

Marmite, candy floss, hash cookies... and evangelising chickens

Annie Porthouse looks
at Christian chick lit

What were you up to on Monday 3rd January, 2005? I was whooping with joy that, as a relatively new author, I was featured in a national newspaper – an entire page in the Daily Mail! The title of the piece was *Eat your heart out Bridget Jones*. The topic was Christian chick lit – which had recently become a huge hit in the US and was now merrily bobbing its way across the waters to us.

For those of you who are wondering why anyone would even **want** to read about evangelising chickens, let's attempt to define Christian chick lit (CCL). Penny Culliford, a UK author who has written three such novels for Zondervan, says it contains 'a strong, quirky, usually single female ... dealing with real life situations, careers, boyfriends and friendships ... who doesn't get it right all of the time.'

It's generally (although not always) written in the first person, diary-style, as in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. CCL typically features single women in search of that missing 'something' in their lives, openly voicing their innermost wants and needs, dreams and fears.

The Christian version, like its secular counterpart, also revolves around weight loss, finances and finding Mr Right, but subtly weaves Christian faith into the mix.

Herein lies a problem (arguably one

that applies to all Christian fiction). How can fiction be wholesome, without being as boring as watching (glossy pink) paint dry? How can we allow our zany female to go wild, when she has to adhere to the publisher's strict guidelines, which often prevent her from drinking, engaging in almost any sort of sexual activity... and sometimes even from lying? This is where we in the UK differ from our mates in the States. For example, Scripture Union generously allowed me to permit my protagonist, Jude, to live her student life to the full. A re-write for a US Christian publisher (sticking to CBA guidelines) omitting the slightly 'iffy' language, alcohol and hash cookies, would shrink both my novels down to mere pamphlets! So how, as Christian novelists, can we hit that middle ground successfully?

CCL, bless its cotton socks (pink, fluffy ones...) suffers from the Marmite complex: you either consume it with a passion, laughing out loud at highly inappropriate moments – or the mere mention of it sends you dashing to the nearest cliff to hurl yourself off.

'It doesn't appeal to me. I like something deeper,' is a common view. Some have called it 'candy floss for the Christian soul'.

Conversely, many are true fans. 'I'd never read chick-lit, Christian or

otherwise, until my daughter-in-law gave me a Marian Keyes book. I've never laughed so much... it totally changed my views,' says Eleanor Watkins.

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And does CCL have a purpose? One could say that all art is for art's sake and doesn't require a justification. Or is entertainment the predominant aim? Perhaps, but not exclusively. Eleanor Watkins thinks that 'humour plays a big part in successful chick-lit, but that doesn't mean it can't also contain realism, teaching, encouragement.'

It could be argued that the novels can be a discipleship tool – teaching Christian singletons about God, life, love, etc. Or even evangelistic – demonstrating to the unchurched that God can be involved in the ups and downs of our everyday lives. 'I use it to make people laugh, much needed in the church, but also as satire, to examine some of the attitudes and motives prevalent in the church,' says Penny Culliford.

One final question, for homework: G P Taylor and Jeff Lucas have recently tried their hand at CCL. Are men suitable candidates for contributing to this genre? Gather round some candy floss and discuss!

(Thanks to the authors who contributed to this article via the ACW Facebook page.)



In addition to *Dear Bob* (Scripture Union's best-selling young adult novel) and the sequel, *Love Jude*, Annie has contributed to three non-fiction books and has had many articles published. When you can't find any chickens to convert, visit her website: www.annieporthouse.com.