

## The Edge of Reason: the Myth of Bridget Jones

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‘That’s what’s so silly about feminism, darling.  
Anyone with an ounce of sense knows we’re the  
superior race and the only nigger in the woodpile is –’  
‘Mother!’  
‘— when they think they can sit around when they  
retire and not do any housework. [...] I don’t know!  
You all seem to have some silly idea about getting  
Indiana Jones in your house loading the dishwasher.  
You have to train them.’<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Bridget Jones is no mere fictional character, she’s the Spirit of the Age. Her diary presents a perfect zeitgeist of single female woes. It rings with the unmistakable tone of something that is true to the marrow and captures what – alas – it is like to be female. Any woman of a certain age can recognise elements of Bridget in herself. Indeed she is far more than the patron saint of single women: she is everyman, or rather, everyone. She is the most enchanting heroine for the millennium.<sup>2</sup>

Actually of course Bridget Jones *is* a mere fictional character, albeit an exceptionally successful one. Helen Fielding’s 1996 novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary* has sold well over ten million copies in more than 30 languages worldwide.<sup>3</sup> It was followed by an enormously successful sequel novel, *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason*, first published in 1999. The 2001 film *Bridget Jones’s Diary* made more money in the UK in its first weekend than any previous British film; at the time of writing a sequel film is in production. So if Bridget Jones is the Spirit of the Age, what Age is this, and what kind of Spirit? In this chapter we want to assess whether Bridget Jones is the symbol of political, cultural or social transformation that so many critics have claimed that she is. Our argument is that if anything she is the opposite: a symbol of conservatism, neo-liberalism and postfeminism. Our opening quote from *The Edge of Reason*

encapsulates those themes. Bridget's mother's "common sense" is reassuring precisely insofar as it produces a postfeminist attack on feminism and a neo-liberal sneer at 'politically correct' objections to racism.

It seems unlikely that many readers and viewers believe Bridget literally to be a real person:<sup>4</sup> her *reality* is an illusion created by the extraordinarily powerful ways in which the novels and films interpellate their audience, especially their heterosexual female audience. The "That's me!" reaction noted by Whelehan<sup>5</sup> and a host of other critics has also been strongly experienced by our own students when we have used *Bridget Jones's Diary* in the classroom, and was neatly summed up by one student who stopped Merl in the corridor one afternoon to announce excitedly "I AM BRIDGET JONES".

Fielding's use of the first person confessional idiom was one of the things that made the original Bridget Jones newspaper column, later to become the first novel, so popular and engaging, and *Bridget Jones's Diary* is much fresher, funnier and less strained than *The Edge of Reason*. Each diary entry begins with a tally of Bridget's weight, how many alcohol units she has consumed, how many cigarettes, how many calories, and an account of whatever other ongoing self-help regimen she is engaged in, including the number of positive thoughts she has had, the number of serious current affairs articles she has read, the number of National Lottery Instants scratch cards she has bought, and so on. The organisation and repetition of this account is the source of much of the "Bridget terminology" that has entered the wider culture, and it comments ironically on the kinds of pressures middle-class white women supposedly face in being women. Indeed the back jacket blurb of *Bridget Jones's Diary* suggests that this commentary may constitute (among other things) "a dazzling urban satire of modern human relations". However in our view it is overstating the case to suggest that this commentary, however amusing, constitutes successful satire, which we would take to be a political critique of social values which ridicules and denaturalises them. In fact we argue that the effect of the comedy in these texts is rather more insidious than progressive.

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The slippage from self-conscious suspension of disbelief to interpellated over-identification embodied in the “That’s me!” reaction can also be seen in journalistic accounts of Bridget and her many media forays. Some of these constitute Bridget Jones as a noun rather than a fictional character (for example, a piece in *The Guardian* about the number of home-owning single women describes such women as “Bridget Joneses”<sup>6</sup>). Others seem wilfully to overlook the fact that she does not really exist in their enthusiasm to position her as their ego ideal or ideal sexual partner. For example, a generally critical review of the video and DVD release of the film concludes, “It’s a real shame because I wanted to get on with her as well as everyone else seemed to ... But Bridget and I just weren’t destined to be best buddies”.<sup>7</sup> Most striking is Tony Parsons’ ongoing love affair with his fantasy Bridget in his column in *The Mirror*. Parsons manages simultaneously to hail the filmic Bridget because “a real woman looks like Bridget Jones” with her apparently fleshy excess,<sup>8</sup> and at the same time to use his fantasy Bridget, “Bambi with a fag in her mouth and a bad man between her thighs”,<sup>9</sup> to deride contemporary women and feminism.

Our purpose in this chapter is to treat Bridget Jones not as a *real* woman, nor indeed as a *real* expression of the zeitgeist, but as a *myth*, in the sense of myth as “depoliticised speech”.<sup>10</sup> We take it as axiomatic that culture is political and that popular culture is an arena of popular politics. In a well known statement of cultural materialism, Alan Sinfield writes: “Literary writing, like all cultural production, operates through an appeal for recognition: ‘The world is like *this*, isn’t it?’ it says in effect; and that has to be political”.<sup>11</sup> It is precisely the success of Bridget’s appeal for recognition, the “That’s me!” effect, that makes “her” (it) such a politically potent myth. In this chapter we want to focus on three predominant sites of recognition. Firstly Bridget’s ditziness is foregrounded and rendered heterosexually attractive. The fact that Bridget, despite her class, education and professional status, is a one-woman disaster area is certainly the root of the humour in both the film and the novels, and is arguably also the single most important point of identification for the audience. Secondly Bridget’s whiteness is naturalised and unmarked. The fact that not only Bridget herself but all of her significant friends and family are white is apparently unnoticed both by the readers and by the characters, and yet it underpins both the

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narrative(s) and the characterisations in the novels. Thirdly, within our consideration of femininity and whiteness, we will be indicating ways in which the novels constitute class. We will be suggesting that Fielding represents Bridget's world as unproblematically middle class, and renders the particular privileges of this world in such a way as to efface class difference, and to naturalise the differential privileges available to neo-liberal subjects, by making class a function of cultural capital rather than material inequity.

### **Bridget the Neurotic Sex Symbol**

*Bridget Jones's Diary* invites readers to recognize themselves in the woes of Bridget's obsession with her weight, her boozing and bingeing (as well as relishing the incitement to pleasure that her daily tabulations also represent), and as we have noted this interpellation appears to be successful. What is being offered as appealing is a fantasy about the impossibility of emotional or bodily control, where that lack of control and the irrationality it underwrites will become unproblematic with the consummation of heterosexual romance. In narrative terms, in *Bridget Jones's Diary* instability, mutability and neurosis will be progressively solved by meeting a man, having sex, then going on mini-breaks with him, overcoming a range of narrative obstacles (having spots, being fat, smoking too much, getting drunk) in order finally, after much deferral, to marry him.

The narrative logic of both novels is that given any emotionally significant circumstances the last thing that should happen is for Bridget to take responsibility for initiating or participating in rational discussion. This ditziness produces contradictory and complex meanings, none of which is successfully satirical. Bridget's friends Shazzer, Jude and Magda function not only to offer the pleasures of female bonding which mitigate their "man trouble" with shopping sprees and bouts of boozing, but to naturalise and normalise Bridget. All of Bridget's friends are more dysfunctional than she is – either by being more feminist, which is constituted as unfeminine, strident and emotionally uptight (Shazzer), or by being even more out of control, that is, *too* neurotic to be acceptably feminine (Jude). Self-determination and personal liberation are represented in the novels as unattainable delusional fantasies ("Am assured, receptive, responsive

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woman of substance who does not take responsibility for others' behaviour. Only for own. Yes," Bridget tells herself helplessly.<sup>12</sup>) This is underwritten by Bridget's internal self-policing discourse about the guilty necessity of being a "feminist" in order to avoid total degradation and humiliation, while always naturalising the unattractiveness of being perceived as a feminist by men: "After all, there is nothing so unattractive to a man as strident feminism".<sup>13</sup>

Despite the first person confessional idiom of both novels, there are numerous instances in which Bridget shares information with her diary where Fielding is offering us insight unavailable to Bridget herself. These authorial ploys invariably demonstrate Bridget's ditziness or lack of self-awareness. At key moments in the texts readers know more than Bridget knows herself, but crucially this knowledge situates us as affectionately protective of, or sympathetic to, her naiveté and gaucheness. For example, after the publication of her disastrous newspaper interview with Colin Firth, Bridget writes in her diary: "Have not heard anything back from Adam or Michael at *Independent* but sure they will ring soon and maybe ask me to do another one, then can be freelance in home office, typing on roof terrace with herbs in terracotta pots!".<sup>14</sup> This device is most evident in *The Edge of Reason* while Bridget and Mark Darcy are estranged. At a number of middle-class social events – a weekend house party in the country, Magda's daughter's birthday party – Bridget's diary entries apparently unwittingly cue us about Mark's continuing desire for her. At one level, this device works to secure the romantic plotting of the novel and to reassure readers by offering them familiar generic codes that promise a resolution in which Mark and Bridget will be romantically reunited. At the level of myth, this cueing works to signify Bridget's naiveté and lack of control as heterosexually desirable, as engendering masculine rescue, masculine lust, masculine protectiveness. One key way in which Bridget's vulnerability is marked in these episodes is her gauche lack of cultural capital. For example, at a "scary party" in *Bridget Jones's Diary* where all the other women are quoting Shakespeare and discussing opera, Bridget's detailed knowledge of the TV gameshow *Blind Date* makes her far more attractive to the hero, for whom the women talking about high culture are pretentious and undesirable.

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This ideological codification of ditziness and lack of control as heterosexually desirable sits uneasily alongside the more overt attempts Fielding makes to engender a satirical critique of relationships. The novels may circulate categorisations like “smug marrieds” and “singletons” which appear to offer a satirical commentary on the social status of those with access to the structural privileges of marriage, but in both *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *The Edge of Reason* the complexities of sexual and intimate relationships are narratively never a function of systemic structural matters, and thus the categories of “smug marrieds” and “singletons” function merely as poles for Bridget’s neurotic ambivalence about relationships. The discourses offered by Bridget’s self-help manuals (all 37 of them) provide substance for Bridget’s fatalistic internal dialogue rather than for a reading of the instability and contested nature of contemporary gender roles within heterosexuality. Whatever “crisis of identity” Bridget represents, it is one of personal neurosis rather than one precipitated by material inequality. As we will argue shortly, this is one of the manifestations of the novels’ neo-liberalism.

Heterosexuality is naturalised as myth in part through the representation of Bridget’s gay friend Tom, whose presence is tokenistic and disenfranchised. This is important because the category of heterosexual femininity is only distinctive as an individually experienced neurosis; as a material category, heterosexuality is not satirised or even marked. Throughout *Bridget Jones’s Diary* Tom functions as “one of the girls”, assimilated into their gang as a sign of their middle-class liberalism and urban sophistication (differentially marked from the suburban homophobia of Bridget’s mother). In this novel Tom, as a gay male character, also stands in for homosexuality, where lesbianism and female bisexuality remain absences which structure the integrity of the female homosociality. In *The Edge of Reason* Tom’s position is more tenuous. He remains present in the novel, and his emotional neurosis is still equivalent to that of Bridget or Shazzer, and thus the novel positions itself in the metropolitan milieu and claims its liberalism in the form of a presumptive anti-homophobia. Yet throughout *The Edge of Reason* there are a number of startlingly poorly handled gay jokes or narrative interludes that position homosexuality significantly more meaningfully than as tokenistic cipher. Soon after Bridget and Mark

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Darcy become estranged she goes “emergency shopping” with Shazzer and Jude. Back at Bridget’s flat, drunk, they agree that Mark must be gay because “Why else would he go off with someone freakishly tall like Rebecca, with no sense of girlfriend-hood, no tits and no bottom – i.e. a virtual man?”.<sup>15</sup> A little while later, Tom turns up distressed because his sometime boyfriend Pretentious Jerome has told him that he does not fancy him. The others rush to comfort Tom by suggesting that Jerome must be as straight “as a very straight ... penis”.<sup>16</sup> The intended joke, in which both injured parties console their bruised egos by imagining that they have been rejected because they are the wrong gender, does not work because, politically, heterosexuality and homosexuality cannot be reversed in this way – they are not structurally equivalent. In both situations homosexuality is contingently visible, either as pretentious and body fascist (Jerome) or as a misogynistic disavowal of the feminine (Mark going after Rebecca the non-woman), while heterosexuality remains unmarked and naturalised.

One of the most unsettling examples of this dynamic occurs when Bridget comes across Geoff Alconbury in London. Geoff is the husband of one of Bridget’s mother’s friends. He is known to us from the first novel as a sexist lecher whom Bridget has to fend off at family parties. In *The Edge of Reason* Bridget finds him in a gay pub wearing a comically gross leather outfit, clearly on a date with a rent boy. Geoff blusters out some excuse to Bridget but it seems significant that the most inappropriately sexist man in Bridget’s universe turns out to be queer (gay, bi, s/m, whatever). Thus the recirculation of the tired stereotype of the untrustworthy married queer signifies that gross sexism, as perpetrated by Geoff at family parties and the like, is not a malicious quality of heterosexuality. Geoff’s indiscretion (if we are to assume that is what it is) is not classified as typical “smug married” having-your-cake-and-eating-it behaviour, nor even as “fuck-wittage” in the way that other instances of men’s sexual misbehaviour are treated in the novels. It is not self-evident why whatever kind of emotional chaos Geoff is supposed to be going through should be differentiated from any one of Bridget’s and her friends’ messy episodes, and yet Fielding marks *this* episode as tawdry and disgusting rather than endearing and attractive. The novel’s homophobia thus prevents Bridget’s continual “dating hell” from turning heterosexuality itself into a problematic category.

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Fielding's achievement is that she situates Bridget as chaotic, anxious and emotionally (and professionally) incompetent and yet still manages successfully to interpellate the readership of her novels as Bridget wannabes (or Bridget fanciers). She does this by constituting a successful neo-liberal landscape where a post-feminist acknowledgement of how awful men are does not mean that you have to do anything about them, and where heterosexuality is structurally unmarked but clueless femininity is heterosexually desirable.

### **Bridget the White Goddess**

There is another significant aspect of this out-of-control, over-anxious and neurotic femininity to which we wish to draw attention, and that is its *whiteness*. The whiteness of Bridget Jones (both the character and the film and literary texts) is unmarked, unspoken and all-pervasive. The very fact that whiteness is unmarked is an effect of its easy hegemony – its appeal to common sense.<sup>17</sup> In this context Bridget's ditziness and anxiety and the rather heavy-handed stereotyping of non-white characters in the texts are two sides of the same coin.

Whiteness and neurosis have been discursively linked since the emergence of sexology in the late nineteenth century. The precise nature and causes of white neurosis were hotly disputed among Victorian sexologists, but the idea that sexual and racial categories were inseparable was taken for granted, and the belief that "civilised" and "cultured" white races were prone to psychological stress, especially psycho-sexual stress, was widely held. "Primitive" African or Asian constitutions were supposedly untroubled by either psychological complexity or the strains of "civilised" urban life. White women in particular, especially those of the more "refined" classes, were regarded as prone to collapse under the strain of modern living, particularly the strain of romantic emotions and relationships. The 1860s American neurologist George Miller Beard, for example,

saw a significant correlation between modern social organization and mental illness. A deficiency in nervous energy was the price exacted by industrialized urban societies,

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competitive business and social environments, and the luxuries, vices, and excesses of modern life. [...] The labors of domestic servants, the harshness of rural existence, the brutalities of savage tribes, were nowhere near as mentally wearing and exhausting as the refinements of civilization. [...] The Indian squaw enjoyed her 'slow and easy drudgery ... in the open air,' spared the 'exhausting sentiment of love,' while the sensitive white woman had the more demanding anxieties of love to handle. It was absurd to expect that a Southern black should suffer from nervous diseases, or that insanity, epilepsy, and neurasthenia should flourish on the banks of the Amazon or the Nile.<sup>18</sup>

This Victorian construction of white femininity is echoed by Bridget Jones, who is not only obsessed with the anxieties of love but is also unable to cope with the demands of her professional career, her social obligations, or her urban living environment. Her attempts at television and print journalism are ludicrous, her appearances at parties (including her own dinner party) are heralds of disaster, and her living environment is literally falling apart, with an eight-foot hole in the wall of her flat forming the centrepiece of her disastrous London adventures in *The Edge of Reason*.

The whiteness of these texts is thrown into relief by the ethnic stereotypes which constitute the non-white characters in the novels. All of these characters are "funny foreigners": Bridget and her white friends have no interactions with black or other minority ethnic British people at all. The "funny foreigner" in *Bridget Jones's Diary* is Julio, Bridget's mother's stereotypical Latin lover whom Bridget sums up as "a Portuguese tour operator with a gentleman's handbag".<sup>19</sup> As a textual device Julio highlights the white masculinity of the hero Mark Darcy, who at the climax of the novel reveals, in a "thrillingly authoritative" manner,<sup>20</sup> that Julio is a con man. In doing so Mark demonstrates once and for all his own intelligence, integrity, and devotion to Bridget; indeed, to echo our opening quote, he has become the Indiana Jones

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who Bridget hopes will soon be loading her dishwasher. The contrast between Mark and Julio also demonstrates that the exotic Other may be sexually attractive – “wild, drunk, unkempt and, frankly, just the type I fall for”, as Bridget writes of this final showdown<sup>21</sup> – but wholly unsuitable for a serious romantic relationship.<sup>22</sup>

This racial, indeed racist, dynamic in the texts – an unmarked but mentally stressed urban whiteness counterpointed by an ethnic Other in the role of “funny foreigner” – is much more strongly present in *The Edge of Reason*. Two kinds of “funny foreigner” appear in this novel: the “wise African” and the “perverted Oriental”. The “wise African” appears in the character of Wellington, a young Kenyan man whom Bridget’s mother brings home with her from a holiday in Africa. Both the characters and the reader expect Wellington to be another Julio, and sure enough he does persuade the local Rotary club to give him a “charitable donation” so that he can buy a jet ski for his village. However he is by no means a con man on Julio’s scale, and even more importantly he is not Mrs Jones’s lover. The failure of Fielding’s satire is particularly marked in Wellington: while Bridget slyly contrasts his taste for CD Walkmans and jet skis with his supposedly solemn pronouncements on tribal traditions and ancient cultures, she nevertheless gratefully accepts his “very still and strong” sympathy over her troubles with Mark<sup>23</sup> and contrasts his “dignified graciousness” with the twittering white women and drunken white men at her mother’s parties.<sup>24</sup>

From the very first diary entry in which Bridget fantasises herself as “like Jemima Goldsmith or similar radiant newlywed opening cancer hospital in veil while everyone imagines her in bed with Imran Khan”,<sup>25</sup> *The Edge of Reason* participates in a highly sexualised version of Orientalism in which white characters – specifically Bridget and Mark – are alternately threatened and adored by “Orientals”. There are two major incidents in the novel around which this dynamic unfolds: in both cases the “Orientals” are south-east Asians, and in both cases the threat they present is homosexual. The first occurs when Bridget insists that Mark take her home to his flat for the first time and they open the bedroom door to discover that “There, in the huge white bed, was a lithe oriental boy [sic], stark naked, smiling weirdly, and holding out two wooden

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balls on a string, and a baby rabbit".<sup>26</sup> Bridget immediately concludes that Mark is a "gay bestial pervert" who is "keeping oriental boys in bedroom together with wildlife" and she leaves the flat "hearing shouting in the manner of American troops being massacred by Vietcong".<sup>27</sup> This homosexual threat almost destroys Bridget's relationship with Mark, who later explains that the "boy" is really the schizophrenic son of his Filipino housekeeper, whose comically large family alternate between being "hysterical [...] all over the house"<sup>28</sup> and "want[ing] to worship Mark as a god".<sup>29</sup> The second incident takes place in the Thai jail in which Bridget finds herself after a smuggler places drugs in her luggage at the airport. Bridget is awoken in jail by the attentions of the "Lesbian Ring" who "all started kissing and groping bits of me. [...] Although obviously I felt violated, part of me could not help but feel it was so nice just to be touched. Gaaah! Maybe I am a lesbian? No. Don't think so".<sup>30</sup> But just as Mark is really worshipped "as a god" by the Filipinos, so the very next day Bridget starts to teach one of her Thai fellow inmates the words to Madonna songs and "Seemed to be considered some kind of goddess as knew words to *Immaculate Collection* all the way through".<sup>31</sup> Eventually Bridget is rescued from the jail by the combined efforts of Mark Darcy, her two best friends Jude and Shazzer, and her own uncharacteristic resilience which is much remarked upon and constantly praised by the other white characters.

Both of these "Oriental" incidents act to confirm and naturalise the heterosexuality of the white characters involved by displacing the possibility of homosexuality onto a stereotypical Oriental Other. Such displacement is particularly necessary in Bridget's case to preserve her heterosexual femininity in the face of her intense relationship with Jude and Shazzer, who begin their letter to her in jail with a declaration of love and who, when Bridget returns to London, share an intimately homosocial bedroom which might otherwise come dangerously close to the homosexual sleeping arrangements in the Thai jail.<sup>32</sup> In Mark's case the "Oriental boy" incident saves both his masculinity and Bridget's future marriage with him from the spectre of Geoff Alconbury and his rent boy.

The central object of the attempted satire in *The Edge of Reason* is the psychobabble of self-help texts. The novel establishes at the outset that

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Bridget and her white female friends are addicted to these texts, which are blamed for over-complicating heterosexual romantic feelings and for creating obstacles to heterosexual romantic relationships. As the novel progresses it is also revealed that Bridget's white *male* peers also succumb to the blandishments of such texts, including Mark Darcy himself. That "Africans" and "Orientals" in the novel do not suffer from such problems, or from such texts, goes without saying. However there is one text which appears in the novel as a far more sensible and persuasive form of self-help than *Mars and Venus* could ever hope to offer: Rudyard Kipling's "If". "If" is introduced into the novel when Mark's and Bridget's respective fathers recite it drunkenly at a family party, and Mark then hands Bridget a note which turns out to be the text of the poem. Bridget subsequently finds it in her pocket while in the Thai jail and clings to it as a psychological life raft: just to hammer the point home, the novel reproduces the text of the poem in full at this point. Two political strands hang from this deployment of Kipling. The first is the novel's awkward disavowal of Kipling's imperialist legacy. The only character to comment on this in the novel is Pretentious Jerome, who complains that "It's regressive, colonialist doggerel" but reduces this critique to the observation that "it fucking rhymes".<sup>33</sup> This moment in the novel effectively closes down any space for serious cultural politics or critique of Kipling by representing opposition to colonialist discourse as a trivial kind of "political correctness" spoken by an already ideologically excluded gay character. The second political strand is that constant re-reading of "If" helps Bridget to deal with the exotic horrors of the Thai jail, but once she is back in her strangely white corner of London she reverts to her chaotic, disaster-prone, "out-of-control" feminine self and has to be rescued all over again by Mark the white hero. The poem's stiff-upper-lip model of British whiteness sees Bridget through her encounters with "perverted Orientals"; but in her relationships with white men its exhortation to "be a Man, my son!" ultimately represents yet another self-help ideal which she cannot live up to – literally because she is a woman. Thus it secures her racial privilege as a white woman without disrupting her ditzy vulnerability in relation to white men.

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**Conclusion**

Bridget Jones's emotional crises are supposedly precipitated by structural changes in contemporary gender roles in a world where women live alone, have professional careers and stay single and childless into their thirties. But this is the myth of Bridget Jones. The cultural and emotional landscape represented in the diaries is intensely conservative in terms of gender, race and class, as we have shown.

The conservatism around gender consists in the prioritisation of women's attractiveness to men above all other things. Indeed Bridget's "crises" themselves are repeatedly presented as a spectacle for male desire and a male gaze. The fact that she is a walking disaster area is what makes her heterosexually attractive. The postfeminist logic of the novels is therefore that she can only have a career *and* be feminine if she is a disaster at work, and that she can only be "solved" by marriage. The conservatism around race is that whiteness is unmarked while ethnic difference is marked by "foreign-ness". Thus Bridget's cultural world is ignorant of multiculturalism, and any attempt to critique colonialist, Orientalist or Africanist discourse is viciously ridiculed as "political correctness". The conservatism around class rests on the naturalised assumption that everyone in Bridget's world is at least middle-class. Moreover class difference in the novels is always about cultural capital and never about material inequality or hardship. This allows the middle-class Bridget to be represented as the under-privileged one, and the social gaffes that result from her lack of cultural capital are part of the ditziness that makes her heterosexually attractive. Bridget's "crises" are entirely neurotic rather than material; nothing that happens, from losing her job to taking out a second mortgage she cannot afford, ever has any permanent consequences in the material sphere.

The myth of Bridget Jones is both a neo-liberal and a postfeminist one. The myths about identity that surround Bridget Jones are so resonant because they authenticate conservative modes of negotiating the current conditions of capitalism in the West. Financial deregulation, globalisation, the deunionisation and casualisation of labour, and the degradation of the public sector, amongst others, are all features of the current economic and political moment. These conditions all have a

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bearing on the cultural and political location occupied by Bridget, and on her narrative exploits. The myth of Bridget Jones is neo-liberal because it abstracts “the individual” from social and cultural power relations, and treats all problems as individual and emotional rather than as social and structural. It is postfeminist because it takes the social and political gains of feminism for granted and yet insists that they are ultimately less important than attracting a man. In short, the success and power of the novels’ and film’s interpellations of their audiences both signals and reinforces a depoliticised understanding of an unequal world. If Bridget Jones really is the Spirit of the Age, then this Age is apparently still in urgent need of political, cultural and social transformation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason* (London: Picador, 2000 [1999]), 375.

<sup>2</sup> This paragraph is constructed from quotes from reviews which appear on the back jackets and inside pages of *Bridget Jones’s Diary* and *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason*. The reviewers are, in order of appearance, Melanie McDonagh in *The Evening Standard*; an unnamed reviewer in the *Sunday Express*; Nicola Shulman in *The Times Literary Supplement*; Sally Emerson in the *Daily Mail* (emphasis original); Rachel Simhon in the *Daily Telegraph*; Virginia Blackburn in the *Express*; and Jilly Cooper in an unnamed publication.

<sup>3</sup> Imelda Whelehan, *Helen Fielding’s Bridget Jones’s Diary: a Reader’s Guide* (New York & London: Continuum, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> Although Whelehan (ibid.) does report that some readers did write to and even propose marriage to “Bridget” during the mid-1990s, believing that the original newspaper column on which the novel was based was genuinely autobiographical.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Alastair Ray, “What Are You Like? Bridget Joneses,” *The Guardian*, 15 October 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Jessica Mellor, “Big Pants to Bridget,” *The Mirror*, 30 November 2001.

<sup>8</sup> Tony Parsons, “Panting for Real Women,” *The Mirror*, 23 April 2001. Discourse about the weight gained by Renée Zellweger for the part of Bridget Jones seems to neatly capture the satirical dead end of the Bridget Jones phenomenon. “Bridget Jones is not merely a fat cow ... [she] has the kind of beauty that makes you feel like getting stuck in” (Tony Parsons, “Bridget’s Just Like Bambi with a Fag in her Mouth ... Oh, How I Adore Her: Tony Parsons on Why He’s Fallen V. V. Deeply in Love with Miss Jones,” *The Mirror*, 19 April 2001). The ecstatic rumblings about Zellweger’s “hello mummy” pants and minisculely rotund tummy do nothing to trouble the underlying discourses of regulation and punishment that often characterise contemporary representations of

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women's bodies; indeed the level of commentary on Zellweger's non-existent bulges precisely marks the excessiveness of such regulation.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Parsons, "Bridget's Just Like Bambi with a Fag in her Mouth".

<sup>10</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Grafton, 1973 [1957]), 155.

<sup>11</sup> Alan Sinfield, *Cultural Politics – Queer Reading* (London: Routledge, 1994), viii.

<sup>12</sup> Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary* (London: Picador, 1996), 208.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>14</sup> Fielding, *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason*, 181.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>17</sup> Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: the Social Construction of Whiteness* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), 135.

<sup>19</sup> Fielding, *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Fielding, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, 303.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>22</sup> In the film version of *Bridget Jones's Diary* "Julio" is replaced by "Julian", a British smoothie with a sun-bed tan. We would suggest that one reason for this is quite simply that Julio is too gross an ethnic stereotype to "get away with" on film.

<sup>23</sup> Fielding, *Bridget Jones: the Edge of Reason*, 131.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 129.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 67.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 78.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>32</sup> On homosociality, homophobia and homoeroticism see Maddison (2000) and Storr (2003)

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

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