

REVIEW ESSAY

**Suzanne Ferriss and
Mallory Young (eds),**

***Chick Flicks:
Contemporary Women at
the Movies***

(New York and London, Routledge, 2008).

By Marian Evans

When I last flew to Sydney, to research a paedophile ring, I chose to view *The Nanny Diaries* (2007) from among the many movies available; and remembered how I used to read my mother-in-law's Mills and Boon romances, arguably a kind of pre-chick culture chick lit, lying in her clawfoot bath while she looked after my children. Because there is sometimes very little suspense or surprise in chick flicks or chick lit, the films or books manifest the creation, deferment and realisation of hope in utterly predictable – and comforting – ways.¹ So I welcomed the opportunity to read *Chick Flicks; Contemporary Women at the Movies*.

A companion to Ferriss and Young's earlier volume, *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction*,² *Chick Flicks* is a collection of essays, possibly intended as an undergraduate media studies text, unlike Roberta Garrett's recent *Postmodern Chick Flicks*³ or Rikke Schubart's *Super Bitches and Action Babes*⁴, both more theoretically complex. If so, it is a good collection to start from.

Chick Flicks has thirteen chapters. These provide a theoretical context, some historical context, and discuss subcategories of the

chick flick as the editors understand it. The editors (each also author of a chapter, Ferriss on "Fashioning Femininity in the Chick Flick" and Mallory on "Chic Flicks: The New European Romance") argue in their introduction that chick flicks are best addressed as a form of *chick culture* "a group of mostly American and British popular culture media forms focused primarily on twenty-to-thirty something middle-class women"(1). Chick culture includes chick flicks, chick lit dating from the publication of *Bridget Jones's Diary* in 1996, chick TV programming dating from *Sex and the City* at about the same time, and other elements of pop culture. "Above all", the editors claim, "chick culture is vitally linked to postfeminism" and "chick flicks... can be viewed as the prime postfeminist media texts"(3). They chose the essays in this volume to help place chick flicks within chick culture, to initiate a discussion, and to present a wide range of views.

Ferriss and Young acknowledge that unlike chick lit (which "features single women in their twenties and thirties 'navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships'"⁵) the term "chick flick" does not have a precise historical meaning; they define chick flicks "in the simplest, broadest sense [as] commercial films that appeal to a female audience"(2), including both contemporary films and films from other periods.

This broad definition somewhat undermines their attempt to appropriate chick flicks to chick culture, to fix, as well as to place, chick flicks within a single context. Commercial films that appeal to a female audience are "vitally connected" to much more than postfeminism and a media form focusing on twenty-to-thirty something English or American middleclass (white, heterosexual)

women, as the three chapters on films about those collectively described as “other” chicks demonstrate. (A little surprisingly Mallory’s – continental – European chic flick chapter is not included in this category though arguably it belongs there.)

The “other” chick chapters include “Something’s Gotta Give...” by Margaret Tally about the “older bird”, analysing themes in films like *Something’s Gotta Give* (2003), *Calendar Girls* (2003) and *Anywhere But Here* (1999), with particular emphasis on ambivalence about older women’s sexuality. Lisa Henderson’s “Simple Pleasures: Lesbian Community and *Go Fish* (1994)” explores the paradoxes within a lesbian example of a chick flick that is both a romantic comedy and an art film. Myra Mendible’s “Post-feminism, Class, and the Latina American Dream” on chica flicks comments on the ambivalent construction of working-class, female agency in films featuring Latina protagonists; it focuses on *Maid in Manhattan* (2002), *I Like it Like That* (1994) and *Real Women Have Curves* (2002).

Ferriss’ and Young’s categorisation of “The other chick: race, sexuality, age, class” movies as “other” is precise – because the films contributors discuss in these categories reach beyond postfeminism, chick culture and the girl power of, say, *Legally Blonde* (2001). It may also be an inappropriate attempt to subsume these “others” – as well as the new European romances Mallory discusses as “chic” flicks – into a postfeminist and chick culture mistress narrative. Ferriss and Young acknowledge this as a potential problem (9) and this may be why there are no chapters on chick flicks by black women or women working in Asia, although *The Color Purple* (1984) is mentioned several times, in the introduction and in Deborah Barker’s “The Southern-fried Chick Flick” (now there’s an

“other” category for someone living in the Pacific). But there are no details given about how the “others” were selected for inclusion in the narrative Ferriss and Young present.

This is unfortunate, because many of the “other” films were not made for and within chick culture. For instance, Myra Mendible writes about Latina women’s struggle for self-respect, dignity and social justice and Patrica Cardoso’s *Real Women Have Curves* as a positive example of “feminist resistance fused with ethnic and class empowerment” (168). *Real Women Have Curves* may, however, fit within a broader chick flick category described by Kirsten Smith, who co-wrote *Legally Blonde*, the subject of Carol M Dole’s chapter “The Return of Pink: *Legally Blonde*, Third Wave Feminism and Having It All”, a careful analysis of the film’s relationship to the “girlie” feminism of chick culture. Smith writes elsewhere, in an only implied reference to *Legally Blonde*:

It seems like the chick flick got to be a larger genre. There’s the female action movie and the romantic comedy and the weeper and the woman-in-jeopardy movie. The genre that we’ve been working in we’ve named the ‘girl-power’ genre. The female character starts without any acceptance. She spends the movie gaining that acceptance. But at the same time she’s redefining the parameters of that acceptance. *Erin Brockovich* is a great example of that.⁶

Like *Real Women Have Curves*, Niki Caro’s *Whale Rider* (2002) and *North Country* (2005) are examples of the girl-power genre, or as I’d describe it, woman-power. Caro has said of the parallels between Josey Aimes in *North Country* and Pai in *Whale Rider*: “Obviously they both faced tremendous opposition but they go about creating change

in not a crusading heroine way but in quite a gentle way and they are both so unlikely”⁷. Collectively these “other” chicks – Latina, Māori, lesbian, older, and working class heroines (Mendible refers back to *Norma Rae* (1979), *Silkwood* (1983) and *Places in the Heart* (1984)) – belong in a bigger world than the one Ferriss and Young present and *Legally Blonde* represents.

Feminist Gloria Steinem offers a redefinition of “chick flick” that embraces this larger world. According to her, chick flicks have “more dialogue than special effects, more relationships than violence, [relying for] suspense on how people live instead of how they die.”⁸ They may be art house films, and may even have a male protagonist, surrounded by interesting women with their own storylines, like Susanne Bier’s *After the Wedding* (2006). Or an “other” chick flick may be like Gurinder Chadha’s *Bride and Prejudice* (2004) or one of the European chic flicks discussed in Mallory’s chapter, with a woman central character who is more “edgy” than those in films made in England and America. Located within this definition, the best of chick flicks are just good movies. They are more than movies with youngish white middle-class women as central characters that I-we turn to for ease and pleasure and lack of challenge when travelling. They can be complex and surprising and demanding. And for everyone.

Melissa Silverstein in her *Women and Hollywood* blog says uncategorically: “Most women who work in the film business in any capacity absolutely hate the term ‘chick flick’.”⁹ I suspect that this may be because chick flicks are widely understood as described in the *Webster’s On-line dictionary*: “a motion picture intended to appeal especially to women”: not for everyone.

Nicole Holofcener, writer/director of three features, most recently an ensemble comedy about three rich women and their “broke” friend, *Friends with Money* (2006), and a director of episodes of the chick TV hit *Sex and the City*, when asked what she thought of the term “chick flick”, responded: “Ugh, don’t you hate that term? It’s derogatory, it’s stupid, it’s so irritating...I am so sick of this goddam chicklit shit, this is not a chick flick, it’s just a movie about a woman.” And then backs up slightly, perhaps because she believes that marketing her films as chick flicks will bring in a specific audience: “But I’m not that upset about being labelled anything, because I do get to make my movies. And if people are talking about my movies at all, then that’s good.”¹⁰

Karen Hollinger’s “Afterword: Once I Got Beyond the Name *Chick Flick*”, at the end of *Chick Flicks*, elegantly explores some of the inherent contradictions that Holofcener’s statements embody. She does not, however, extend her analysis to the material conditions that lie behind Holofcener’s comments. Myra Mendible alludes to material conditions towards the end of her chapter but a lack of sustained analysis of them in *Chick Flicks* (as in many other books about women and film) in my view diminishes the book’s impact.

Although the editors address the use of “girl” and “chick” as a postfeminist reclamation of identity (reminiscent of second wave feminism’s reclamation of “cunt” and “dyke”), and acknowledge that the term “chick flick” was probably invented by men and derisive, they do not fully explore chicks’ possible reclamation of the word “power”, nor its wider meaning in this context. As Gloria Steinem writes: “Whoever is in power takes over the noun – and the norm – while the less powerful get an adjective”¹¹. Thus we get, to give some of her examples, “Hispanic leaders” but

not “Anglo leaders”, “gay soldiers” but not “heterosexual soldiers.” And “chick flicks” but not “prick flicks.”¹²

There is no doubt about who holds power in the global film industry. As filmmakers, women were collectively more powerful than men during only one historical period, in the United States from about 1906-1919, when the industry held gendered beliefs about women filmmakers’ capacity to secure a wide audience base and keep reformers from meddling through licensing and censorship.¹³ In the United States and elsewhere the industry continues to provide “few points of access for writers traditionally denied the chance to demonstrate their skills and gain experience...Without meaningful interventions targeted at the industry status quo, the industry will fall further and further behind a changing America [world].”¹⁴

One result of the power imbalance is that, unlike chick lit, chick flicks are in general not examples of women’s self-representation, though some women’s adaptations of chick lit, for example *Legally Blonde*, are. And are very successful in commercial terms. The truth is that all the chick culture chick flicks released are the outcomes of business decisions based on beliefs that women who write and direct films present a greater economic risk than men.¹⁵ This reality is reflected in the movies referred to in *Chick Flicks*; women wrote and/or directed less than twenty percent of them. Women who want to represent their own lives in these postfeminist times struggle to have their business cases accepted.¹⁶ Chick flicks from chick culture get funded if they seem likely to do good business, and not just because contemporary women go to see them. Men go too.¹⁷ There are probably many chick flicks that fit within Steinem’s definition that never get to fly, because of decision makers’ limited view

of women writers’ and directors’ potential for making films that will draw an audience. And this situation is likely to become exacerbated because “Hollywood is trying to think about how to get men to go see films that used to be targeted at women to punch up the numbers” so that “masculinization of films targeted at women” is taking place, with the making of more films like Judd Apatow’s *Knocked Up* (2007).¹⁸

Chick Flicks does have some chapters that contextualise chick flicks and place them beyond the conceptual framework of the twenty- or thirty-something white middle class chicks of chick culture. Maureen Turim’s “Women’s Films: Comedy, Drama, Romance” places them within the history of women’s movies and advocates a more theoretical approach to contemporary chick flicks, asking “much harder questions of how they situate female desire (in both the psychoanalytic and philosophical dimensions of that term)” (39). Ferriss’ own chapter explores how makeover movies from *Now, Voyager* (1942, and very popular in a recent wave of responses to a *New York Times* article on chick flicks¹⁹) to *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) reflect contemporary ideas about femininity and identity. Lisa M Rull’s “A Soundtrack for Our Lives” was for me one of the most pleasurable chapters for its analysis of paradoxes and contradictions inherent in choosing music for a soundtrack.

Finally, two chapters about chicks in roles once reserved for men. In the first, Holly Hassel’s “The ‘Babe Scientist’ Phenomenon: the Illusion of Inclusion in 1990s American Action Films”, Hassel concludes that “The babe scientist is a misleading invitation to female viewers to see themselves in a central role in this historically male genre” (199); but argues that there is a developing chick action flick genre, citing *The Relic* (1997)

as a precursor. And in “Babes in Boots; Hollywood’s Oxymoronic Warrior Woman”, Kate Waites discusses women’s roles in the three *Lara Croft* films, the two *Charlie’s Angels* films and the two *Kill Bill* films, concluding that Hollywood’s warrior woman is “a projection of male fantasy...[and] a strange amalgamation of the hypermasculine and emphasized feminine, implying that even our twenty-first-century myth-makers continue to be steeped in the lore – as well as the law – of the father”(218). For me, that is a wonderful final sentence for the last chapter and lead-in to the afterword that follows.

When I finished reading this book, I asked myself “Why is it important to argue for a larger context for some chick flicks rather than to squash them into the box of chick culture?” And I opened the paper with my cup of tea and found a possible answer in an article about why so few New Zealand writers “make it big”. Each year, hundreds of new local books arrive at Wellington’s Unity Books, which specialises in quality New Zealand publications. Co-owner Tilly Lloyd rejects outright what she calls “the gorse of New Zealand publishing...there are a lot of books published in New Zealand that would have been better off as a four-page article in a major magazine.”²⁰ And it seems possible to conceptualise chick flicks as gorse.

Colonists introduced gorse – *Ulex europeaus* – into the temperate New Zealand landscape. In spite of ongoing attempts to contain or control it, dating from the early 1860s, it now overruns 5 per cent of arable land. As a child I played in the gorse at the back of our section in South Auckland; I still find it beautiful. And it has one quality that redeems it; it can provide shade for regenerating native bush, which will itself cast shade on the ageing gorse canopy as it grows, and kill it. As artist Regan Gentry and his co-writer Bidy Livesey

conclude: “By turning our thinking around, gorse could change from problem to problem solver; from coloniser to conservationist.”²¹

And that’s a possible answer. Chick flicks may provide shade for women’s self-representation to regenerate and develop further, where older women, indigenous women, lesbians, representatives of chick culture, immigrant women, can quietly gain power and present films that will grow beyond chick flicks’ pretty and thorny canopy, to enhance our understanding of how we live in our diversity. By exploring the parameters of chick flicks within chick culture, this book provides a useful introduction to one aspect of this potential.

- 1 Scriptwriter David Mamet coined this definition: “...dramatic structure consists of the creation and deferment of hope...The reversals, the surprises, and the ultimate conclusion of the hero’s quest... in direct proportion to the plausibility of the opponent forces,” D Mamet, *Bambi vs Godzilla: On the Nature, Purpose, and Practice of the Movie Business* (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 111.
- 2 S Ferriss and M Young, *Chick Lit: The New Woman’s Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 2006).
- 3 R Garrett, *Postmodern Chick Flicks* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).
- 4 R Schubart, *Super Bitches and Action Babes: the Female Hero in Popular Cinema, 1970-2006* (Jefferson and London: McFarland, 2007).
- 5 Ferriss and Young (eds) *Chick Lit: Tthe New Woman’s Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge), 3, citing M Cabot, *Boy Meets Girl* (London and New York: Avon, 2004).
- 6 M McCreddie, *Women Screenwriters Today: Their Lives and Words* (Westport: Praeger, 2006), xviii.

- 7 R Baillie, "Caro goes from Piha to Hollywood", *New Zealand Herald*, 2006, from http://www.nzherald.co.nz/feature/story.cfm?c_id=634&ObjectID=10365742 visited 12 September 2007.
- 8 G Steinem, "A Modest Proposal", *The Huffington Post*, 2007 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gloria-steinem/a-modest-proposal_b_55772.html visited 17 March 2008.
- 9 M Silverstein, "Pondering the Chick Flick", 2008, *Women & Hollywood*: <http://womenandhollywood.blogspot.com/2008/04/pondering-chick-flick.html> visited 13 April, 2008. This site also covers the film of *Sex and the City* (2008), written by a man, in a way that is useful when analysing the film's themes and impact.
- 10 S Avni, "Nicole Holofcener: the Truthdig Interview", 2006, *Truthdig*. http://www.truthdig.com/interview/print/20060406_nicole_holofcener_interview/ visited 10 January 2008.
- 11 G Steinem, "A Modest Proposal", 2006.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 K Mahar, "True Womanhood in Hollywood: Gendered Business Strategies and the Rise and Fall of the Woman Filmmaker, 1896-1928", *Enterprise and Society*, 2001, 2(1): 72-110.
- 14 D Hunt, *The 2005 Hollywood Writers Report: Catching up with a Changing America?* (Los Angeles: Writers Guild of America, West), 8.
- 15 In what appears to be a world first, a recent study found that United Kingdom films written by women were dollar for pound slightly more effective than those written by men. The box office return for films with a woman screenwriter was \$1.25 per £1 budget, compared with \$1.16 for films with all-male writers.
The authors of the study found that people who commissioned – or presumably, were approached to fund – stories, perhaps unconsciously, believed that women did not write stories that would sell. They appeared
- to believe that the main audience for films was young men and that woman could not write action and horror movies that appealed to this group. However, the data shows that overall cinema audiences were roughly equally balanced between men and women. Women over 35 are the largest single part of United Kingdom cinema audiences and for many individual films female audiences are in the majority. Comedy, not action, is the most financially successful genre and women like men can and do write a broad range of genres including comedy. See S Sinclair, E Pollard and H Wolfe, *Scoping Study into the Lack of Women Screenwriters in the UK: a Report Presented to the UK Film Council* (London: Institute of Employment Studies for the UK Film Council, 2006) <http://www.ukfilmcouncil.org.uk/usr/ukfcdnloads/191/0415womenscreen%20-%20FINAL%2009.06.06.pdf> visited 30 November 2007, p.19.
- 16 For instance, *Real Women Have Curves* took 11 years to produce and when Lupe Ontiveros, who had previously played over 100 roles as a maid, accepted a Sundance Award for her role as playing the protagonist's mother she acknowledged HBO for its *cojones* in funding the film. See P Cardoso, *Real Women Have Curves*, 2002 and 2005, DVD extra. Chick flick writer and film director Nora Ephron – whose wonderful script for *When Harry met Sally* (1989) was, according to the male director, based on *his* experiences on coming out of a marriage and starting to date again – recently explained why women comedians have suddenly become successful: "Here's the answer to any question: cable...There are so many hours to fill, and they ran out of men, so then there were women". See A Stanley, "Who says women aren't funny?", *Vanity Fair*, April 2008, 182-191 and 251: 184. *Real Women Have Curves* may have benefited from this shift, too.
- 17 R Harris, S Hoekstra, C Scott, F Sanborn, LDodds and JBrandenburg, "Autobiographical Memories for Seeing Romantic Movies on a Date: Romance is Not Just for Women",

- Media Psychology*, 2004, 6(3): 257-284;
and J Wolcott, "The Right Fluff: a Guy's Guide
to Chick Flicks", *Vanity Fair*, March, 2008:
404-409 and 432-434.
- 18 <http://womenandhollywood.blogspot.com/2008/05/shootout-discusses-chick-flicks-and.html> visited 17 May 2008.
- 19 M Cieply, "Wary Hollywood Plans More Chick Flicks, Hoping to Lure the Guys", *New York Times*, 9 April, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/04/09/movies/09roma.html> visited 10 April 2008.
- 20 S Catherall, "Publish and be Ignored", *Dominion Post*, 15 March, 2008: E1-2 & E1.
- 21 R Gentry and B Livesey, "Reluctant Emblem", in *Of Gorse of Course*, 2007: 21-30. See www.umbrella.org.nz: Umbrella: 29.

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