


The
RIGHT FLUFF

— *A Guy's Guide To Chick Flicks* —



A full-page photograph of Reese Witherspoon as Elle Woods from the movie *Legally Blonde*. She is wearing a bright pink leather jacket and matching skirt, red-tinted sunglasses, and has her blonde hair styled in a high ponytail. She is smiling broadly and holding a small tan Chihuahua dog named Bruiser in her arms. The dog is wearing a purple sweater. She is also carrying a red leather handbag. The background is a blurred outdoor setting.

OF HUMAN BLONDAGE

Reese Witherspoon stars as Elle Woods (with her Chihuahua, Bruiser) in *Legally Blonde*; opposite, Renée Zellweger chews her finger in the title role of *Bridget Jones's Diary*.

Marriage and maturity have turned the author from a devotee of blood-soaked action films into a chick-flick connoisseur, always up for another rerun of *Dirty Dancing* or *Legally Blonde*.

But is the genre going flat? Tracing its heritage—Joan Crawford begat Barbra Streisand begat Meg Ryan begat Reese Witherspoon—

JAMES WOLCOTT provides a rundown of the chick flick's essential elements

G

o ahead, scoff, but there was a time when my movie tastes were rugged and chapped, downright virile. Sure, I might catch an Astaire-Rogers musical now and then just to take the "edge" off, but put an action film in front of me, packed with violence and bravado, and I was ready to gnaw. I wasn't devoid of aesthetic standards. I wasn't some B-movie barbarian, junking out on biker films and gore-fests at Times Square grind houses, where lonely men went to molt. My moviegoing wonder years coincided with the glory stretch of macho grit in the late 60s and early 70s, when Steve McQueen's *Bullitt* tore down the straightaway; when directors Sam Peckinpah and Don Siegel doused their antiheroes with flea powder and cut them loose in the scorpion desert; when New York City played surly host to Al Pacino's *Serpico*, Gene Hackman's Pop-eye Doyle (*The French Connection*), Robert De Niro's Johnny Boy (*Mean Streets*), and Robert Shaw holding the subway system hostage in *The Taking of Pelham 123*; when Burt Reynolds exuded beefcake prowess with his bow and arrows in *Deliverance*, Billy Jack preached peace and love with barefoot kicks to the head, and the Corleones reigned as America's First Family. Even musicals from the scruffy 70s, such as Bob Fosse's *All That Jazz*, drummed the floor with boot-heel stomps of macho declaration, and not every serious sports movie doubled as a Celebration of the Human Spirit, as witness the racy hockey picture *Slap Shot*, starring Paul Newman, who, critic and blogger Kim Morgan recently observed in tribute, "carrie[d] the picture with an odd sort of foul-mouthed dignity we simply don't see in movies these days." Yes, I too think back fondly on those hairy days when foulmouthed dignity was still in flower (before political sensitivities became so squeamish) and foulmouthed indignity was also free to break into aria, with Jack Nicholson cursing up a blue fury in *Carnal Knowledge* and *The Last Detail*. I look back and wonder what happened to the former me, who went to see Peckinpah's *Straw Dogs* twice on successive

evenings to get his lurid fix of sweaty, grubby sex and spasming carnage photographed and edited at full crescendo—a rhapsody in red. Today, macho movies make me shrug, their excesses no longer enticing. I see zombie-face Javier Bardem toting his air-pressure cattle gun in the ads for *No Country for Old Men* and I think, My, aren't we the fancy serial killer fresh from the hardware store? I read ecstatic reviews extolling the flashing, slashing steel and arterial spray of *Sweeney Todd* and I realize I've lost my love of tomato paste. Much as I revered Judd Apatow's *Freaky and Geeks*, I have no interest in the stunted toadstools taking up couch space in the slackers' hangar he's built on the big screen (*The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, *Knocked Up*). No, today, I am more likely to find myself situated in front of the zillionth cable replay of *Dirty Dancing* or *Legally Blonde*, worrying what will become of Mandy Moore if she co-stars in one more stinko, and wanting, actually wanting, to see *Enchanted*. Marriage and a semblance of maturity have collaborated to make me a student and captive of the chick flick, even if it means suffering through the ordeal of *Georgia Rule*.

First, one accepts the paradox: that to honor the bland—to value the flavorless rather than the flavorful—runs counter to our most spontaneous judgment (and elicits a certain pleasure in thus contradicting common sense).
—François Jullien, *In Praise of Blandness*, Zone Books, 2004.

GAL POWER

(1) Kirsten Dunst and Gabrielle Union face off in *Bring It On*. (2) Chick-flick queen Toni Collette in *Muriel's Wedding*. (3) Lindsay Lohan strikes a sultry pose in *Georgia Rule*. (4) Rachel McAdams, Diane Keaton, and Sarah Jessica Parker yuk it up in *The Family Stone*. (5) Renée Zellweger has a Ben & Jerry's moment in *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. (6) Toni Collette and Cameron Diaz as sisters in *In Her Shoes*. (7) Sandra Bullock takes the inevitable pratfall in *Miss Congeniality*. (8) Barbara Hershey and Bette Midler in *Beaches*, an early chick flick. (9) Selma Blair and Reese Witherspoon in the juggernaut *Legally Blonde*.

There are those who would argue that the candy-flavored phrase "chick flick" is demeaning, reductive, and sexist. Well, too bad. It's catchy, it rhymes, and it gets me where I need to go. First, though, we must define what a chick flick isn't. Although it targets a female audience, it is not to be confused with the Lifetime/Oxygen cable movie, which addresses a similar demographic with its own distinctive, watered-down, easy-to-swallow formula. Cast with familiar, beloved B-list drama and sitcom TV stars (Rob Lowe, Roma Downey, Valerie Bertinelli, Jami Gertz) and visually designed as comfort food for tired eyes, the typical Lifetime cable movie is a domestic melodrama of seduction and abduction. A woman—a young



The Graduate

tance from his father, sold his film rights to *The Graduate* for \$20,000, then gave the copyright to the Anti-Defamation League. He and his wife home-schooled their two sons and worked as dishwashers, housecleaners, and clerks at Kmart, living in campgrounds and trailer parks. They even lived in a Motel 6 for a while, in the small California coastal town of Carpinteria, before moving to England, where two years ago they were threatened with eviction from their apartment above a pet shop.

Considering himself a literary and not a commercial writer, Webb both distanced and disinherited himself from the success of the movie. (Two other movies based on his books were made: *The Marriage of a Young Stockbroker*, in 1971, and *Hope Springs*, in 2003.) One of his sons, who became a performance

artist, even cooked and ate a copy of *The Graduate* with cranberry sauce, a stunt that was mentioned in the English press. "Millions and millions were made from *The Graduate*, and here I am," Webb told the BBC, "searching around for a couple of quid to buy my sandwich—people love that." He did publish seven more novels, including *Home School*, a sequel to *The Graduate*, which picks up in the mid-70s, with Benjamin and Elaine living in Westchester County, with their two boys, and crossing paths again with Mrs. Robinson. When Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's released the American edition, in January, Webb told the *New York Post* that he "thought it would be my final bow to fiction, to go back to the beginning to find the ending. And then on to something else."

After claiming not to have seen the movie of *The Graduate* for many years, he now calls it "excellent," giving it "four and a half out of four stars."

Throughout his long career, Mike Nichols has won at least one of every major entertainment award: the Oscar, the Emmy, the Tony (seven of them), and the Grammy (for best comedy album, with Elaine May). He's done such fine work for so long that he is in danger of being taken for granted. When he's asked what was different about making movies back in the 1960s, now that his career has entered its sixth decade and he has amassed a formidable body of work (including *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, *Silkwood*, *Working Girl*, *Postcards from the Edge*, *Primary Colors*, *Wit*, *Angels in America*, and *Closer*), the ghost of a smile crosses Nichols's face. "I was just thinking," he says, "about how happy we were making *The Graduate*. What was different? Of course, we were different then. There's nothing better than discovering, to your own astonishment, what you're meant to do. It's like falling in love." □

Chick Flicks



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 408 for the sort of film you couldn't drag some guys by their entrails to go see. To such cynics, Ephron is auteurism's answer to Celine Dion, spreading margarine across each romantic ballad she dramatizes. To admirers, she is the Dorothy Parker of the date movie, a dispenser of after-dinner quips. There's no denying that Ephron's most notable films are firmly, tidily constructed beneath their chatty exteriors, built to last in the studio tradition of the Hollywood that is no more. She inherited—imbibed—that tradition of craftsmanship from her parents, Henry and Phoebe Ephron, the screenwriting team whose credits include *Carousel*, *Daddy Long Legs*, and the Tracy-Hepburn comedy *Desk Set*, the Ephrons' mystifyingly compelling, laxative adaptation of their stage play that has become a cult item through its many repeats on Fox Movie Channel. The letters Nora sent home from college became the basis for the Ephrons' play and film *Take Her, She's Mine*, with James Stewart as Sandra Dee's flustered dad (Sandra Dee: virgin pioneer chicklet of the chick flick).

An Academy Award nominee for her screenplays of *Silkwood* and *When Harry Met Sally*, Ephron struck gold as the director

and screenwriter for *Sleepless in Seattle* and *You've Got Mail*, the former suffused with the wan rapture of *An Affair to Remember* (clips of which appear in the film), the latter an updated remake of Ernst Lubitsch's *The Shop Around the Corner*, with Tom Hanks and Meg Ryan re-united from *Sleepless in Seattle*, carving out a heart-shaped warmth within Manhattan's cold mercantilism. Although Ephron's recent screen ventures have veered off target (*Bewitched* wiped out a small island in the Pacific), her influence is reflected in the scrubbed surfaces and cashmere cuddles of Nancy Meyers's sparkled chick flicks *What Women Want*, *Something's Gotta Give*, and *The Holiday*, and Julie Delpy's *Two Days in Paris*, which is *When Harry Met Sally* with baguettes.

The Jane Austen Book Club's membership runs the gamut of stereotypical female characters who populate the degraded modern equivalent of the women's picture: earth mother; recently dumped chick; stylish snob-ette; single dog-breeder; dykey daughter; hippie grandma and frisky triple-divorcée. The same ladies can be seen en masse in such endurance-test, no-boys-allowed movies as Steel Magnolias, How to Make an American Quilt, My Best Friend's Wedding, Bridget Jones's Diary, and dozens of others.

—John Patterson,
"If Only... We Had Better
Women's Pictures,"

The Guardian, November 10, 2007.

Along with the dog breeder and frisky cougar mentioned above, other stereotypes fill out the playing deck of the chick flick: the Gay Confidant (the role Rupert Everett will carry into Valhalla), the Oprah-esque Font of Soulful Wisdom (paging Queen Latifah), the

Dependable Good Guy (sleepyhead Mark Ruffalo), the Kind but Slightly Vague Father Figure Who Helps Unload Stuff out of the Car, the Old Person on the Park Bench Who Gets Off a Wry One-Liner after the couple walks out of frame, the Boyfriend's Poker-Playing Buddies (farting and wisecracking behind a small forest of beer bottles), and the Snooty Salesperson Left Holding the Atomizer After a Withering Retort. And let's not neglect the standbys of the lesbian-inflected chick flick—*Kissing Jessica Stein*, *Puccini for Beginners*, *Imagine Me & You*, *Gray Matters*—where there's nearly always a Clueless Dude who doesn't understand why he isn't making headway and a Lewd Dude who does understand and proposes a threesome with him in the middle (a man sandwich).

Coiled within this ensemble demonstration of love and laughter and misunderstanding and morning-after regrets and reconciliation and eating Häagen-Dazs straight out of the carton is a gnarled branch of conflicted, suppressed yearning, and the name carved on that branch is Toni Collette's. Contending with Cameron Diaz's bouncy, selfish irresponsibility in *In Her Shoes* and Natasha Richardson's noble White Cliffs of Dover bone structure in *Evening*, Collette is the sister with a forlorn haircut, the emotionally choppy brunette martyr sweeping up the confetti of other people's parties. (The verbal punishment she took in *Muriel's Wedding*, the Australian export that made her a star, was downright sadistic!) In a looks-obsessed culture, blondes have it easy—they're issued permission slips for bad behavior—while the Toni Collette underdog broods in partial eclipse until her breakthrough in the last act, when her inner worth is finally valued and the last traces of inhibition are vanquished in