

# **What Comes Next:**

## **An Analysis of Matron Lit**

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## I. Introduction

In 1995, *The Independent* started running a column written by Helen Fielding about a woman named Bridget Jones. Bridget was a white, middle-class, thirtysomething woman living alone in London and working in publishing. Bridget had close friends, family who lived relatively nearby and a job, and she was single. To many readers of the column, she epitomized the new career woman who lived in London, worked at an entry-level job and had fun. The column was written as a first-person diary entry that described the daily events of Bridget's fictional life. The popularity of the column prompted Fielding to write a novel about a year in Bridget's life. That novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, was published in Great Britain in 1996 and in the United States in 1998. The book was one of the bestselling novels of the 1990s and became the archetype of a new genre in fiction. That genre, the "chick-lit" genre, has spun off several sub-genres where the female protagonist is either younger than Bridget (teen lit), slightly older than Bridget (mommy lit), a generation older than Bridget (hen or matron lit), of a different race than Bridget (chica lit) or from a different culture than Bridget (Hungarian chick lit). Each sub-genre retains the core elements of the chick lit genre while developing plot lines that speak to the specific issues faced by modern women of their age and culture. This paper examines one specific chick lit sub-genre, matron lit, and analyses the ways in which the core themes of chick-lit fiction translate into the realities of life for middle-aged and older women.

## II. The Chick-Lit Genre

In 1995, Chris Mazza and Jeffrey DeShell used the phrase "chick lit" in the title of their anthology of postfeminist fiction, *Chick Lit: Postfeminist Fiction*. To Mazza and DeShell, "chick lit" fiction was a type of fiction that used postfeminist theories to illustrate the issues confronting women in the 1990s, including love and courtship, career hurdles and the desire to

combine the core elements of friendship, professional success and satisfaction and love. In a 1996 *New Yorker* article profiling the *NY Times* Op-Ed columnist Maureen Dowd, James Wolcott defined the term “chick” as “a postfeminist in a party dress, a bachelorette too smart to be a bimbo, too refined to be a base, too boofy to be a bohemian.” (Wolcott 1996, 54). Wolcott extrapolated from this concept of a chick to the writing being produced by women who meet his definition of a chick. Wolcott wrote that “postfeminist writing has reverted in the nineties to a popularity-contest coquetry. I’m not sure there has ever been more sheer *girlishness* in journalistic writing than there is today.” (Wolcott 1996, 57, emphasis in original). *Bridget Jones’s Diary* was published that same year, and a genre was born.

The protagonists in chick lit fiction are single women in their twenties and thirties who are trying to balance careers and relationships.

Chick lit...responds to upheavals in the dating and mating order through a mixed strategy of dramatization, farce, and satire. Daughters of educated baby boomers, chick-lit heroines, in their degree of sexual autonomy and professional choices, stand as direct beneficiaries of the women’s liberation movement. Yet they shift early feminist agendas, such as equal pay for equal work, to lifestyle concerns. Unlike earlier generations, chick protagonists and their readers have the right to choose; now the problem is too many choices. (Harzewski 2006, 37).

In the chick lit novel, the women are as interested in their friends, their jobs, their looks and their consumer habits as they are in the quest for a husband and children. They take for granted their independence and their freedom to choose where to live, how to live, what to do and with whom to do it. They speak to the reader as if to a friend, sharing the successes and failures that make up their day-to-day existence. The genre is known for its purported realistic portrayal of the modern single young woman. “The typical chick-lit protagonist is...not perfect but flawed, eliciting readers’ compassion and identification simultaneously.” (Ferriss & Young 2006, 4). As

a result, chick-lit speaks to a range of concerns facing young women in the modern world yet does so in a tone that is entertaining, approachable and recognizable.

By the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, chick-lit had become so popular with readers that authors began writing novels that examined the chick-lit protagonist as she aged. As a result of the development of such sub-genres as mommy lit and matron lit, readers can continue to read the chick-lit genre as they go through the various stages of life to find their issues and problems reflected in the lives of the protagonists of these books. The first stage in the development of a chick-lit sub-genre shifted the emphasis from the challenge of balancing career with friends and relationships to the challenge of balancing career and family. Plot lines then moved to the issues a woman confronts once her children have grown, or her husband dies or divorces her (often for a younger woman). This latter stage is captured within the sub-genre of matron or hen lit. As noted in a 2005 article in the *Sunday Times* by Kira Cochrane, “the glossy twenty something characters of chick lit are being joined by more realistic middle-aged heroines whose experiences of life and love are often more complicated and affecting...what’s really key is that they’re not consolatory literature. They’re about what happens next.” (Cochrane 2005, Sept 25).

### **III. A Sampling of Chick Lit and Matron Lit Literature**

Any discussion of chick lit must begin with Bridget Jones. As noted above, the first book in what is now a trilogy detailing the trials and tribulations of Bridget’s adult life was published in 1996. By then Bridget was already a familiar person to readers of *The Independent*, where Helen Fielding had been writing about her for a year before the release of *Bridget Jones’s Diary*. Bridget is single, in her thirties and living in London where she works in publishing. She has three best friends, Sharon, Jude and Tom. Sharon is a strident feminist, Jude is in an on-again, off-again relationship with “Vile Richard” and Tom is gay. Bridget has several married friends,

most notably her oldest friend Magda, who is married to Jeremy and has two young children. Bridget's parents live outside the city, and when the novel opens, her mother is about to embark on a mid-life crisis during which she leaves Bridget's father, starts a new career and appears to have one or more affairs. Bridget's mother and her mother's friends are constantly questioning Bridget about her plans to marry and have children: "'Bridget! What *are* we going to do with you!' said Una. 'You career girls! I don't know! Can't put it off forever, you know. Tick-tock-tick-tock.'" (Fielding 1996, 11). Over the course of the year in which the novel takes place, the reader learns about Bridget's weight fluctuations, her intake of alcohol and cigarettes, her attempts to learn to cook, her shopping and beautification expeditions, and her crush on and then brief relationship with her boss, Daniel. Readers see her struggle from job humiliations to cooking disasters with determination and humor and ultimately rejoice as she discovers requited love with Mark Darcy, the son of her parents' neighbors.

Fielding brings Bridget and the rest of the characters back for a sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. The second novel in the Bridget Jones saga, which was published in the United Kingdom in 1999 and in the United States in 2000, takes place immediately after the end of the first novel. Bridget has moved from the publishing world to television. She and Mark attempt to navigate the ups and downs of a relationship while her close friends battle for Bridget's attention and a not-so-close friend attempts to steal Mark away. Although there is much in the way of professional and domestic mishaps and humor, the tone of the second book is more serious than that of the first. The events of the book take place during the calendar year 1997, the year of Princess Diana's death. Her death is incorporated into the story line, as is the sadness and anger that gripped the country in its aftermath. Bridget is arrested in Thailand for unknowingly attempting to smuggle drugs and is the object of a death threat. The book ends

with Jude's marriage to Vile Richard, and the (permanent, the reader is made to feel) reconciliation of Bridget and Mark.

In the United States, the two books that are generally regarded as the earliest published novels in the chick lit genre are *Animal Husbandry* by Laura Zigman and *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* by Melissa Banks. Both books contain many of the core elements of the Bridget Jones novels while providing a different approach to the problem of the modern woman's attempt to find personal and professional happiness. In *Animal Husbandry*, the female protagonist is named Jane, and she works on a late-night television talk show. Jane has a gay male best friend named David and a female best friend named Joan, who she met when she and Joan were working together at *People Magazine*. Jane meets and falls in love with Ray, who also works on the television show. At the time that they meet, Ray is engaged to someone else. Jane and Ray begin an affair, and after a period of time, Ray calls off his engagement and asks Jane to move in with him. After Jane has given up her apartment, Ray tells her that he wants to step back from the relationship, forcing Jane to move in with Eddie, another co-worker. The rest of the book describes Jane's attempts, with help from David, Joan and Eddie, to make sense of Ray's behavior. There are comic touches throughout the novel, but the overall tone is more serious than the tone of the Bridget Jones books. Jane does not end up with Eddie or back together with Ray. She is inconsolable after she discovers that Ray was cheating on her with Evelyn, a co-worker, during their relationship. Jane is wiser when the novel ends, but sadder too.

There is similar pathos and poignancy in *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*. The book is comprised of several inter-related short stories which start when the female protagonist, also named Jane, is 14 and ends with her meeting and falling in love with her life partner. In between she takes and leaves a job as an editorial assistant at a publishing house, has a bad first

relationship and then tries twice to have a relationship with a much older man. After her father dies and she decides not to marry the older man, she has a relationship that is serious but wrong for her and starts a job in advertising. In the title story, which ends the book, Jane meets and falls instantly in love with a man named Robert at her best friend's wedding. In an attempt to make the relationship work, Jane consults a self-help guide called *How to Meet and Marry Mr. Right*. In adopting the advice contained in the guide, Jane alters her personality to such a degree that Robert stops liking her. When Jane confides to Sophie, her best friend, about the book, Sophie takes over: "For a second, she looks at me like I'm someone she used to know. 'Are you serious?...You need deprogramming.'" (Bank 1999, 261). The book is filled with quips and one-liners: As Jane notes, "'funny is the best thing I am.'" (Bank 1999, 255). But the overall feel of the book is serious and poignant. Jane is trying to understand who she is and how she fits in. In the process of figuring that out and coping with the loss of her father, Jane experiences profound sadness and pain.

The 7<sup>th</sup> edition of *Genreflecting* notes: "As yesterday's Chick Lit fans have matured and diversified their interests, there has been quite a branching out from the 'single-in-the-city' books into subgenres such as Mommy Lit, Hen Lit and Widow Lit." (Vnuk 2013, 256). An analysis of the mommy lit genre is outside the scope of this paper. However, it is worth noting that although the typical chick lit novel does not end with a wedding, at the end of both *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* and *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, the reader is left with the strong impression that the female protagonist will marry her boyfriend. So-called "mommy lit" novels are a natural progression of a genre that is meant to be realistic and contemporary, in that the main conflict in those stories is not about juggling career and personal relationships but instead is about the conflict between career and family. In perhaps the best well-known of the mommy lit

novels, *I Don't Know How She Does It*, *The Life of Kate Reddy*, *Working Mother*, published in 2002, Kate Reddy is a thirty-five year old hedge fund manager and married mother of two young children. Over the course of the novel, she wins the support of her male colleagues, travels the globe, almost has an affair with a client, ruins the career of a male colleague after he engages in sexist acts towards her young protégée, almost loses her husband and decides to quit her job to spend more time with her children and salvage her marriage. In the famous scene that opens the novel, Kate is standing in her kitchen at 1:37 am, pounding frozen mince pies with a rolling pin to make them look homemade before her daughter brings them in for the school Christmas party. “There were proper mothers, self-sacrificing bakers of apple pies and well-scrubbed invigilators of the washtub, and there were the other sort. At the age of thirty-five, I know precisely which kind I am...” (Pearson 2003, 4). As in *Bridget Jones's Diary*, the novel is written in journal-entry, first-person confessional form, and Kate's story has many comic turns. Kate is capable, driven and successful and is married to a more easy-going, lower-earning husband. Kate chooses to leave London for a less stressful, and less expensive, life in the country, but the novel's ending leaves open the possibility that Kate will find her way back towards her professional life, albeit in a less competitive and more personally satisfying way.

In a 2005 article in the *Christian Science Monitor*, Marilyn Gardner observed that “as baby boomer women reach their 50s and approach their 60s, many are eager to read about women like themselves.” (Gardner February 2, 2005). The matron lit sub-genre provides such readers with “reassurance that the middle and later years, while not without challenges and sorrows, can include zest, adventure, and – gasp – romance.” (Gardner February 2, 2005). An early example of matron lit is *Julie and Romeo*, published in 2000. A sequel was published in 2005. In *Julie and Romeo*, readers are introduced to Julie Roseman, who is 60 and a divorced



mother with two grown daughters and two grandchildren. She runs a flower shop in the suburbs of Boston that she inherited from her parents when they died. The rival flower shop in town is run by Romeo Cacciamani, the only son of her parents' enemies. Romeo is a widower with six children, five grown sons and a daughter in college. When they were teenagers, Julie's daughter Sandy fell in love with Romeo's son Tony, but the family animosity kept them apart. Julie and Romeo run into each other at a florist convention and strike up a friendship that quickly turns to love. Their children are horrified and do everything they can to keep the lovers apart. Julie enlists the help of her best friend Gloria and Romeo enlists the help of his best friend Al to act as go-betweens. The story is told in Julie's voice with a comic tone and a light touch. At a tension filled gathering between the two families, it is revealed that Romeo's mother and Julie's father had an affair, and that the end of that affair sparked the hatred between the two clans. Once everyone realizes that members of three different generations of Rosemans and Cacciamanis have fallen in love with each other, the family animosity eases. Sandy and Tony marry, and Julie and Romeo combine their flower shops and share an apartment without giving up their separate homes.

*The Hot Flash Club*, first published in 2003, is an excellent example of the matron lit sub-genre. It and its three sequels tell the story of the lives and experiences of four middle-aged women living in and around Boston. Faye, a widow at 55, was married to a successful corporate lawyer and was herself a relatively successful painter. She and her husband were happily married and had one daughter, who is herself married with a baby girl. Shirley is 60 and has been divorced three times. She is a massage therapist and has never had children. Marilyn, 52, is a paleontologist unhappily married to a molecular geneticist who works and teaches at the same university as she does. They have one son, who is engaged to be married. Alice, who is

62, divorced and the mother of two grown sons, is a vice-president of a large insurance company that is about to merge with a competitor to become a global conglomerate. She is also, interestingly, an African-American woman, although almost nothing is made of that fact over the course of the novel. The book is written in the third person but different chapters are narrated from the point of view of each of the women in turn so that the reader has the opportunity to get inside the head of each of the main characters as her story is told. The women grapple with infidelity, weight gain, career challenges and changes, sexual awakening, new relationships and male fragility. They are not lifelong friends; instead, they meet early in the novel and bond over their shared frustration and confusion with the issues of being a middle-aged woman. “‘You’re point is that we’ve lost control of our destinies, right?’ Faye asked. Alice nodded brusquely. ‘Absolutely. We can’t decide when our bodies will cooperate as they always have – something beyond our control has taken over.’” (Thayer 2003, 59). The tone of the books is light and optimistic, but the issues the women face, including changes in their bodies, concerns about sexual attraction, questions of career options, are more geared towards the time of life that is generation ahead of the chick-lit heroine.

A matron-lit book that is similar in theme to *The Hot Flash Club* but more sober in tone is *Revenge of the Middle-Aged Woman*. Published in 2002, the novel concerns Rose, a complacent and contented woman, who is 48 and married to Nathan. Rose and Nathan have two grown children, and they work together at a major London-based newspaper, Nathan as an editor and Rose as the editor of the weekly book review. Rose has a deputy named Minty who is younger, thinner and more aggressive than Rose. Fairly early in the novel, Nathan tells Rose that he and Minty are in love and that he is leaving her to live with Minty. Shortly after that, the editor-in-chief of the paper fires Rose and promotes Minty. Rose spends the remainder of the

novel recovering from these unexpected events. Her two children provide support even as they grapple with their own relationships, and her two best friends, one a single woman living in Paris and one a woman who had children late in life and is struggling with their demands, do what they can to help her. Rose is offered steady freelance work and rekindles a relationship with the man who had been the love of her life, and with whom she was involved before she met Nathan. Although Minty becomes pregnant, Nathan and Minty's relationship is difficult, and Nathan sends Rose signals that he might like to return to her: "When I left you, I didn't want you very much. Now I think about you all the time.'...Only six months ago I would have given a year off life to hear Nathan say that...But now the words fell on an inner ear that had been deafened by events." (Buchan 2002, 305). The book is written in the first person, and although there are comic touches, the overall tone is somber and sad.

In *No! I Don't Want to Join a Book Club*, first published in 2006, readers are introduced, via a series of diary entries, to Marie Sharp. Marie lives in London and is about to turn 60, a fact about which she is surprisingly happy. She comments on all the free things available to people once they turn sixty: "Went to optician's. At sixty I now have free eye tests – brilliant!" (Ironsides 2006, 53). Similarly, "As I stepped into the tube station I was quite bowled over by the idea that I no longer had to pay. Ever. 'Freedom Pass!' – the very words are like an entry to a new life." (Ironsides 2006, 77). From October to July, readers learn about Marie's 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, the arrival of her first grandchild and the death from lung cancer of one of her closest friends. Marie discusses her close friend's attempts to find love, or at least sex, her acceptance of the changes in her body and her general complacency. At the end of the novel, Marie discovers that she is attracted to an old friend from her youth, and is thrilled to discover that her affection is returned. The tone, which has been somewhat bland and accepting, suddenly turns cheerful and

positive. “But as I write this, I remember: Michelle is moving out. And in her room there is a *very* large double bed. So would I go so far as to say it is ‘just wonderful?’ Well, I just might.” (Ironside 2006, 231).

*Jane Austen in Boca* provides readers of matron lit with examples of older but still feisty female protagonists. The novel concerns the friendship and love interests of three women, Lila, Flo and May, who are in their seventies and living in a retirement community in Boca Raton, Florida. All three are widows. Lila is actively in search of a new husband. May is quiet, complacent and content to live her life alone, with her friends. Flo is intelligent, independent and strong-willed. Each of the women finds love by the end of the book, although Lila is dismayed to discover that her husband is hoping to have sexual relations with her, and then relieved when he dies. Although the book is written in the third person, Flo’s and May’s emotions and thought processes are shared openly with the reader. The tone is lighthearted, and the stereotypes are depicted with humor and affection.

In 2013, Helen Fielding published the next installment in the Bridget Jones story. *Bridget Jones: Mad About the Boy* is the first novel about Bridget since the release of *Edge of Reason* in 1999. The novel contains almost all of the core elements of its predecessors. The story is told in first person, in diary format, and covers the entirety of 2013 (with flashbacks to 2012). Mark has been dead for five years, killed during one of his human rights missions. Bridget, at 51, is raising their two children, ages seven and five, on her own, with the help of a nanny. She has given up her career in television and gained, and then lost, 40 pounds. Jude and Tom are still there, but Sharon has moved to California with her successful dot-com American husband and has been replaced by Talitha, a good-looking and sophisticated former colleague from Bridget’s days in television. Bridget’s father has died of lung cancer, and her mother has

moved into a retirement community. Bridget attempts to restart her writing career by updating and adopting famous novels (first *Hedda Gabler* and then *To the Lighthouse*) into movie scripts. For most of the novel, she dates a man twenty years younger than she is while slowly falling in love with a teacher at her son's school. The book is a cross between mommy lit and matron lit in that Bridget is grappling with raising two young children while struggling to re-start her career, but she is doing it as a fifty-something widow. Although the book ends happily, there are scenes of great poignancy as Bridget describes the depth of her grief over Mark's death and how lonely and out of touch she feels. "I was at a different stage of life, even though I was at the same age. It was as though there had been a seismic time shift and my life was happening years behind theirs, in the wrong age." (Fielding 2014, 79).

#### **IV. The Transition of Chick Lit into Matron Lit**

In *Rewriting the Romance, New femininities in chick lit*, Rosalind Gill and Elena Herdieckerhoff posit that a portion of the success of the genre lies "in the 'that's me' phenomenon whereby Bridget became regarded not as a fictional character but as a representation of the zeitgeist." (Gill & Herdieckerhoff 2006, 488). Chick lit books strike a chord because their readers, largely women of the same generation as the female protagonists, identify with the heroines. As Cheryl Wilson noted in *Chick Lit in the Undergraduate Classroom*, "It is good to be able to represent women as they actually are in the age in which you are living." (Wilson 2012, 87). The very nature of the writing makes the novels approachable and provides a mechanism for the reader to identify with the narrator. The use of the first-person confessional draws the reader in. As A. Rochelle Mabry points out in *About a Girl*, the books are typically written "in the first person, in the heroine's voice, conveying the notion that these novels, although fictional, are authentic, in-depth accounts of women's experiences. (Mabry

2006, 195). That point is re-emphasized by Shari Beinstock who notes: “The first-person, confessional mode of chick lit further enhances readers’ identification.” (Beinstock 2006, 256). Reading Bridget’s diary is almost like having a conversation with Bridget, or eavesdropping on one of the evenings that Bridget spends with Shazzer, Jude and Tom. Readers come to feel that chick lit heroines struggle with and work through the issues that they themselves are coping with but do not wish to admit to. “Chick lit crystallizes some of the most important cultural issues women are currently engaged in addressing.” (Beinstock 2006, 254). As Nicola Shulman points out in her review of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* in the *Times Literary Supplement*: “*Bridget Jones’s Diary* rings with the unmistakable tone of something that is true to the marrow; it defines what it describes. I know that if I were a young, single, urban woman, I would finish this book crying, ‘Bridget Jones, c’est moi.’” (Shulman 1996, 26).

If chick lit speaks to a generation, then which novels speak to the generation that came before the postfeminist woman? It’s been noted that chick lit books speak to the “language of personal choice.” (McRobbie 2007, 39). Certainly much has been written about the fact that chick lit encapsulates the post-feminist or third wave of feminism, where the feminist agenda conflicts with the reality of the choices women make when they have the option to make those choices. If the heroine of a chick lit novel is in her late twenties or early thirties, then the heroine’s mother is likely in her fifties. What is happening in *her* life? What choices has she made, and how does she feel about them? Readers learn a lot about Bridget’s mother, for example, but only from Bridget’s point of view. She is portrayed as flighty or irresponsible, a modern-day version of Mrs. Bennett from *Pride & Prejudice*. But imagine a novel written in her voice, articulating her frustration with her life, with the choices she did not make because she did

not feel that she had the option to make them. The result would be similar in many ways to the sub-genre that is matron lit.

In each matron lit novel summarized above, there is a change in life circumstances that causes the heroine to re-evaluate the choices she has made and the direction her life has taken. This re-evaluation leads to unexpected life developments. Certain of the core elements of the chick lit story (important friendships, a concern for physical appearance) appear in and inform matron lit stories, but other key chick lit elements have shifted to account for the different time of life and, more importantly, for the wisdom and maturity that comes with age. Even Bridget's mother demonstrates her grasp of certain core truths in a way that Bridget, in her early thirties, cannot: "That's what's so silly about feminism, darling. Anyone with an ounce of sense knows we're the superior race." (Fielding 1999, 375). Fundamentally, matron lit novels are about the impact on women of the passage of time and the occurrence of unexpected events, the options available to women after these unforeseen events occur, and the potential for happiness and adventure even after life has turned out to be much harder than expected.

A fundamental element in both chick lit and matron lit stories is the importance of friendship to the female protagonist. Her friends, much more than her love interest, support her, understand her and prop her up. In chick lit books, friends are often in similar life situations, grappling with new careers or young love. In *Animal Husbandry*, for example, Jane and her best friend Joan met when they were both newly-hired at *People Magazine*. Although Jane now works in television and Joan has moved to *Men's Times Magazine*, they speak on the phone "at least eleven times a day." (Zigman 1998, 25). "Talking on the phone first thing in the morning from our desks was a kind of unspoken ritual, a way to debrief each other on our short time apart." (Zigman 1998, 58). The book contains an almost four page running phone conversation

between Jane and Joan where neither one speaks more than a few words before the other, knowing where the conversation is heading, picks up the thread. Here is a short segment:

Was he \_\_\_?  
 Unappealing? Completely.  
 Was there anything \_\_\_?  
 Remotely attractive? No. He had that \_\_\_  
 Thing?  
 With his lips. You know. Too \_\_\_  
 Moist?  
 With little bits of spit \_\_\_  
 In the corners?  
 In the middle. Like a little white thread. (Zigman 1998, 166).

This dialogue demonstrates how close Jane and Joan are, and how closely their experiences of men and dating are aligned. Similarly, in all three *Bridget Jones* novels, Bridget's friends are the center of her life (slightly less so after the birth of her children in *Mad About the Boy*). They anticipate her horrible cooking and make alternate plans to celebrate her birthday without telling her. They bring alcohol, chocolate and cigarettes after a bad breakup. They are an endless source of comfort after Mark's death: "'You know where we are if you need us,' Tom said. 'Any time, day or night.'" (Fielding 2014, 19). After Jane's father dies in *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing*, her best friend "Sophie drove down. She stayed with me in my room, and scratched my back while I talked." (Bank 1999, 186). This quiet scene poignantly describes the strength of the friendship bond between Jane and Sophie. It is at Sophie's wedding that Jane meets Robert, and it is Sophie that talks Jane out of following the dating rule book. As A. Rochelle Mabry notes, "the communities portrayed in many chick-culture texts are equally as important as the central romantic relationship – sometimes arguably more important." (Mabry 2006, 202).

Friendship is fundamental to the lives of matron lit heroines as well. As Tom tells Bridget in *Mad About the Boy*: "the measure of happiness is not your husband or boyfriend but the quality of the other relationships you have around you." (Fielding 2014, 446). In *Julie and*



*Romeo*, Julie's staunch supporter and ally is her closest friend Gloria. "We had been best friends since the seventh grade. She was my maid of honor and the person who drove me to my divorce hearing. Gloria and I go way back." (Ray 2000, 44) Later in the novel, Julie says, "the thing about talking to Gloria was that it was a little like talking to myself, only much better." (Ray 2000, 111). In *Revenge of the Middle-Aged Woman*, Rose calls her two closest friends, Vee and Mazarine, to talk through Nathan's infidelity before she speaks with her grown children. It is through Vee that Rose starts working again and through Mazarine that she begins to pull herself back together physically and emotionally. Even in the matron lit novels where the friendships are relatively recent, they become central to the heroines' lives. As May notes in *Jane Austen in Boca*: "She marveled at the amount of time she had come to spend with the two women and how much she enjoyed them. Even their bickering, which was fairly constant, was entertaining, and she never left their company without being amused and engaged." (Cohen 2002, 9). In *The Hot Flash Club*, the four main characters meet for the first time early in the novel at a party. Very quickly, they understand how much they have in common, despite their disparate backgrounds: "The four women burst out laughing, instant rapport zapping among them like a kind of electric shock." (Thayer 2003, 60). They leave the party and head for a restaurant where, over chocolate, they share points of view and sufficiently intimate details of the problems with which they are grappling, so that by the end of the evening they have decided to help each other. Those friendships form the core of the rest of the novel and the other three books in the series. "Women need to connect...The power and enduring importance of women's friendships run like a golden thread through many matron lit books." (Gardner February 2, 2005).

Although friendship is an important element of all chick lit novels, more focus has been placed on the role of physical appearance and the joys of shopping in chick lit than any other

element of the genre. “Looks are a form of currency that aid not only one’s search for a mate but also one’s ability to secure that promotion, get that next job, and become a more fully realized human being.” (Mabry 2006, 240). Bridget, as always frank and to the point, acknowledges this directly early in the first novel when she is pining for Daniel: “Wise people will say Daniel should like me just as I am, but I am a child of *Cosmopolitan* culture, have been traumatized by super-models and too many quizzes, and know that neither my personality nor my body is up to it if left to its own devices.” (Fielding 1998, 52). Readers learn about Bridget’s search for the perfect outfit or the painstaking beauty regime she undergoes before an important date. Similarly, although the female protagonist in *The Girls’ Guide to Hunting and Fishing* spends the majority of the book uninterested in her clothing and her appearance (she does not even wear makeup), and is almost always in a relationship notwithstanding this indifference to how she looks, the final story in the novel contains not only her introduction to the man she will likely spend her life with but also the only stereotypical shopping scene in the book, when Jane shops for a dress to wear to her best friend’s wedding: “I search for a whole hour without finding a single maybe, until I see it, my perfect dress, a black Armani sheath—but only in an ant-sized two and a spider four...But in the communal fitting room, Donna hands me the black Armani sheath in a ten—the one that almost got away. I take this as an omen. Is the dress perfect? It is so perfect. I say, ‘You are my fairy godshopper.’” (Bank 1999, 228). It feels like no coincidence that Jane meets Robert when she wears the dress.

Although shopping and beauty are also core themes of matron lit books, there is a different tone to the role of physical appearance in the lives of these older women. This difference is foreshadowed in a scene late in *The Edge of Reason*, when Bridget’s mother insists that Bridget have her colors done to determine which shades look best on her. Bridget misses

Mark and is complaining that she looks terrible. Bridget's mother, usually portrayed as silly, says: "Well, we're sorting that out, darling, aren't we, with your colours. But actually it doesn't make any difference what you look like, does it, Mary? You just have to be real." (Fielding 2002, 376). Matron lit characters are very conscious of and care about their looks, but they understand the limitations that age and life experience has imposed on how they look, and with that understanding comes an acceptance and an ease that is lacking in the chick lit books. Thus, in *Mad About the Boy*, Bridget becomes prosaic and wise on the subject of looks and their role in women's lives: "It's horrifying how differently some people treat you when you're fat, to when you're not. And when you're all done up and when you're just normal. No wonder women are so insecure. I know men are too. But when one is a woman, with all the tools at a modern woman's disposal, one can literally look like a completely different person from one half-hour to the next." (Fielding 2014, 94).

Matron lit characters like to shop and do not feel guilty about it. In *Jane Austen in Boca*, shopping is a basic backdrop to the lives of the women and men who live in the retirement community: "Shopping in Boca is an activity that falls somewhere between a vocation and a sacred rite. Everyone shops regularly; everyone is a good shopper." (Cohen 2002, 23). Some of the most important scenes in the novel take place in shopping malls, as the men and women meet and re-connect. Similarly, as Faye notes in *The Hot Flash Club*, "Your tribe is the female, and believe me, shopping is a universal female instinct." (Thayer 2003, 76). But in matron lit novels, shopping plays another role. It can be a salve to the soul of a woman whose looks have been affected by age and life circumstances. Thus, for example, after Rose sinks into a real depression after Nathan leaves her, she visits her friend Mazarine in Paris. Mazarine is horrified by Rose's appearance and takes her shopping, to great effect: "For anyone's information, the

healing quotient of getting, without difficulty, into a black lace body embroidered with tiny butterflies is high.” (Buchan 2003, 172). In *The Hot Flash Club*, Marilyn, the academic, is wholly uninterested in her appearance. The other women take her in hand and give her a clothing and beauty make-over. Marilyn does not understand: “‘Clothes are that important?’ ‘Absolutely,’ Alice said. ‘They telegraph your identity.’ ‘Cosmetics too,’ Faye added.” (Thayer 2003, 221). Tellingly, though, Alice, who has worn sleek professional suits throughout her adult life, is finding them literally and figuratively too constrictive. Even as Marilyn undergoes a transformation, Alice is slowly shedding her Type A career woman persona in favor of something softer. She complains early in the novel that her clothes are tight at the waist and in the sleeves. When the women meet and bond for the first time, Alice rips the waistband of her expensive trousers because she feels so uncomfortable. She notices that her wardrobe lacks color. By the end of the novel, she is wearing loose clothing that flows and drapes rather than constricts, a metaphor for the changes she is making in the rest of her life.

The heroines of matron lit novels understand that their looks have changed as they have aged. As Alice notes in *The Hot Flash Club*, “‘We shouldn’t try to look young...but that doesn’t mean we can’t look like fabulous woman of a certain age.’” (Thayer 2003, 222). Often, in what might be a nod to the chick lit precursor to the genre, matron lit novels include one or more modern young women of the type that might be the main character in a chic lit novel. Often the female protagonist in a matron lit novel stands in sharp contrast to these younger women. In *Revenge of the Middle-Aged Woman*, for example, Rose notes that “Bond Street catered for size eight. Since Minty possessed fawnlike slender limbs, a tiny waist and no bosom, that was fine. No assistant fainted at the size of her arms. But I was forced to shop in Oxford Street where the stores grudgingly accepted that size 14 did exist.” (Buchan 2002, 9). Interestingly, although

there is some wistfulness in the way that matron lit heroines compare themselves to the younger women in their lives, readers do not have a sense that matron lit protagonists wish they could change places with this new generation of women. Faye says so early in *The Hot Flash Club*: “I wouldn’t want to be that age again.” (Thayer 2003, 101).

The concept of younger women and what they represent runs through matron lit novels in other ways as well. As Alice notes in *The Hot Flash Club*, “Women of our age broke through the glass ceiling by bludgeoning their own heads against it. Now young women just swim upward without any problem, yet they don’t even notice those of us who made it possible. Worse, they want to get rid of us so they can have our jobs.” (Thayer 2003, 64). Alice feels threatened by a new employee. “A lovely, fit, energetic, brilliant, cocky, *younger* woman had come...to work with Alice as assistant to the vice president in charge of administration. Alison Cummings. Thirty-two, unmarried, no children, a Harvard MBA.” (Thayer 2003, 30-31). When Alice loses her job, she believes that Alison set her up to fail. Similarly, in *Revenge of the Middle-Aged Woman*, Rose loses both her job and her husband to Minty, who is not only a size 8 but is more aggressive, more confident and more determined than Rose feels she ever was. Rose’s son Sam is dating a woman named Alice who is very much like Minty. “Alice was not the sort of woman to appreciate cookery tips. What was more, her immaculate good looks and naked ambition made older woman uncomfortable.” (Buchan 2002, 32). Matron lit books are thus full of chick lit type characters who have the potential to remind the matron lit heroines of how far removed they are from current liberated young women. Driving home one day, Rose notices them everywhere: “The streets of the city were filled with young women...bright, glossy, anticipating, they wore short skirts, cropped tops and strappy high heels...In their eyes and eager expressions were reflected lust, energy and greed. No grief yet.” (Buchan 2002, 339).

Matron lit books do not, however, portray the younger generation with empathy or kindness. Minty is not a likeable character, and even though she manages to win both Nathan and the job promotion, by the end of the novel, the cracks in Minty's armor are obvious. She is pregnant, terrified, demoted at work and unsure whether Nathan will stay. Sam leaves Alice, who makes a half-hearted suicide attempt after realizing that she had taken Sam for granted. In contrast, Rose has a fulfilling new career on her own terms, looks very well, has consciously chosen not to try to reunite with Nathan and is cautiously optimistic about her next relationship. Similarly at the end of *The Hot Flash Club*, Alison asks Alice to return to work as her partner. She explains that Alice was fired not because of Alison but because of Alison's male assistant, who was plotting to have both women fired. Alison asks for Alice to return not only for professional reasons but for personal ones as well: "I could lose my job if you don't help me...I need friends! I just moved here! I don't know anyone!" (Thayer 2003, 312-313). In *Julie and Romeo*, Julie's oldest daughter Nora is a tough, thin, successful career woman who intimidates Julie. But Julie finds the courage late in the novel to stand up to Nora and her manipulations: "Don't you ever, ever conspire against me with anyone again and expect me to forgive you because I am your mother. I am sick and tired of forgiving you, Nora." (Ray 200, 184). It is Nora who ultimately pushes for an end to the animosity between the two families and encourages her mother to be involved with Romeo. Younger women may seem to remind matron lit heroines of all the things that are no longer possible for them, but often the conclusion of matron lit novels finds the older woman happier and more in control of her life than the younger woman.

Fundamentally, the issues that matron lit heroines grapple with are weightier and filled with more gravitas than the issues that confront chick lit heroines. Both groups of women grapple with their looks, their weight and their clothes. Both groups rely on their friends and

find themselves in love, purposefully or unexpectedly. But the women in matron lit novels have been battered about by life. They have raised children and watched those children leave. They have seen marriages end, either by divorce or death. They have lost jobs they liked or had to return to work for financial reasons after decades out of the job market. These women know that cigarettes, wine and a new dress will not solve these kinds of problems but that time, support sheer determination will. “It’s a positive process of women saying, the 40s and 50s are not this sort of asexual time of serving everyone else and giving up myself...the books are about women looking to each other to support each other, to help reevaluate the past, come to terms with themselves in a new way. It really speaks to a cultural shift that’s happening in women’s mid-life.” (Miller, 2005, May 8).

#### **V. Libraries, Bookstores and Matron Lit**

Although much has been written in scholarly journals about the arrival and popularity of the chick lit genre of women’s fiction, very few articles discuss the matron lit sub-genre in any depth. Newspaper articles, mainly from the mid-2000s, noted and described the existence of books geared towards the middle-aged female reader, and those articles tended to mention the same core group of books. Although Barnes & Noble’s website has a section devoted to chick lit within the “women’s fiction” category of the fiction and literature grouping, it does not have a category for matron or hen lit, and none of the books listed under “women of a certain age” were within the classic matron lit classification. The Goodreads website has a chick lit grouping of books, and labels its matron lit book discussion under “boomer lit.” Amazon’s website does not have a chick lit grouping, let alone a matron lit sub-grouping. The New York Public Library has almost 220,000 books in its fiction collection, and its website contains over 30 sub-headings. But there are no groupings for either chick lit or matron lit. The Maryland Library Association

contains a “hen lit” interest group page that gathers information and book recommendations from newspaper articles and internet resources. Similarly, the Schaumburg Township District Library has a “booklists” page containing Matron Literature. The Chick Lit Books website contains a page on the “hen lit” sub-genre which includes several book recommendations. A few of the books for this paper came from that website and others came from the newspaper articles discussing the sub-genre. Thus, matron lit books are not as easy to identify and locate as chick lit books, but a few online reading guides do exist.

Patrick Raynor is the co-head of acquisitions for the New York Society Library located on the upper east side of Manhattan. He explained that the library’s approach to fiction acquisition in any genre, apart from the detective/mystery genre, which is sufficiently popular as to have a different set of acquisition guidelines, is to start with the circulation history for an author or the genre in which a new book is placed. He noted that library patrons who read a specific genre tend to have favorite authors or time periods or locations, so that the library can make an educated guess about the potential popularity of a new book by tracking the circulation history of other, similar books. Reviews in *Publishers Weekly*, *Library Journal* and *Booklist* are generally the next most effective measure of how popular a new book might be to library patrons. A prominent review in the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal* or a major magazine tends to increase the library patrons’ interest in a new book. Patrick noted that ultimately the most important information that guides acquisitions is the information that library staff members receive from patrons. The library policy is to acquire a book if at least two patrons request it. As Patrick noted, “Our best indicator that someone wants to read a book is that she or he went to the trouble of requesting it.” (P. Raynor, personal communication, October 30, 2014). The New York Society Library has in its collection all six of the matron lit books



discussed in this paper. They are shelved alphabetically by author in the fiction sections of the library.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Kira Cochrane's 2005 article in the *Sunday Times* points out an obvious fact about readers and writers: "It's primarily middle-aged women who both write and read books, yet popular fiction hasn't reflected this...middle-aged women are generally in the background, relegated to the role of wife or mother." (Cochrane 2005, Sep 25). Lisa Miller's *Tribune* article makes a similar point: "This age group is the bread-and-butter of the publishing world. Such women have always been big buyers of fiction...publishers can draw them in with funny, daring heroines wrestling with issues that ring true." (Miller 2005, May 8). That there ever was a lack of books with middle-aged female protagonists speaks to the assumptions that publishers and writers made about this group of women and the lives they led. Baby boomers are in their fifties and sixties, and most of them have children who are out of the house and on their own. Women who stopped working (or never started) when their children were born are thinking about new careers. Divorced women would like to date. Widows wonder what the next phase of life might bring.

At the beginning of their collection of chick-lit theory, Ferriss and Young point out that "chick lit features single women in their twenties and thirties navigating their generation's challenges of balancing demanding careers with personal relationships." (Ferriss & Young 2006, 3). Matron lit describes a similar struggle, but one with more components and more challenges. The women are not so much balancing as choosing a direction at a time when many options feel closed off. Rather than accepting that the rest of her life will be about grandchildren and gardening, rather than slipping quietly into widowhood or suffering silently while her husband

starts over with a younger woman, the matron lit heroine is demonstrating to baby boomer women that there is much left for them. “The climate is changing a little bit, but it will take a little more magic for the doors to open completely. Someday it’s all going to click. These books are giving women ideas, giving them hope for something that is available for them for the last part of their lives.” (Gardner 2005, Feb 2). Matron lit books are not as frequently funny as chick lit books. Indeed, they are often sad or frustrating and even can sometimes be infuriating. But in each matron lit book discussed in this paper, the protagonist triumphs over her fears, her doubts, her conflict and her weight. She does this with the help of her friends and with the strength of character that has come from life and from living.

I thought of deep, tearing sorrow, then remembered – and anticipated – the exhaustion after a night of lovemaking. I thought of grief and its fallout, and the beauty of lit candles...I thought of how it was possible both to shrink and unfold, how I had experienced both, and how the unfolding at forty-eight was both joyous and unexpected. And would continue for a long time. (Buchan 2002, 339)

**Make Your Own Chick-Lit Novel!**

**1. Start with one young urban female.**

----- (who is a low level employee in:) -----

**2. Choose one of the following:**

- a) Publishing                      b) Public relations
- c) Advertising                    d) Journalism

----- Add -----

**3. Anxiety about one or all of the following:**

- a) Body                              b) Sex life
- c) Biological clock                d) Annoying mother
- e) Emotionally immature men    f) Dying alone
- g) Shopping addiction            h) Insufficient collection of shoes
- i) Nicotine addiction            j) Crappy salary
- k) Excessive alcohol consumption

l) Finding love in the city of:

- 1. New York                      2. Manhattan
- 3. Gotham                        4. London

----- Mix it all together -----

**4. Zaniness ensues.**

**Make Your Own Hen-Lit Novel!**

**1. Start with one middle to late middle age female.**

----- (who is:) -----

**2. Choose one (or more) of the following:**

- a) Divorced                        b) Married with grandchildren
- c) Widowed                        d) Never been married

----- Add -----

**3. Anxiety about one or all of the following:**

- a) Weight gain                    b) Losing a job
- c) Finding a new job              d) Younger women
- e) Money                          f) Death
- g) Children's lives                h) Finding clothes that fit
- i) Elderly parents                j) Sex
- k) New relationships

l) Finding potential (new) love in the around:

- 1) London                        2) Boston
- 3) Boca Raton                  4) Atlanta

----- Mix it all together -----

**4. The next phase of life ensues.**

The chart on the left appeared in Harzewski 2006, 34 and in Harzewski 2011, 48.

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