Lena “writhed in fury” and felt “white hot rage” at the suggestion “he was happy to prostitute her out for the sake of the project!” (267). Lena’s boss berates Gavin for his comment and Lena is forced to deny that she is even in a relationship with Dan. Both heroines express their anger and toughness at the sexism and harassment they encounter at the same time they try to win professional respect from their co-workers. Thus, Hill’s heroines exemplify the continuing evolution of romance, which Ann Jensen noted as early as the 1980s involves heroines working in non-traditional jobs, confronting sexism and the gendered nature of the workplace.65

In conclusion, the heroines of Hill’s novels can be read through Regis’s three social trends in relation to the romance. While these heroines have independence and financial security, they are hindered by impediments to their affective individualism and companionate love. They exemplify romance heroines working in non-traditional professions and address inequalities in the workplace as they attempt to fulfil their professional ambitions. These heroines also have complex gender constructions, whereby they are not simply feminist or postfeminist. Depending on the context, different feminist readings of these heroines is possible.

Workplace Inequality: Sex Discrimination, Postfeminist Solutions?

In this section, I examine the representation of workplace inequality and sexism in Hill’s two novels. I have already argued in this chapter that examples of sexism are encoded into some of the essential elements of romance. I have suggested that sexism is eroticised through the elements of romance; however, heroes also change their sexist views over the course of the novels. This is partly explained by them overcoming their barriers and being “healed” by the heroine. Moreover, heroines overcome obstacles to their professional goals, thereby accruing respect from their colleagues. This section takes a wider view of sexism and gender inequality in the workplace. I argue that the novels are feminist in representing issues of blatant, covert and subtle sexism and harassment; yet they favour postfeminist solutions where the heroines avoid formal processes and instead opt to “deal with it” themselves. I argue that there is a discordant message in these novels about gender inequality in the workplace: they are feminist in representing such issues however appear to emphasise postfeminist solutions.

Both heroines, Lena Todd and Wendy Hopkins, experience a range of blatant, covert and subtle forms of sexism and sex discrimination in their construction site workplace. Benokraitis (1997) differentiates between “blatant”, “covert” and “subtle” sexism. “Blatant” sex discrimination refers to acts that “intentionally” and “visibly” treat women unequally. “Covert” sex discrimination are acts that are “hidden, purposeful, and often, maliciously motivated” while subtle sex discrimination is “typically less visible and obvious” than blatant forms. All three forms are exemplified in the two Hill novels. From their first day on the site Lena and Wendy are subjected to a range of sexist behaviour from men at all levels of the organisation and particularly when they are new on site. For example, Lena in *The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots* is subjected to what Benokraitis (1997) terms sex discrimination by “collegial exclusion”. This is where “women are made to feel invisible or unimportant through physical,

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social, or professional isolation".\textsuperscript{67} When Lena first arrives on the site, she is
given what she describes as a “data entry job” (24) which confines her to the
office and makes no use of her engineering qualification. No explanation is given
by her boss as to why Lena performs this job. After six days, it is not surprising
that Lena is so frustrated that she takes herself out onto the wharf where the
main construction work is taking place, without wearing the requisite safety
gear and having had no safety induction. The client and her boss berate her for
her behaviour while drawing attention to her sex thereby reinforcing the
sexism of this workplace.

On returning from the jetty, Lena experiences blatant sex discrimination that
Benokraitis defines as “intentional” and “visible”.\textsuperscript{68} According to Hacker (1981)
engineers value being “adept” rather than “inept”.\textsuperscript{69} For Hacker, “ineptness” is
often associated with femininity. Thus, an engineer who lacks the skill and
knowledge required to use tools effectively or “assemble objects” often leads to
them being ostracised or teased. In Lena’s case, the sexism binds her femininity
to her supposed lack of skill. As Frehill notes, “[e]ngineering work, by definition,
requires application of the theoretical principles of math and science. It is
imperative to ‘prove oneself’ by ‘doing’.”\textsuperscript{70} Lena’s physical exclusion from the
construction site prevents her demonstrating that she can put the theoretical
principles of engineering into practice. She asks her boss, “What does an
engineer from Perth come here to do?” (37) implying she is there to work as an
engineer, not as an office girl. Her boss Carl responds, “you forget that you’re
also young, female and fuckin’ inexperienced” (37). Lena replies, “believe
me...I’m never allowed to forget it” (37). Carl’s comment reinforces a number of
stereotypes about women in engineering. Firstly, it emphasises Lena’s sex
difference as though being a woman is related to her ability to perform her
professional duties. Further, he emphasises her lack of experience and age
while suggesting that she must somehow prove herself as competent and
capable. Yet, he intentionally excludes and isolates her from the site where the

\textsuperscript{67}Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{68}Ibid., 7.
\textsuperscript{69}Hacker (1981) as quoted in Frehill (1997, 120).
\textsuperscript{70}Frehill, "Subtle Sexism in Engineering." 131.
application of her knowledge should occur. Carl’s comment, not only intentionally sexist, suggests that Lena is “inept” without providing the opportunity for her to prove him wrong.

The research by Bastalich (2007) reveals that women engineers experience a “cultural bind” where, they:

[M]ust either adapt to the existing engineering workplace culture and be ‘like men’, and by implication unlike ‘most’ ‘emotional’ women, or they can be ‘different’ and vulnerable to derogation and a quiet hostility.71

Professionally, Lena and Wendy experience subtle and blatant sexism when they try to go about their daily work and meet performance deadlines. As I have explained, Lena deliberately tries to fit in by changing her physical appearance. Wendy however finds herself “vulnerable to derogation” because she maintains her difference. For example, Wendy expects a certain amount of difficulty and non-cooperation in her role as health and safety officer. However, when she tries to implement basic safety procedures, the scale of the sexism she encounters is apparent immediately. One comment from a male co-worker is: “Now hang on a minute there, missy...you can’t just dole out extra paperwork like lumps of cream on scones. We’ve got a job to do, which won’t get done if we’ve all this crap on our plates as well” (58). Here the use of “missy” is a form of sex discrimination that Benokraitis (1997) terms “subjective objectification”. This is where women are treated as “children, possessions or sex objects”.72 In this case, even though Wendy is simply doing her job, the use of “missy” reaffirms her sex difference. The simile of “like lumps of cream or scones” alludes to the stereotypical feminine role of domestic homemaker or woman in the kitchen, suggesting that that is where she belongs.

In other examples, the men on site reaffirm the “difference” of Wendy and Lena through the use of nicknames. Lena is given the name “Madame engineer” by her colleagues, a reminder that while she may be a university qualified professional, her ability and competence is less important than her sex. Indeed,

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71 Bastalich et al., "Disrupting Masculinities," 395.
72 Benokraitis, Subtle Sexism, 17.
as Bastalich and others argue, thinking about what it means to be an ‘engineer’ is a highly gendered process whereby, “to be an engineer is to be a man”.

Despite Lena altering her appearance by donning a work uniform and requisite “steel-capped boots”, it is not enough to obfuscate her “difference” which her nickname and its repeated use on site, constantly reaffirms. Wendy too is given a nickname, “the sergeant” (71) because she has a certain amount of power in her job as the health and safety officer. This name reflects another subtle form of sex discrimination, as defined by Benokraitis (1997), as “radiant devaluation” where women are devalued in “glowing terms”. The use of “sergeant” acknowledges her power while also alluding to the negative connotations and stereotypes associated with the “cops”, policing the site’s safety practices and processes. In conversation with her likeable colleague Chub, he suggests that the nickname is positive in that it “sort of comments on the authority you have”, though Wendy quickly adds, “or mocks it” (71). Wendy’s comment indicates that she is aware of the doubleness associated with the nick name. Furthermore, Wendy’s difference is affirmed further through being the target of practical jokes, having her work camera tampered with, finding stickers put all over her car and then discovering her boots stolen from outside her donga and thrown on the roof. These examples assert that female engineers and other women working in such contexts have to navigate a profession and spaces where men are the norm and their presence attracts unwanted attention designed to reinforce difference.

Difference is also emphasised in other ways in these novels, particularly by the comparison of the heroes with other men on the site. As I have previously explained, the heroes of The Girl in Steel-Capped Boots and The Girl in the Hard Hat engage in sexist behaviour towards the heroines, notably when they first meet. However, the narrative positions readers to view the heroes as different to other men. Dan and Gavin are presented as ideal in comparison to other men on site. Radway (1984) argued that the heroine and hero of romance are often presented as “ideal feminine and masculine types” in contrast to foil

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73 Bastalich et al., "Disrupting Masculinities," 390.
74 Benokraitis, Subtle Sexism, 19.
characters. In Hill’s novels, the heroes are presented as incredibly attractive in comparison to other men. The men on the worksite are represented as suffering a severe case of Peter Pan syndrome, as boys who “never grew up” and instigators of blatant, covert and subtle forms of sex discrimination. When the heroines enter the workplace, their every detail becomes fodder for the men. The women cannot go anywhere without being escorted or attracting unwanted male attention. They encounter all manner of offensive pick-up lines including, “I’m not a gynaecologist, but if you have a need, I can take a look at it for you” (39). In the mess hall Lena notes the “sleazy grins”, the feeling that everyone knew who she was (20) and the many winks (21). When she meets the “barge boys” she describes them as “friendly, abrasive and completely sexist” (21). The boss, Dan, captures most succinctly the kind of workplace the men create:

They smoke anywhere they like. The toilet dongas are a breeding ground for disease. They litter. They forget to wear their PPE, or the PPE they do have is damaged or inadequate. They drive their utes too fast. There is a speed limit, you know. They break things. Last week someone backed his ute into the conveyor and bent one of the struts! Luckily, no serious damage. They don’t wait thirty minutes after hot work before clearing the site. They don’t tag damaged equipment, they just chuck it in a container so some other person can re-discover it and not tag it all over again. They don’t read safety memos! They are constantly—....(90)

Even described by another man, the construction site men are depicted as sexist, irresponsible, unsafe and disgusting. With so many male foils around, it is not surprising that the heroes appear attractive. The heroes also reinforce sexist behaviour and make suggestions on how the heroines should respond to it.

Hill’s two novels are feminist in the attempts to represent sexism. The novels represent women working in male dominated contexts and raise awareness of the kinds of sexism that may be encountered. However, how the heroines respond to that sexism is another element that a feminist textual analysis must consider. Frehill (1997) has analysed subtle forms of sexism in the engineering industry. She notes that surveys of female engineers have revealed that some women view sexist behaviour by male colleagues as ‘‘obnoxious’ rather than as

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75 Radway, Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature, 131.
a form of discrimination.” Furthermore, Bastalich and others (2007) undertook 51 interviews with ten male engineers and 41 female engineers revealing that women had different strategies for dealing with sexism. The study found that some female engineers “spoke about ‘ignoring’ sexism, or finding it ‘entertaining’ or ‘amusing’” while others “emphasised the importance of ‘not reacting’ (or getting upset) when teased and tested, even when this reached extreme levels.” Lena and Wendy experience daily sexism on the site. Wendy chooses to ignore it with no complaint or response. For example, she experiences off-putting, sexist comments when she first walks into the Barnes Inc. office. A man says, “And who might you be, blondie?” (6). He also refers to her as “darlin’” (7). The narrative reveals Wendy’s thoughts, “she knew [his] eyes were on her rear as she walked off in the direction he had indicated. Her skin prickled in annoyance but she decided it was a fight best saved for another time” (6). The use of the nouns “blondie” and “darlin’” exemplify Benokraitis’s definition of sex discrimination as “friendly harassment”. This form of sexism is defined as “sexually oriented behaviour that, at face value, looks harmless or even playful [however] creates discomfort, embarrassment, or humiliation.”

In this case, Wendy is singled out for being female then addressed reductively in relation to a body part, such as her “blonde” hair. This treatment constructs a picture of explicit and implicit sexism within the context, yet Wendy chooses to ignore it.

A number of studies and discussion papers have emphasised the importance of addressing sexual discrimination and sexism in male dominated professions, including engineering and the mining industry. In 2013, the Australian Human Rights Commission released a toolkit of strategies for increasing the number of women in male dominated industries including mining, construction and utilities. The toolkit identified “masculine or blokey” workplace cultures that are “non-inclusive” and have a “higher tolerance of behaviours that could be

78 Ibid.: 392.
79 Benokraitis, Subtle Sexism, 16-17.
viewed as sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination”.⁸¹ One strategy to combat this workplace culture was the development of workplaces that embraced “inclusivity” and “diversity” as well as “meeting the needs of all employees”, including the promotion and display of “zero tolerance for sexual harassment, bullying and discrimination”.⁸² In the two Loretta Hill novels, the men in power suggest formal complaints and ‘official’ routes for dealing with sexist behaviour. In doing so they exemplify Projansky’s “men can be feminists too” postfeminism where men appear to make better feminists than women.⁸³ Carl and Dan suggest the formal, structural procedures for sexism, yet neither woman is interested in pursuing an official complaint. For example, Dan suggests to Lena that she report sexual harassment (192). Her response reflects the tendency to “ignore” the behaviour, as Lena explains: “Dan, if I reported every guy who tried to take advantage of me like that, I’d be here till the cows came home” (192). Dan implores her to treat the situation seriously. Lena however is not swayed, stating, “You...need to trust me. Let me handle things in my own way” (192). He warns her she should not feel “shame” in “rock[ing] the boat” (193). Lena’s response is interesting in two ways; firstly, she suggests that the sexism is rampant and therefore it would take too much time to complain. Rampant sexism implies that it is institutionalised. Secondly, Lena reflects a postfeminist attitude to sexism in that it is best handled by the individual rather than pursuing an official complaint. Similarly, in The Girl in the Hard Hat, Carl warns Wendy about the gossip, “If you have any major problems, like harassment, please don’t fuckin’ wait on it. Come see me” (9). Even though Dan and Carl suggest that the heroines pursue formal sexual harassment complaints against male co-workers, the women decide to handle sexism and harassment in their own way, thus choosing friendship with their co-workers over affirmative action.

The novels raise questions about the type of sexism experienced and the heroine’s individual responses to it. Do they decide against complaining

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⁸² Ibid., 36.
⁸³ Projansky, Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture, 67-68.
because the sexism is so rife that it would mean complaining about virtually every man on the site? Or perhaps they decide against complaining because they wish to seek out their own solutions to these problems, wishing to make their own way through a situation, one that in a gender equal world would not exist. Even though the men in power exhibit a “men can be feminists too” style of postfeminism, they exhibit a faux feminism. If they were true feminists, they would enter a complaint on behalf of these women in the quest for a workplace free of discrimination. Instead, they stand idly by waiting for the women to make a formal stand. The novels suggest that these women are seeking postfeminist, individualist solutions to their problems, rather than identifying and seeking formal redress for structurally located sexism and inequality. Through their inaction, the men in power enable these women to handle it “their own way” while being complicit in ongoing discrimination and sexism in the workplace.

In conclusion, *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat* are feminist in their invocation of the issues around workplace inequality and sexism; however, they counteract that representation by having characters not address such issues formally. Thus, the novels show a textual disharmony between the issues represented, the narrative structure and actions of the central characters.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter I have examined two novels by Western Australian born author, Loretta Hill, *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat*. The novels are a subset of the wider chick lit genre due to their settings in the remote male dominated construction sites of the Pilbara in Western Australian. According to the existing literature on women in engineering and mining in Australia, there is an absence of women in these industries and a plethora of issues that impact recruitment and retention of female staff. Hill’s novels are both romances that include the essential elements of the form. As I have argued, sexism and sex discrimination appear within some of these essential elements, including the society defined, meeting and attraction. Both heroes can be read
as sexist towards the heroines initially; however, this is explained away by their internal barriers that delay the progression of romance. Hill’s novels reveal the complex relationship between romance and feminism in chick lit. These novels are romance in structure however examine issues of gender equality in this profession and work environment. Even if the heroines seek postfeminist solutions to sexism and harassment, the representation of these issues is feminist, positioning readers to consider how they might address such workplace problems.

The next chapter draws together the findings from my examination of feminism and romance in Australian chick lit. I outline my responses to my two key research questions: "What is the relationship between feminism and romance in chick lit?" and "What is the role of setting in the representation of feminist romance in Australian chick lit?". I outline the limitations of my study, possible future research in this area and theoretical conclusions in light of my discussion.
Conclusion: Australian Chick Lit as Feminist Romance

You’ve got to go, “Shoes, shoes, shoes! Handbags, chocolate!” she says, shouting, and then whispers: “Women’s rights.”

Irish chick lit author Marian Keyes

Introduction

A powerful sign of chick lit’s life, much to the surprise of those who predicted or anticipated its demise, was the publication in 2013 of the highly anticipated novel, *Bridget Jones’s Diary: Mad About the Boy*. In the 1990s, Bridget was a comedic poster-girl for single women; in 2013 she is a fifty-something mother of two who is trying to write her screenplay *The Leaves in His Hair*. Shockingly for some readers, Bridget is now a widow after losing her husband Mr Darcy to a landmine explosion in war-torn Darfur. In a decline after Mark’s death, Bridget is urged by her friends not to become Germaine Greer’s “Disappearing Woman”. For Bridget’s friend Talitha, any semblance of Greer’s disappearing woman must be “brutally murdered and buried” (33). Indeed, Bridget’s narrative centres on her reclamation of public life following her decline after Mark’s death alongside her navigation of her fifties, which Bridget acknowledges used to be the “age of Germaine Greer’s ‘Invisible Woman’” (152). While some readers may be shocked by the death of Mark Darcy, others will find in this new Bridget Jones novel a reflection on the mid-life heroine.

2 The screenplay is an adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*.
3 In a lecture tour in 2013, Greer critiqued the so-called “disappearance” of women from the news (which she argues is now dominated by “men in suits”), from public life, in the pursuit of thinness and particularly as they age.
Bridget Jones's Diary: Mad About the Boy evidences chick lit's longevity while testifying to the genre's ability to deal with new themes, issues and formulations of the romance plot. Like Fielding's most recent novel, Australian chick lit offers new engagements with love and romance and new permutations of the romance. Since emerging in 2000, Australian chick lit has developed subgenres that have taken it far beyond the city limits, beyond the adventures of professional urban women and beyond any suggestion that it is “only about romance”. Australian chick lit engages with issues surrounding work, motherhood, identity, body image and relationships in ways that resonate with its unique context. As I explained in Chapter One, women have made considerable progress in Australia towards equality; however, significant issues remain in relation to work, domestic life and the status of Indigenous women as well as those living outside of urban centres. Australian chick lit engages with such issues thereby offering a commentary on women’s status in Australia.

This chapter describes the key findings and contributions of this thesis. I summarise my responses to the two main research questions, outline the limitations of my research and suggest future research in this area. I then draw a number of theoretical conclusions, especially in relation to feminism and romance.

**Answering the Research Questions**

*What is the relationship between feminism and romance in Australian chick lit?*

As I have shown through my case study chapters, the relationship between feminism and romance in Australian chick lit is complex. It is not possible to state that chick novels are only about the “search for Mr Right” or “The One” or that they are antifeminist or postfeminist. As I have argued, numerous variables need to be considered when discussing feminism and romance in chick lit, including firstly, how romance and feminism are defined and theorised, and secondly, which aspects of a novel those definitions and theories are being applied to. In this thesis, I have explored the representation of romance and feminism in a selection of Australian chick lit primarily in relation to the narrative components of plot, character and theme. I have done so to identify
moments of harmony and disharmony in relation to romance and feminism and also any contradictions and in the plots, characters and themes of the novels in relation to feminism and romance.

Through the application of Regis’s (2003) definition and theory of eight essential elements that comprise romance novels, I have argued that the Australian chick lit examined are, for the most part, romances. They tell the story of “courtship and betrothal” for one or more heroines and include the eight vital elements that Regis argues comprise the romance form. However, I have also shown that there is much variety in how these elements are organised. Furthermore, the selected Australian chic lit grapples with ideas and ideals of romance and love that was also a point of disagreement within the women’s movement of the 1960s and 1970s. Even though most novels utilise a romance plot, not all novels reinforce romantic myths such as “Happily ever after” or “The One”. Novels such as Maggie Alderson's *Handbags and Gladrags* and *How to Break Your Own Heart* probe these ideals to the extent that their heroine’s lives are irrevocably altered. Australian chic lit also contains numerous reluctant romantic heroines, including *The Girl Most Likely’s* Rachel Hill, *Paris Dreaming’s* Libby Cutmore and the heroines of Loretta Hill’s two red dirt romances. Thus, the utilisation of the romance plot does not guarantee that a novel will contain a romantic heroine. Nor does it guarantee that ideals about love and romance will be reproduced uncritically.

Australian chic lit contains examples where the romance plot is challenged through multiplots or sequels. Multiplots, as I have suggested, have the power to offer more than one romance plot including the opportunity to offer an “other end” for one or more of the heroines. As I have explained, novels such as *Me, Myself and I* use a single heroine propelled through two parallel plots. Such a device allows her life to be explored as a single woman and a married mother, thereby probing her choices. Sequels have the power to undo the hermetic seal of previous endings and are another strategy that authors employ to explore the choices of a heroine beyond her original happy ending. In Chapter Eight, I discussed two Rachael Treasure novels, *Jillaroo* and *The Farmer’s Wife*. In this
case, Jillaroo is an ideal romance with a happy ending. Yet, its sequel The Farmer’s Wife challenges readers’ expectations of romance by pulling apart the romantic relationship that provided the certainty of the first novel. Thus through a focus on the plot, heroine and issues/themes a novel can be seen to represent contradictory notions of love and romance. Novels can have a romantic structure but defer from reinforcing romantic ideals.

In terms of feminism, the Australian chick lit novels discussed depict women who have benefitted from changes to women’s rights since the last peak of feminist activism in the 1960s and 1970s. Heroines have personal and professional goals and ambitions they want to realise and their plots often chart this realisation alongside their developing relationship with a hero. Some heroines identify with and reinforce feminist views such as women’s right to vote, to be free from violence and have equality in the workplace. Heroines who espouse such views include those in Anita Heiss’s novels as well as the heroines of The Boy’s Club and allmenarebastards.com. These heroines state their recognition of and affiliation with “feminism”. Other heroines “show” that they are feminist. Rachael Treasure’s heroine Rebecca Saunders is profoundly aware of gender inequality in the rural context and does not let it stop her chasing and fulfilling her dreams: she navigates places and spaces usually dominated by men and masculinity while confronting sexism and gender inequality directly. Loretta Hill’s heroines also confront sexism and gender inequality in their workplace, even if it is not by official channels. Thus, it can be concluded that these novels are certainly “in dialogue with feminism”5 as Whelehan noted of the chick lit she discussed in The Feminist Bestseller. Arguably Australian chick lit’s representation of issues such as intimate relationship violence, workplace harassment and discrimination and gendered differences in the experience of domestic life suggest a continued need for discussion about women’s rights.

Some Australian chick lit heroines exhibit aspects of the postfeminist sensibility, where feminism is invoked variously so it can be rejected, taken into account or corrected. For example, the heroine of allmenarebastards.com

5 Whelehan, The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City, 218.
selectively engages with feminism when it suits her but rejects and corrects what she sees as an extreme feminist view. Loretta Hill’s novels offer a feminist representation of women working in male dominated environments and introduce numerous examples of blatant, covert and subtle forms of sexism. However, her novels *The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots* and *The Girl in the Hard Hat* downplay sexism and sexual harassment by depicting heroines who do not want to pursue formal complaints against male co-workers. Instead, the heroines want to deal with it “in their own way” thereby exemplifying a postfeminist view. Moreover, the encoding of romantic elements such as the meeting and attraction with examples of sexism suggests that these two Loretta Hill novels eroticise sexism. Alternatively, novels such as *The Boys Club* offer a strident critique of a patriarchal television station, eventually valuing and reinforcing feminism. The novel’s heroine formally complains on behalf of her female co-workers who are subjected to sexual discrimination and unites them as a group to pursue legal cases against their employer. In sum, the Australian chick lit novels discussed demonstrate various engagements and representations of feminism, including novels offering and slipping between feminist and postfeminist views.

As my case study chapters have shown, the selected novels show varying degrees of harmony and disharmony between romance and feminism in relation to their plots, heroines and themes. Novels such as *Jillaroo* reinforce romance as a plot-type while representing the deep gender inequalities of the rural context. Anita Heiss’s novels depict heroines who assert their allegiance to feminism at the same time they buy into romantic myths such as “The One” and “Happily Ever After”. Some novels are more romantic than feminist and vice versa. Novels such as *The Boy's Club* and those of Rachael Treasure, Anita Heiss and Loretta Hill demonstrate that romance and feminism are by no means antithetical; in these novels romance and feminism co-exist, however not always harmoniously. Therefore, there is no one rule for chick lit or even Australian chick lit in terms of romance and feminism. Rather, there are varying and divergent engagements with romance and feminism. Clearly, feminism is represented in these novels; in some cases it is “told” and others it is “shown”.

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What is the role of setting in the representation of feminism and romance in Australian chick lit?

My second research question asked what role setting and place (or geography) plays in the representation of feminism and romance in Australian chick lit. Throughout this thesis, I have emphasised the importance of setting when examining chick lit generally and specifically in relation to feminism and romance. I have argued that much of the existing literature on chick lit has focused on urban novels. Within Australian chick lit however, there are numerous subgenres that move the genre beyond city limits. This thesis has explored urban Australian chick lit, urban-set novels about professional ‘white’ single women and their Indigenous counterparts, as well as suburban novels, rural romances and red dirt romances.

The shifts in setting found in each of Australian chick-lit’s sub-genres clearly support the argument that context matters. As I stated in my Introduction, feminist geographers including Laurie, Dwyer, Holloway and Smith (1999) have argued that place and context are crucial to the construction of gender. In the case of Australian chick lit, context and place determine what heroines do, where they work, the men that they meet and the issues they face. With each shift in setting from the urban to suburban to rural and remote, it is clear there are slight shifts in the issues and themes encountered. In urban Australian novels, heroines appear to encounter similar issues and problems as their English, Irish and North American chick lit counterparts including those associated with work, marriage and relationships, motherhood, consumerism and health and well-being. Anita Heiss’s novels discussed in Chapter Five exemplify the importance of context to the cultural identity of her Indigenous heroines. In three out of her four novels, her heroines travel to a new city to pursue career opportunities. Such relocations invite the heroines to reflect on their cultural identity in relation to their new city surroundings. In Paris Dreaming the heroine orientates her own cultural identity in relation to French culture including issues surrounding the recent attempts to ban the burqa. Manhattan Dreaming invites the heroine’s reflection on the election of Barack

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6 Laurie et al., Geographies of New Femininities, 4.
Obama and the hope that one day Australia will have an Indigenous Prime Minister.

Novels such as *Spinning Around* and *The Girl Most Likely* that shift the setting to the Australian suburbs engage with notions of domesticity, motherhood and work-life balance. In particular, *Spinning Around* probes the life of a lower-middle class woman split between her marital crisis and her role as mother and part-time city worker. While the heroine believes herself to be struggling and somewhat failed on the domestic front, the crisis in her marriage prompts her realisation that her assessment is not entirely true. *The Girl Most Likely* uses the suburbs as a backdrop for a down on her luck heroine who laments her previous success, her decision to never be a mother and her desire to write a novel. Neither novel presents suburban life as immediately attractive or idyllic.

In Chapters Eight and Nine I discussed the most profound shifts in setting to rural and remote environments. Context and place impacts the kind of formulation of romance presented, particularly the characteristics of the society defined and the barriers that protagonists face on their journey to a happy ending. This is especially true of rural and red dirt romances where gender inequality specific to the context is a pervasive day-to-day experience for the heroines. These two chapters demonstrated that a focus on setting has the power to offer insight into contemporary gender roles and stereotypes. In rural and red dirt romances, readers find a context where men and masculinity appear to rule; this is notwithstanding the determined attempts of the heroine and other main characters to carve out a place for themselves outside the gender regime or change the gender regime altogether. Heroines of these novels encounter sexual discrimination, sexual harassment and other aspects of a highly gendered work environment. Rachael Treasure’s heroine Rebecca Saunders also faces domestic violence, harassment and intimidation. The setting primarily acts as a stimulus for the kinds of issues represented and the opportunities that heroines have to address them. Thus, a consideration of setting in conjunction with romance and feminism offers insight into contemporary issues impacting Australian women in different contexts.
Limitations of the Study

This study is confined largely to Australian chick lit with intertextual references to novels from the United Kingdom and North America. As I explained in Chapter One, I used purposive sampling to select novels that resonated with my research questions. There are many Australian novels I have not considered and potentially other sub-genres that are beyond the limits of this study. As well, I have not applied my reading of these novels to other types of chick texts such as chick television or chick flicks. My focus has been on the novel form including the plots, characters and themes in relation to feminism and romance. In relation to feminism, I have drawn upon theories of feminism as postfeminist and third wave feminist. My examination of romance has drawn from a range of theories, particularly upon Regis's (2003) narrative theory of the romance novel including her basic definition and essential elements.

Further Research

In recent years interesting, innovative research has been undertaken in relation to the chick lit genre. Most compelling of this recent work is that of Cheryl A. Wilson who discusses the use of chick lit in the classroom particularly for feminist pedagogical reasons, Eva Chen’s examination of the Chinese chick lit novel, *Shanghai Baby* in relation to neoliberalism, the usefulness of representing qualitative research findings in a chick lit format to raise awareness about social issues affecting women (such as low self-esteem) and the effects a chick lit protagonist’s body weight can have on readers. While these recent publications are timely and offer further insight into the genre, other avenues for further research are apparent.

Analysis of romance and feminism in contemporary Harlequin book series, especially in comparison to mainstream chick lit, is one avenue for investigation. This is timely given the launch in 2013 of Harlequin’s Cosmo girl

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7 Wilson, "Chick Lit in the Undergraduate Classroom."
8 Chen, "Shanghai(Ed) Babies: Geopolitics, Biopoliticiess and the Global Chick Lit."
9 Leavy, "Fiction and the Feminist Academic Novel."
10 Kaminski and Magee, 'Does This Book Make Me Look Fat? The Effect of Protagonist Body Weight and Body Esteem on Female Readers' Body Esteem.'
and KISS lines, both of which appear to replicate chick lit characteristics.\textsuperscript{11} While Harlequin appears to have relaxed some of the rigid guidelines it once had for novels, there are still length constraints that influence content.

Another opportunity for future research in the chick lit area is that focused on the reader. This research would include reception or ethnographic studies similar to Radway's (1984) investigation into romance novel readers. An ethnographic study, such as Radway's investigation, might examine chick lit from the perspective of the 'consumers' of the product. Like Radway, such a study might combine qualitative and quantitative methods including asking readers to complete survey questionnaires, be interviewed and/or join focus groups to discuss the context in which reading occurs, the purpose of reading and their views on the defining qualities of "failed" and "ideal" novels. An investigation into reader responses towards particular novels might also shed light on the various reading positions chick novels contain, some of which my study has explored. Research that gauges reader responses to representations of feminism in the novels or to reoccurring motifs such as consumerism, sexuality and body politics would also be a valuable contribution to knowledge of this genre.

A potential future research opportunity relates to the genre's recent cultural and thematic deviations. Many regionally specific chick novels including from the Philippines, India\textsuperscript{12}, Saudi Arabia\textsuperscript{13}, China and Asia have appeared in recent years. All have received attention in the popular press. Further research into these texts or in comparison to 'Western' novels will offer insight into the genre as a globalising phenomenon. As well as crossing geographical and cultural barriers, chick lit has drawn upon existing genres and developed its own sub-


\textsuperscript{12} Samanth Subramian's review states that the most significant novel of the Indian chick lit canon was journalist Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan's \textit{You are Here}. While Subramian pans this novel as largely a stereotypical chick story about boozy evenings and romantic trysts, she makes the observation that the appearance of the genre in India results from the importation of the concept of consumerism. See Samanth Subramian, "The Girls' Guide to Flirting and Shopping," \textit{The National}, August 28 2008.

\textsuperscript{13} The most popular example is the novel \textit{Girls of Riyadh}.
genres including those that draw upon crime, fantasy, travel, religious motifs and gay/homosexual themes or meander into “porn-lit” or “retro chick lit” domains.\textsuperscript{14} Again these sub-genres provide further opportunities for research.

One further avenue for future research lies in the online and virtual communities associated with chick novels. Arguably, chick lit’s online presence exemplifies Henry Jenkins’ “convergence culture” where “old and new media collide”.\textsuperscript{15} As “old media”, much chick lit is still sold in hard copy form; however future research might consider its online presence, including online communities that have emerged in relation to the genre including how writers engage with readers and fans via dedicated websites. Another consideration would be the uses and gratifications of soft copy reading such as in an e-book or Kindle format. Analysis of online chick lit communities and the medium used to read would probe the genre’s multi-medium presence and situate reading popular fiction within social media platforms and Web 2.0 technology.

\textbf{Final Conclusion}

While a boon for publishers, the chick lit genre has achieved much for women’s fiction. Had it not been for those early novels by Helen Fielding, Marian Keyes and Candace Bushnell published in the mid-1990s, accompanied by rollicking media debate and lucrative commercial success, many female authors would not have been published and female readers might still have been deciding between ‘literary’ texts, bonkbusters and paperback romances. Chick lit has given women readers more choice at the same time it has given women writers a louder voice. To reflect back on chick lit’s brief history is to note with satisfaction how much it has grown and evolved.\textsuperscript{16} With their success assured, stalwart chick authors such as Marian Keyes have braved new and difficult topics. While some chick novels still undeniably revolve around “finding Mr Right”, which in the age of “liquid love” and high divorce rates is without doubt

\textsuperscript{14} Madeleine St John’s \textit{The Women in Black} is set in a 1960s department store in Sydney.
\textsuperscript{16} Cathy Yardley has stated that the “parameters and definitions for Chick Lit are evolving daily.” Cathy Yardley, \textit{Will Write for Shoes: How to Write a Chick Lit Novel} (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2006), 4.
a matter of pressing concern for many women, other authors are using the chick format as a platform to probe topical issues for women including domestic violence\textsuperscript{17}, incompatibility between partners in marriage,\textsuperscript{18} terminal illness\textsuperscript{19} and workplace inequality.\textsuperscript{20} Other authors, such as Rebecca Sparrow, are using their high profiles to embark on new and different projects that try to consciousness-raise about what they see are important, yet under-discussed issues.\textsuperscript{21}

One difference between ‘chick lit’ and its other chick forms (such as chick television and chick flicks), is that authors, especially those with successful track records, such as Marian Keyes, Helen Fielding, Jane Green, Maggie Alderson and Rachael Treasure, appear to have a high degree of control over their content. They appear to have control over what to write about and potentially set new agendas. Marian Keyes for example, as implied through her quote which opened this chapter, appears keenly aware of the power she has as a writer. Her statement that novels shout “shoes, shoes, shoes! Handbags, chocolate” and whisper “women’s rights”, suggests that she intentionally uses the chick format to represent issues relevant to “women’s rights”.

My study has emphasised the polysemic nature of Australian chick lit. Chick novels are open to multiple readings, including those that are “progressive” and “regressive”. Tania Modleski in \textit{Old Wives Tales} (1998) encouraged feminist critics and theorists to examine texts for both their progressive and regressive aspects.\textsuperscript{22} In many ways, individual readers or critics will bring their own agenda to a novel. As this study of chick lit demonstrates, there is no single representation of feminism and romance in Australian chick lit. Rather, there is much variability, contradiction and slippage when different narrative qualities (such as plots, characters and themes) are compared, thereby suggesting that

\textsuperscript{17} See for example Marian Keyes \textit{This Charming Man} and \textit{The Brightest Star in the Sky}.
\textsuperscript{18} See for example Maggie Alderson’s \textit{How to Break Your Own Heart}.
\textsuperscript{19} See for example Monica McInerney’s \textit{The Alphabet Sisters}.
\textsuperscript{20} See for example Marian Keyes’s \textit{The Other Side of the Story} and Loretta Hill’s \textit{The Girl in the Steel-Capped Boots}.
\textsuperscript{21} For example Rebecca Sparrow is co-editing a collection by parents on the unexpected death of child either during pregnancy or after birth.
\textsuperscript{22} Modleski, \textit{Old Wives’ Tales and Other Women’s Stories}.
novels are not always in textual harmony. Nevertheless, the genre contains strong, clear examples of novels that combine romance, especially the romance plot, with feminist themes and issues. In this way they illustrate the workings of feminist romances as stated by Cranny-Francis: they use a “familiar and much loved format” as a “powerful tool for [...] propagandist purposes.”

Australian chick lit uses romance to scrutinise persistent gender inequality and sexism in a range of contexts, from the urban to the red dirt.

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