

Two hours later Lewis died, and reportedly was buried on the spot. Those are the reported facts. But do they report what actually happened?

In this book, the argument goes both pro and con. Holmberg says the evidence is convincing. The contrary point of view, however, is argued by John Guice, who sees a coverup. In this hall of justice sits judge Jay H. Buckley, who weighs all the evidence and comes down on the side of suicide. But we know that a jury of historians is like a gaggle of lawyers, each out to prove his own point of view and thereby strengthen his reputation. These are already academics of high reputation. But they argue strenuously. So the book ends with a ? or rather an !. Or rather two such marks. The fourth judge, the new reader, will have to make up his/her own mind.

—Ray B. Browne

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Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction

Suzanne Ferris and Mallory Young, Editors. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Ferris and Young's collection begins an important conversation about an explosively popular yet often critically dismissed genre. Most readers and moviegoers are familiar with the formulaic Chick Lit scenario. The heroine is a young, professional, white, middle-class heterosexual. She falls short of the cultural ideal in looks and is especially unhappy with the current state of her uncoupled life, but the author or filmmaker sets her on a course to happiness with the help of a close group of friends, intensive shopping, a variety of passing sexual experiences, and a frequently ironic view of the self. The story ends in a marriage or at least a promising relationship.

It is the revelation of variations on this norm and the contradictions among the essays' authors that make *Chick Lit* an interesting if sometimes uneven read. Chick Lit is a pure incarnation of past popular romances; it is a contemporary and ironic critique of romance tropes. It is today's "woman's fiction" in the tradition of Austen and Wharton; it is popular entertainment, pure and simple. It reproduces the patriarchal force of normative heterosexuality, in part through placing women in conflict with one another; its true focus is women in community, not the marriage plot. It is defined by the unique demographic from which it emerges and to which it appeals; it is exportable to a myriad of identities and cultures.

Together the essays provide a useful starting point for future study, succeeding in helping to place Chick Lit on the timeline of the history of writing by women. Readers in search of a broad introduction to primary examples of the genre will find ample discussion of familiar texts, such as Fielding's *Bridget Jones* and Weisberger's *The Devil Wears Prada*, but they will also be introduced to a wide range of subgenres, from Sistah Lit to Grits Lit, from Tween Lit to Mommy Lit. The focus is largely on genre, but substantial cultural and historical context is meaningfully explored.

The effect of the work as a whole is to invite a deeper gaze into the history of women's popular writing, especially in light of more recent feminist and new historical readings. Chick Lit itself suggests the comparisons undertaken in this collection, to the normative and canonical works of Austen, Bronte, and Wharton, for example, but equally interesting comparisons might be made to earlier popular but less canonical works, such as Haywood's *Fantomina* or the subversive blood and thunder romances of Alcott. Another direction for more direct comparison is to the current "literary" novels to which Chick Lit is so often subordinated, and perhaps to the Oprah books of the last decade. Finally, questions of the conservative and progressive implications of Chick

Lit (the ending focus on marriage, for example, or the negative images of working mothers in Nanny Lit and of nannies in Mommy Lit) are raised in this collection but remain fertile ground for further study.

The collection also teases out questions of the connection between Chick Lit and the transition from second to third wave feminism. The authors offer conflicting and occasionally stereotypical views and definitions of second and third wave feminism, as well as postfeminism. Oddly, for example, the opening essay seems overtly hostile to the Chick Lit genre as it is evolving. Upset by a general lack of recognition for her part in the emergence of the term and angry at what she sees as the popularization of the genre away from the more legitimate postfeminist fiction in her own earlier collection, the author engages in stereotypical images of second wave feminists (humorless, butch, hairy legged) to distinguish her postfeminist fiction. The irony, of course is that she, in turn, feels rejected in similarly stereotypical ways by the current wave of Chick Lit. While an extreme example, such limiting referencing appears in more than a few of the collection's essays where, admittedly, the cultural analysis is second to genre considerations.

While browsing a local bookstore recently, I spotted what may well be the next stage of Chick Lit—Gay Divorcee Lit and Empty Nest Lit. Aging Chicks and a successful publishing trend surely will provide plenty of opportunity for a *Chick Lit: The New Woman's Fiction II*.

—Linda S. Coleman
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Chorus and Community

Karen Ahlquist, Editor. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006.

In our divided and fragmented world, the desired goal is “community,” especially political, family, and social. No community is more easily achieved than that of music in general and the chorus in particular, though they may be fleeting—lasting only until the final note fades. In the San Francisco area, there are more than 500 choruses, another record gives some 100 in an English community. A definition of a musical community depends, of course, on the definer. Most people would allow as few as two to constitute a community. Others might well allow one performer, with his or her world of predecessors and spiritual song-mates, to constitute a community. Regardless of size, there is a cohering power about music that draws together a community and provides them with a spirit that cannot be found outside the music. This collection of essays provides a good example. It includes, in five parts, “A Communal Art,” “Grassroots Aesthetics,” “Minorities Identities,” “The Activist Chorus,” and “In the Western Tradition.” Each part includes two or three illustrative examples. Together the essays demonstrate the worldwide appeal and power of the chorus. It is a document that we should all bring close to our hearts.

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