

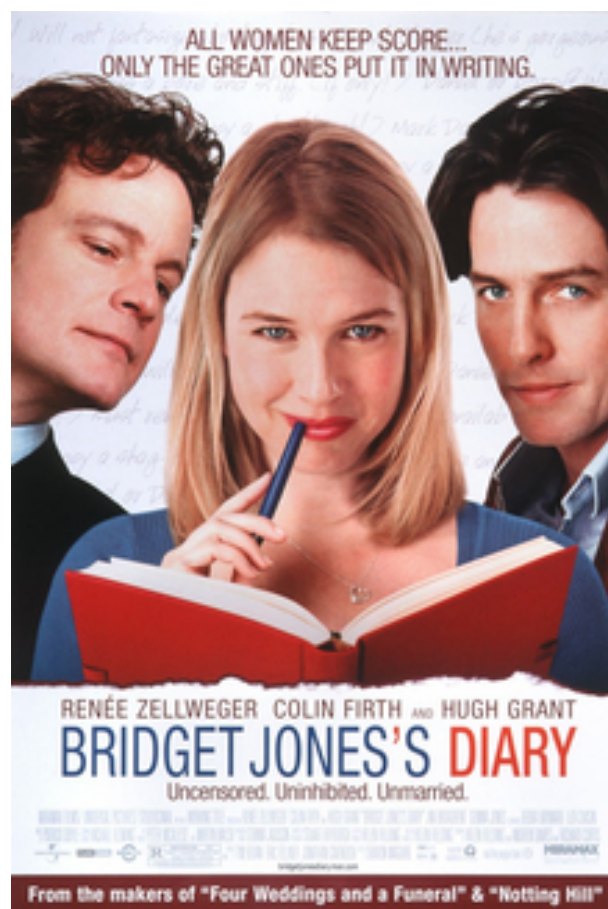
RADICAL TEACHER

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Deconstructing "Real" Love in the Classroom

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BRIDGET JONES'S DIARY. MIRAMAX, 2001

Though less than twenty years old, the genre of chick lit, first popularized by Helen Fielding's novel *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996), has embedded itself in our cultural consciousness. By now, the tropes are familiar: a young, single woman in a big city searches for happily-ever-after, which includes but is not limited to a loving and lasting relationship, career success, and real friendship. In spite of the genre's relative newness, scholars have found strong pedagogical justifications for teaching chick lit.¹ These novels offer students opportunities to assess an emerging cultural phenomenon, consider feminism's place in popular culture, and analyze a text that engages us not just intellectually but also affectively.

Though chick lit allows for new conversations, this body of work also brings with it several challenges. In my upper-division American literature seminar on chick lit at West Chester University, part of the Pennsylvania state system, I ask students to question how these novels construct cultural meanings for romantic love, intimacy, and success. Though excited to read the books, students often struggle to detach emotionally from these novels' romantic tropes. The romantic relationship tropes that appear in these works often reflect those narratives found in wider popular culture, such as "Love at First Sight. Always a Bridesmaid. The One That Got Away. The Love of My Life" (Mamont). Having internalized these ideas about romantic love, students often identify with these "big stories." Thus, they struggle to analyze them as socially constructed fantasies. They are not the only ones. Though intellectually aware of the cultural work these tropes do, I cannot easily dispel my own lingering attachments.

After teaching this course multiple times, I have created several approaches that help students disengage from these texts, or, when they feel emotionally invested in the novels we read, to better articulate why. Modeling my own experiences with these tropes is my first tool for defamiliarizing the "realness" of intimacy found within these novels. I explain to students the difficulties I face when unpacking my emotional investment in these narratives, and name for them those stories I want to believe rather than analyze. Framing the course with my own imperfections, and a willingness to co-investigate, encourages students to do the same.

In addition to teaching strategies, I use readings to destabilize students' attachments to chick lit novels and the romantic narratives they profess. In Liz Mamont and Amanda Hess's short essay, "How to Ditch Happily-Ever-After and Build Your Own Romantic Narrative," the authors explain how US culture's fixation on what the authors term "stock romantic narratives" exerts enormous influence on all U.S. cultural citizens. This piece offers students an accessible model of how to name the romantic narratives that they see in the novels we read. Furthermore, this article suggests that even if we know these stock narratives are "sexist, boring or alienating" they can also be emotionally clarifying and satisfying (Mamont). Mamont and Hess's

willingness to reflect on their beliefs about relationships also helps students to identify their own relationship clichés.

Another piece, by Lauren Berlant, lays the groundwork for a class discussion that analyzes how the romantic fantasies found in chick lit, or those held by students, normalize certain desires, practices, and lives while making other lives and forms of intimacy invisible.

In her introduction to *Critical Inquiry's* special issue on intimacy, Berlant's heavily theoretical piece ruminates on many aspects of intimacy, touching on concepts such as attachment, normativity, intelligibility, and the public-private divide. She speaks about world-building, and the need to imagine and allow for many different forms of intimacy. I use this piece to help students move from uncovering chick lit constructions of intimacy to deconstructing how U.S. popular culture more broadly has naturalized particular versions of love and intimacy. Berlant's piece prepares students to engage in more difficult conversations about more complicated, convoluted forms of intimacy such as singlehood, monogamy, and legal marriage.

When I last taught this course in spring of 2013, the Supreme Court was in the midst of hearing arguments about Prop 8 and DOMA, legislation that sought to institutionalize particular forms of intimacy at state and federal levels.

During class, I challenged students to apply Berlant's ideas to the arguments made in support of and against gay marriage. How did this national debate define intimacy? Was the push to legalize gay marriage a queering of chick lit romantic love? Or, was it a normalizing of something alternative and queer? Though we drew no definite conclusions, students were able to see the very real ways tropes of romance function in the world around them.

That students often begin the semester believing, and believing in, these romantic narratives, is exactly why they should be taught. I offer these approaches as a means to disrupt their uncritical consumption of these novels.

Through their investigations, students begin to see that "real" love is, in fact, a constructed thing.

Note

¹ For example, see Callahan and Low; Love and Helmbrecht; Rowntree, Bryant, and Moulding; Scott; and Wilson.

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