

“I am Girl. Hear me Roar”

Girlpower and Postfeminism in Chick lit jr. Novels

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Abstract

The article focuses on an example of chick lit jr., Meg Cabot's *Airhead*-trilogy, and how feminism, postfeminism and girlpower are discussed in this text. The novels portray a conflict between the generations, where the daughter rejects her mother's version of feminism. There is an interesting ambiguity in the text concerning feminist ideals which makes Cabot's novels, along with many other examples of chick lit jr., difficult to define. But even if there's a remnant of feminism in these novels, that version of feminism stays on the individual plane and never influences society as a whole.

Keywords chick lit jr, feminism, postfeminism, girlpower, generations

Chick lit as a genre has been declared dead on several occasions and the rather tepid reception of Bridget Jones' latest escapades might be seen as the final nail in the coffin. We seem to be tired of chick lit but chick lit jr., aimed at a younger female reader, seems to be still going strong. Authors like Meg Cabot, Louise Rennison and Cecily von Ziegsar are extremely popular and their books sell in

huge quantities. Chick lit jr. as a genre is dominated by young and feisty heroines, remnants of the “girl-power culture”, who shop, party, look for love, fight and on occasion (more in Ziegsar’s novels than in Cabot’s) have sex. These books are sometimes defended by critics such as Joanna Webb Johnson, for example, who applauds the genre that, in her opinion, doesn’t judge or condemn girls’ actions (Webb Johnson 2006). She sees chick lit jr. as a new and improved version of books like Louisa M. Alcott’s *Little Women* and proclaims the genre to be modern and liberating, a new kind of book for girls living in a postfeminist age. But there are also several voices which are against the genre. Patty Campbell, for example, riles against the books and their focus on consumerism and appearances, even if she is unconcerned by the prospect of a generation of young girls being influenced by them – no one can take these books seriously, she argues (Campbell 2006). In Sweden, though, critics have warned parents against letting their daughters read these books. The shopping, the drinking and the sex (especially in Ziegsar’s *Gossip Girl*-series) is interpreted as something girls could be influenced by. (See, for example, Olsson 2009.)

Chick lit jr. is often seen as “pink” books. The covers are pink and the content is by many considered to be “pink” in a more metaphorical way, as the young heroines often choose a very different femininity and feminism from that of their mothers’. In “Teening Chick Lit?”, Imelda Whehelan focuses on the pink covers and says that:

[...]sub textually, the pastel colors offer us a palette more regularly seen on baby clothes and suggests that femininity has been re-commodified, color coded and softened for a generation of young women distant enough from feminism to feel that this is a new identity they can grasp and belong to. (Whehelan, 2009, 2)

What is this new identity that young readers can grasp from chick lit jr.? How is it different? In this article I want to focus on Meg Cabot’s *Airhead*-trilogy and discuss the three books with the help of postfeminist theory.

1975 Helen Reddy had a big hit with the song “I am Woman. Hear me Roar”, which captures many of the ideas from the second wave of feminism from the 1960s and 1970s. Over thirty years later, Meg

Cabot writes her trilogy and a lot has happened to feminism over these years. We have had the third wave of feminism, when the critique of feminism as “white”, middleclass and heterosexual was intensified (see for example Segal 1999), we have had a period of what Susan Faludi defined as “backlash” in her famous book from 1991 (Faludi 1991), where she argues that in the 1980s and 1990s feminism was often portrayed as a movement that didn’t improve women’s lives at all, but rather made it more difficult to be a woman, and we have also the notion that feminism is no longer needed. Jennifer Baumgardner and Amy Richards argue in *Manifesta. Young Women, Feminism and the Future* (2000) that there is a whole generation of women who do not understand that many of the choices they have are possible because of feminism and who don’t want to define themselves as feminists. Which brings us to the ill-defined concept of postfeminism, a term often used in popular culture, but seldom used by gender theorists, as it can mean many different things, from the idea that feminism is no longer needed as gender equality is now a reality, to the “new” feminism of girl power.

Having spent a few years writing about chick lit, I find chick lit jr. especially interesting as the books are both ambivalent and contradictory. Are these books examples of backlash? How do they relate to the concept of “girl-power”? Are they postfeminist? Antifeminist? Any kind of feminist? I hope to be able to provide at least some answers.

A Pink Dystopia

Meg Cabot is a well known author of chick lit jr. who is famous for both her books about Princess Mia and Allie Finkle. Her books are often funny, there are an abundance of happy endings and there is usually romance, but very seldom sex. The *Airhead*-trilogy is a combination of chick lit jr. and dystopian fiction. After the huge success of Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games*, young adult fiction has been flooded with dystopian fiction and, in an earlier article, I compare this trilogy to Collins’ bestselling novels (Nilson 2013). The *Airhead*-trilogy starts with *Airhead* from 2008, in which we meet Em, a strong, somewhat nerdy girl who hates all “airheads”, girls who live for their looks and whose main focus in life is clothes, make up and accessories. After a few pages, Em dies and her brain is transplanted into supermodel Nikki’s body. The second book is *Being Nikki* from

2009, where Em has to live Nikki's life, since almost everyone thinks that she is her. Em cannot be herself, she has to pretend be Nikki, and being a supermodel is not everything it is cracked up to be. Em has to learn to be a new version of a girl, and that leads to all kinds of comic situations, but as the story progresses it becomes darker. The trilogy concludes with *Runaway* from 2010, in which the dystopian traits are stronger. The multibillion dollar company responsible for Em's second chance at life turns out to be an evil force that seeks to sell everlasting youth to those that can afford it. The conflict between generations is somewhat heightened as rich old people can "buy" a new young body and have their brains transplanted into it. The person whose body is used dies. Em, like most heroines in dystopian young adult fiction, has to battle against the corporation to save not only herself but a whole generation of teenagers who will otherwise be sacrificed so that the old and rich can live forever.

However, the focus in these books is not on Em's struggle to defeat the evil corporation but on her struggle to reinvent herself in a new body. Em is in the beginning of the story a tomboy who thinks that she is content with being just that. "What's wrong with jeans, a hoody and converse?" (Cabot 2008, 26). But when her brain is transplanted into Nikki's body, she is all of a sudden "pretty".

The Old-Fashioned Feminist

"Pretty", Mum said, looking confused, "is a patriarchal construct designed to make women feel less worthy unless they live up to a certain standard established by the male-dominated fashion and beauty industry. You know that, Em. I tell you and Frida that all the time". "Yeah", I said, putting the picture down again. "I know. That might be part of the problem". (Cabot 2010, 137)

Em's mother is a feminist who named her younger daughter after the iconic artist Frida Kahlo. She has taught her daughters to rebel against old-fashioned ideas of what girls should look like and how they should act. She wants her daughters to be strong and independent, she wants them to have a good education, and to make their mark on the world. The idea that it is important for Em to be pretty is something her mother cannot understand and she is

equally baffled by Frida's desire to be a cheerleader. In the beginning of the trilogy, Em is completely on her mother's side, but when she finds herself in a new body, she realizes that she has been unhappy for years. She starts to rebel against her mother and her feminist ideas.

So what is feminism in these novels? In chick lit jr., there is a great deal of discussion of feminism, in which feminism and feminists are usually demonized. Feminists are described as "man-hating", "ugly" and "hairy" and labeled old-fashioned. They are seen as hypocrites and often as prudes. When Em's mother complains about Em's new life as a supermodel with the parties and the sexy clothes, Em realizes that she has misjudged her. "My mum's always been a feminist. But I never thought she was a prude" (Cabot 2010, 132). Should we see these descriptions of feminists as a kind of backlash? Stéphanie Genz argues in *Postfemininities in Popular Culture* (2009) that the discussion of popular culture has been too colored by the backlash concept. Examples like *Bridget Jones' Diary* and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* are, in her opinion, ambiguous. Instead of condemning them as backlash, we should try to see how feminism has influenced them. She writes: "Postfeminist femininity presents multiple layers of female identification that oscillate between subject and object, victim and perpetrator" (Genz 2009, 26). Emilie Zaslowsky argues in a similar way in *Feminism Inc.* from 2009. The post-feminism that we see in popular culture is heavily influenced by the concept of girl-power. Zaslowsky says that girl-power can be an example of backlash but at the same time it challenges the way we think about femininity and masculinity.

Girl power is watered-down feminist position available as stylish accessory, but it is also a meaningful and widespread embodiment of some feminist positions that girls draw upon as they create their gender identities. (Zaslowsky 2009, 9)

Girl power is a rather vague concept. Is it all about empowerment? And empowerment to do what exactly? Peggy Orenstein argues in *Cinderella Ate My Daughter* that girl power as a phenomenon is double edged. On one hand, it is about taking control of one's own life and not letting society tell you what to do, but on the other

hand, says Orenstein, it is a lot about conforming to a specific kind of femininity that is the norm today. The freedom to choose is only there on the surface (Orenstein 2011).

The sharp criticism against feminism that we can see in chick lit jr. doesn't mean that these texts aren't influenced by feminist thinking. Em may be very critical of her mother, but in another way she embraces the lessons that her mother has taught her. She is assertive, she is strong and even when she becomes the pretty supermodel that has left the jeans and hoodie behind, she cannot be described as a stereotypical female from days gone by. In the final book, as Em and her friends get ready to fight, Em says: “I resent the implication that a girl wouldn't necessarily know her way around explosives” (Cabot 2010, 20). She can now handle lip gloss, but she can also build a bomb. So why is it so important to refuse the idea of feminism in these books?

One aspect is of course the kind of feminism that is described. Em's mother is in many ways not just a stereotypical feminist, but also a parody of what a feminist is. Charlotte Brunsdon argues in “The Feminist in the Kitchen: Martha, Martha and Nigella” that for the last ten years or so, popular culture has been filled with messages suggesting that what women really want is love and marriage, and that to be happy as a woman you need to embrace your femininity.

Second-wave feminism is remembered and demonized as personally censorious, hairy and politically correct, and has been the key other for younger women keen to celebrate the femininity and feminism of Buffy and Allie. (Brunsdon 2006, 43)

Brunsdon talks about “dis-identity”: feminism in popular culture is molded into something old-fashioned and ridiculous, something that belongs to an older generation. Kerry Mallan says in *Gender Dilemmas in Children's Fiction* that feminism has become a “fossil” in young adult fiction:

For many young women and girls growing up in a so-called post feminist age, with its emphasis on consumerism, sexual freedom, and “go-girl” rhetoric ringing in their

ears, it is little wonder that feminism would seem as outdated as a walkman. (Mallan 2009, 37)

A feminist is something your mother is, feminism belongs to the older generation and Em, along with a large group of chick lit jr. heroines, needs to break free from her mother in order to create her own identity.

At the end of the trilogy Em's mother has come to both understand and respect her daughter's choices. In their "manifest" for a new feminism for a young generation, Baumgardner and Richards argue that an important part of the conflict between generations of feminists is that the older generation has often insisted that their "version" of feminism is the correct one. Quoting Diane Elm, Baumgardner and Richards write: "This problem manifests itself when senior feminists insists that junior feminists be good daughters, defending the same kind of feminism that their mothers advocated" (Baumgardner & Richards, 224). It is, then, possible to read the trilogy not as a rebuttal of feminism *per se*, but as an argument for a new kind of feminism.

The Makeover

The *Airhead*-trilogy is in many ways about getting what we could call an "extreme makeover". Em gets a whole new body complete with a new wardrobe and accessories. In chick lit jr., the makeover is an important theme. The heroine needs to reinvent herself and one of the tools she uses is generally clothes and make up. These books do focus a lot on appearances – there is a great deal in them about what to wear, how to apply lipstick and the horrors of the wrong fashion choice – but clothes also has a deeper meaning. Zaslow argues that the "dress up scenes" should be read as a stage for performing different kinds of identities. "As a marker of class, race and gender, the clothed body becomes a site on which girls can demonstrate their knowledge of fashion, and design identities to perform" (Zaslow 2009, 86). In performing, Nikki Em uses her new body to try out new kind of identities. But is that the only way we can understand the makeover? As a way to experiment with different kinds of identities?

In *Liquid Love*, Zygmunt Bauman describes what he sees as all too common in our modern world, namely our obsession with our-

selves. This is the era of “me, myself and I”, and Bauman talks about our narcissism but also our need to constantly reinvent ourselves. We are always on the hunt for our own identity and in this hunt we are often helped by so called “experts”. Bauman comments:

If you feel ill at ease in a fluid world and are lost among the profusion of contradictory road signs that seem to move as if on castors, visit one or some of those expert counselors for whose services there has never been a greater demand and of whom there has never been a richer supply. (Bauman 2003, 58)

This need and desire to use experts becomes a bit ambiguous as today’s culture is also about making your own choices. Bauman is critical of how we, in his opinion, let other people decide what we should wear, how we should eat and so on.

Rosalind Gill discusses in “The Postfeminist Media Culture: Elements of Sensibility” what she calls “the makeover paradigm” (Gill 2007). In today’s popular culture the makeover is one of the most dominant themes. With shows like *Extreme Makeover*, *The Biggest Loser* and *Trinny and Susannah* we see so called experts giving ordinary people a makeover, showing them how to dress, exercise and what to eat. If you have ever seen an episode of *Trinny and Susannah* you will know that at the beginning of the program they choose women who, in their opinion, wear the wrong clothes. Usually there is at least one woman on the show that dresses like Em does, and is labeled “unfeminine”. This woman is generally seen as not loving her body, and when she learns, with Trinny and Susannah’s help, to embrace her femininity, she becomes a happier person.

Em in Cabot’s novels is described as one of those girls who hasn’t got a clue how to be feminine. “I have been alive nearly seventeen years and I still have no idea what shade of lip gloss looks good on me...” (Cabot 2008, 2). She may be clever, but in the beginning of the trilogy she is also described as silly:

I’m not actually the most feminine girl in the world. I honestly wouldn’t mind trying to be, but the two or three times I’ve experimented by putting on eyeliner or whatever, Frida has just burst into hysterical laughter and told

me to “Take it off! Just take it off right now” before I’ve even gotten out of the apartment. (Cabot 2008, 17)

After her brain is transplanted into Nikki’s body, she needs to learn to perform a kind of femininity that was completely alien to her before.

Why does Em want this? Why isn’t she satisfied being the smart and competent girl that her mother wants her to be? It’s all about the boy. Em’s best friend is Christopher, but the problem is that Em doesn’t want to be just friends. She wants more than that. “Hadn’t all those times I’d sat in our living room, wishing that Christopher would notice me as something more than just someone to play *Journeyquest* with, I sort of longed to be pretty too?” (Cabot 2010, 110). Em says that she wants to be pretty for her own sake, but one of the themes of the novel is that in order to procure true love Em needs to become more feminine.

One of the goals of the makeover is of course to secure a partner, and an overall theme in a lot of makeover programs from *Biggest Loser* to *The Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* is that we need a makeover in order to attract the opposite sex. When it comes to shows like *Trinny and Susannah* and novels like Cabot’s there seems to be a common theme which says that women or girls need to be pretty, need to be feminine and soft in order to be attractive. But it is not just that you need to be feminine, you need to be the right kind of feminine. Em might not be able to figure out an eye-liner, but she is portrayed as a young woman who instinctively knows where the borders between sexy and slutty lie. In *Being Nikki*, one of Nikki’s old friends Lulu gives Em a makeover before they hit the clubs. “I looked just like a hooker I’d seen once down the West Side Highway. Thought I hadn’t wanted to hurt Lulu’s feelings by saying so. Especially since the hooker had been a man” (Cabot 2009, 233). Em wants to be attractive but she also wants to be respectable. In chick lit jr., there are “good” girls and there are “bad” girls, and just as Beverly Skeggs argues in *Formations of Class and Gender* from 1997, in order to secure both a position in society and a man (!), the heroines in the genre need to perform the right kind of femininity in order to be respectable.

The novels also say that being pretty is not enough if you want to find true love. On the one hand, you need the makeover, but, on the

other hand, you need to be yourself, albeit an improved version of yourself. When Em first approaches Christopher in Nikki's body, he is completely uninterested. "He'd just blown off the hottest supermodel on the planet" (Cabot 2009, 256). He isn't impressed with Nikki's beauty, and Em is really upset when she realizes that he now treats her like the airhead they used to make fun of. "The one person I thought could help me – or not even me so much as Nikki – and he'd just completely ignored me, as if I was a fly. Or a busboy. Or a *girl*" (Cabot 2009, 215). It is not until Christopher realizes that it really is Em in Nikki's body that he can see past the surface.

There is another aspect to Em's makeover. Before, when she was a tomboy in jeans and a hoodie, she might have been interested in Christopher, but she had no sexual desires. It's Nikki's body that in a way teaches her about sex. Em discovers desire:

There was no denying that my lips felt super tingly where his had touched them. And I was sort of starting to detect some fire in my lointage area now. O my God! Nikki Howard is a total slut! Or maybe I am, and I had just never had an opportunity to discover it until now. (Cabot 2009, 88)

As we know from Adrienne Rich, Monique Wittig and Judith Butler, just to name a few, heterosexual desire is vital to performing both femininity and masculinity in the "right" way. Being female means desiring a male, at least if you want to follow the norms that still govern large parts of our society. Em needs to master the eyeliner, but she also needs to awaken as a heterosexual being.

The I of postfeminism?

At the end of Cabot's trilogy, Em is happy in her new body. She triumphs against the evil corporation, she gets her Christopher and she reconciles with her mother. Em is now pretty, she is attractive and she knows how to make a bomb since she is a girl that does know her way around explosives. She is a perfect example of a "girl power" kind of heroine. So what does that mean? Zaslow argues that

Girl power focuses on style as a mark of one's autonomy, on sexual expressions as a symbol of one's connection

with the self, on independence from men rather from patriarchal systems and relations of power, and on the individual as independent resister rather than as a member of collective social change movement. (Zaslow 2009, 150)

In chick lit jr., there is a focus on the individual and on her or his ability to do anything she or he wants. Are there feminist traits in these novels? Yes, of course there are, but that does not mean that they are feminist books. There is no real discussion about power in Cabot's novels, there is never any desire to change society in any way and even if there is a certain freedom for the heroine to do femininity in different ways, that is only possible if she is firmly placed inside the heterosexual matrix.

In the beginning of this article, I describe these books as ambivalent and contradictory, and I stand by that. They cannot be labeled either feminist or antifeminist. We find in them a lot of old fashioned ideas about femininity, but there are also some modern ones, and Em is portrayed as a strong female subject. The feminism in these novels is, however, completely connected to an individual project. There is no desire to change the world or to improve the conditions that women (and men) live under as Em is focused on her own quest to become who she wants to be, with the help of both a make-over and a boyfriend. Baumgardner and Richards argue that: “[F]eminism wants you to be whoever you are – but with a political consciousness”, (Baumgardner & Richards 2000, 57). It's not just that Em lacks a political consciousness; in Cabot's trilogy the desire to change society is seen as unnecessary and slightly ridiculous. Em has won the battle and gained a new kind of femininity but the victory ends there. As Baumgardner and Richards put it: “Without a body of politics, the nail polish is really going to waste” (Baumgardner & Richards 2000, 166).

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