

Body Image in Chick Lit

There is a misconception among non-chick lit readers that the genre offers candy-coated, fluffy stories about women obsessed with Jimmy Choo shoes and Kate Spade handbags. While this is true for some chick lit novels, it is not representative of the genre as a whole. Many chick lit novels cover much darker subject material, such as death, eating disorders, infidelity, miscarriages and body image.

Plus-sized women are not exactly strangers in the chick lit genre. British authors such as Jane Green and Elyse Friedman wrote about plus-sized women before American author Jennifer Weiner introduced the world to Cannie Shapiro in *Good in Bed*. The problem with Green and Friedman's books, though, was that the heroines only achieved happiness by losing the weight and becoming thin. Weiner has stood alone in the genre as the only author to allow her heroines happiness while remaining full-figured (Unminger 240).

As a plus-sized woman who happens to be a reader and a writer, the lack of plus-sized heroines who attain happiness despite their weight struck me as being unrealistic and depressing. Considering the fact that "more than one-third of American women wear a size 16 or larger,"

(Maine 112) it makes no sense that chick lit authors would not embrace such a large segment of the population, give full-figured women positive stories and heroines, and not give in to the ideal that the only way to attain happiness is to be thin. It was not until I read Weiner's *Good in Bed* that I realized that there is a market for plus-sized heroines who can achieve happiness while remaining plus-sized. Reading *Cannie's* story also provided me with the impetus to follow in Weiner's footsteps by refusing to equate thin with happiness.

Thus, *Big Girls Need Love Too* was born. My heroine, Molly Sampson, is a 26-year-old plus-sized woman who has a very negative body image. She was mentally and emotionally abused by her ex-stepfather as a child and teen, and has internalized every hateful thing he ever said to her. As a result, when she looks in the mirror all she sees are the flaws in her body rather than the positive characteristics. She focuses on the fact that she is not thin, that she has to shop at Lane Bryant to find clothes that fit and has a few stretch marks and cellulite dimples here and there. Essentially, she has bought in to her ex-stepfather's words—not to mention the message society sends to women on a daily basis—and believes that because she is big that she does not deserve love and happiness, and that no man would ever find her attractive or worth his attention.

Molly's negative body image has caused her to hang on to her best friend, Benjamin, for years. Even though he treats her like a backup plan, Molly continues to cling to him because deep down she does not believe that she deserves something more. Through several blind dates, and by meeting Joe (the eventual hero), she begins to realize that she does have worth and that men do find her attractive. Most importantly, though, she begins to see that she has more to offer a man than big boobs—she is smart, funny, caring and loveable.

Molly finds happiness without losing weight or changing herself physically. Instead, all of her changes are internal. She realizes that Benjamin is a jerk who does not deserve her

friendship much less her devotion. She realizes that she deserves a boss who respects her and who does not treat her badly just because he can. She realizes she has a talent not only for editing, but also for writing and really speaking to people through her new job at the newspaper. She also realizes that good guys do exist, and that they even like women like her.

The decision to make Molly's changes internal was deliberate on my part, since change truly has to come from within in order to be effective. Changing the outside is a temporary fix that often leads to more depression rather than the holy grail of happiness, and Molly is already depressed enough. There is also the fact that thin does not always equal happy. All women have body image issues, no matter their clothing size, weight, height, background, etc. My size zero stepsister has as many body image issues as I do at a size 18, so I think it is unfair for any writer (or society, for that matter) to say that plus-sized women are the ones who have to change their bodies in order to be happy. Thin heroines do not usually have to change their bodies or gain weight in order to achieve happiness, so why should bigger heroines have to lose weight in order to gain happiness?

While depression, childhood abuse and body image issues are by nature dark subjects, Molly—in true chick lit fashion—keeps her sense of humor throughout the entire novel. “Chick lit...is generally written with self-deprecating humour and even at times physical comedy,” (Whelehan 176) which not only helps to make the heroines more relatable, but also helps to make dark subjects more palatable. Molly often uses self-deprecating humor to make cracks about her body throughout the novel. In the opening scene, the reader gets a good idea of who Molly is and how she views her body when Benjamin tells her to relax and that she is not fat. Her internal response is to think that her combination lock at the gym kind of disproves his comment (the numbers she uses for the lock are her measurements).

While humor and chick lit go hand in hand, Molly's sense of humor serves a greater purpose than simply adding light to a dark subject. Childhood abuse victims often develop "a tough sense of humor, a bitter wit or sense of cynicism," because "as long as [victims] keep people laughing, [the victim can] maintain a certain protective distance. And as long as [the victim] keep[s] laughing, [they] don't have to cry" (Bass and Davis 51). Molly's sense of humor has developed as a result of her abusive childhood, as can be witnessed by her snarky tone, not to mention the fact that a good portion of her humorous comments are directed towards herself and her body.

This can also be evidenced in *Good in Bed*, as Cannie was also mentally and emotionally abused as a child (by her father), and who has also developed self image issues as a result. Cannie's sense of humor—while hilarious—is also a very obvious self defense mechanism; she at turns uses it to keep people away but also to gain approval. People are drawn to her because of her sense of humor, largely because having a sense of humor makes one more approachable. When *Certain Girls* picks up with Cannie twelve years after the end of *Good in Bed*, we find that Cannie still has her sharp sense of humor, and that there are times when she still has body image issues despite being mostly at peace with herself.

Humor is a paradox for heroines such as Molly and Cannie, who desperately want to be liked and loved, but who are also scared to let anyone get too close for fear of being let down once again by a man. The humor draws men in, and on one hand, both heroines get a bit of a rush out of the fact that men enjoy the fact that they can be funny. On the other hand, both Cannie and Molly use their humor as a shield, deflecting compliments and making comments about themselves that while on the surface appear funny are really illustrations of just how deep down their hurt and fear reaches.

It takes a special kind of man to see past the sense of humor to the darkness inside, and who will accept a woman who not only has trust issues but also a larger body than most men will admit being attracted to. Canny finds love with Peter (who is ironically a weight-loss doctor), and Molly finds possible love with Joe, a wonderful man who is also not what he appears to be at first glance.

In this regard, chick lit borrows some from the traditional romance. Traditional romance focuses on the love story, with an emotionally satisfying ending with the love story resolved at the climax. Chick lit twists the traditional romance formula in that “the quest for self-definition and the balancing of work with social interaction is given equal or more attention than the relationship conflict,” and chick lit heroines may not always end up with Mr. Right but rather Mr. Wrong or Mr. Right Now (Harzewski 37).

Considering that the traditional romance novel itself “derive[s] in part from...both comedy and of romance in its larger sense,” and that the line between the two is not clearly drawn, (Regis 28) it is easy for one to see that chick lit and traditional romance do share some similarities. Chick lit, in a way, is an updated version of the traditional romance, directed more towards women in their 20s and 30s who have grown up hearing they could have it all and who have the freedom to choose between Mr. Right and Mr. Right Now. In her essay “The End of the Novel of Love,” Vivian Gornick states that “Love...is necessary but insufficient: It cannot do for us what we must do for ourselves” (Gornick 296). I think this is one of the fundamental tenets of chick lit—that love is great, it is something we all wish to obtain, but that the journey in reaching love is the important part.

This all holds true in *Big Girls Need Love Too*. Even though Molly does find eventual happiness with Joe, the book does not end with a declaration of love, a wedding or pregnancy as

many romance novels do. Instead, it ends with Molly opening up to Joe and telling him she thinks she is falling in love with him, and with Joe returning the sentiment. It is a hint that Molly will find true love with Joe, but most importantly it is an illustration that Molly has learned to open up, to trust, and to allow herself to take a chance and be vulnerable. Molly has finally managed to look beyond her body to what is on the inside. Granted, the fact that Joe loves her curves definitely helps, but the fact that he likes who she is as a person is the most important aspect of their relationship. In Molly's case love is important, but it is self love that is most important, with her journey towards self acceptance coming in second.

Whelehan states that "there is no space for large girls in chick lit except at the beginning of novels waiting for their makeover" (Whelehan 201). Weiner took that idea and flipped it on its head, with heroines such as Cannie Shapiro, Becky Rothstein-Rabinowitz (*Little Earthquakes*) and Rose Feller (*In Her Shoes*). Young adult chick lit has begun to follow suit, with novels such as *Go Figure* by Jo Edwards and *Pretty Face* by Mary Hogan featuring high-school aged heroines who are plus-sized and who don't have to lose weight in order to be accepted by their classmates—or the boy they have a crush on. In both *Go Figure* and *Pretty Face* the heroines (Ryan and Hayley, respectively) find themselves, self-acceptance and love from someone who appreciates them just the way they are.

The heroines in each of these novels are complex women (or girls on the verge of womanhood) who are smart, successful, talented, funny, generous, caring people who happen to be full-figured. All of them battle their self image at one point or another. Becky in *Little Earthquakes* laments the fact that as a plus-sized woman no one could tell she was pregnant until late into her third trimester (not to mention the difficulty in finding plus-sized maternity clothes). Rose of *In Her Shoes* has a thin, gorgeous younger sister who is highly irresponsible and selfish,

and who Rose catches having sex with the man Rose has been dating (who also happens to be her boss). Ryan in *Go Figure* is a senior in high school, popular, funny, a great photographer and the ex-girlfriend of rock star Noah, who releases an unflattering song that was written about Ryan. The song makes Ryan look at herself, and she realizes that instead of focusing on her weight it is about time she focused on getting what she wants rather than what everyone tells her she should want (such as losing weight). Hayley in *Pretty Face* has a mother who was once fat, and who is now obsessed with dieting and who forces Hayley to weigh on a daily basis (she even buys Hayley a talking scale), diet, and buys her clothes that are too small in the hopes that it will cause Hayley to shed some pounds. During a summer trip to Italy, though, Hayley discovers that not everyone in the world is as thin-obsessed as her hometown of Santa Monica. It is in Italy that she meets a cute Italian boy who sees her as curvy rather than fat, and Hayley begins to see that she is smart and witty and that curves can be beautiful.

Novels such as these are the kinds of novels I wish to write, novels that feature full-figured heroines who are smart, witty, kind and loveable, heroines who are appreciated just the way they are. I feel that it is time for popular fiction—and women's fiction, especially—to recognize larger women, and that we can be sexy, and that big girls need love too. Considering women buy more books than men, and considering the fact that fiction for women (romance, chick lit, women's fiction) comprises a large share of fiction sales across the U.S., it only makes sense that writers and publishers would attempt to appeal to a largely untapped market in a positive way.

No matter what size a woman wears, we all share similar experiences. However, there are experiences that bring plus-sized women together, such as the inability to find maternity clothes, a general prejudice against larger women, a belief that we must be lazy couch potatoes, that we

do not care about ourselves, we cannot be successful and that we are unlovable. While fiction, especially romantic fiction (romance and chick lit), is a way for women to escape from their own lives, we also read in order to connect. I myself sometimes find it difficult to connect to a skinny heroine with an ethereal beauty, milky thighs, perfect breasts, gently flared hips, a bow-shaped mouth and a cute button nose. In fact, most women find it hard to relate to a woman who looks like that, mainly because most of us do not look that way. Reading romantic fiction and having this ideal constantly thrown at us does no woman any good—no matter how thin or fat she is.

There is a place for a “real” woman in romance and chick lit, and luckily chick lit seems to have embraced the plus-sized heroine. Authors such as Jennifer Weiner, Jo Edwards and Mary Hogan are sending positive messages to women—that you do not have to fit into a certain size in order to be loved, but that until you see that for yourself love is not going to find you. That is a message all women could use, that all women can relate to. That is a message I wish to send with every story I write. Body image issues permeate our society, but maybe if we writers can reach out to other women with a positive body message women will slowly begin to look at themselves differently.

The first time I read *Good in Bed* I had the thought, “she gets it, this is an author who *gets* it.” I can only hope that readers have that same reaction to my stories—that I “get it,” and that they, too, can “get it.”

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