Shopping for Men: The Single Woman Narrative

Ally McBeal and Bridget Jones have become metonyms for what has been assumed, in media discourses, to be a sociological phenomenon: the narrative of the late twenty- to thirty-something single career woman, desperately in search of love. As one newspaper columnist has said of *Bridget Jones' Diary* and its sequel:

> Bridget is not just some fictional comedy character . . . Bridget is a somewhat exaggerated but otherwise accurate-to-the letter example of a specific social group (thirtysomething professional single women) . . . it is blindingly clear that Fielding has identified a phenomenon which will not go away, and, if anything, is multiplying in strength.[1]

But 'Bridget Jones' is precisely a fictional character, and she is very much the product of a very marketable, if unacknowledged, genre of popular fiction for women readers, the single woman novel. In the terms of one of these novels, these are narratives which describe the lifestyle of 'an exhibit in an ethnological museum. "Unmarried urban woman, late twentieth century", the label would read. "Note the mating-display rituals of scarlet lipstick and short skirt".'[2]

Although their narrative structures reproduce many of the same features, the single woman narrative does not belong entirely to the genre of the Mills and Boon romance. The quest for romance centres around a heroine who is

1 Shane Watson, 'In Bed with Bridget', *London Evening Standard*, 18 November 1999, p. 27.

2 Robyn Sisman, *Perfect Strangers*, London: Michael Joseph, 1998, p. 2.

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already, and in her own right, financially independent. These are novels in which the rituals of scarlet lipstick and of fashion are central, preoccupied as they are with consumption; lifestyle, fashion and shopping are what these fictions are all about. In a 1970 essay, 'Consumer Society', Jean Baudrillard argued:

> Today we are everywhere surrounded by the remarkable conspicuousness of consumption and affluence, established by the multiplication of objects, services and material goods. This now constitutes a fundamental mutation in the ecology of the human species. Strictly speaking, men of wealth are no longer surrounded by other human beings, as they have been in the past, but by *objects*.[3]

These are narratives which represent women of (relative) wealth who relish a world of consumer choice, are in a position to participate in the 'multiplication of material goods' and who take some pride in the fact; as one heroine puts it: 'I'm successful, in a fashion. I earn enough money to go on shopping binges at Joseph every three months or so, and I own my own flat.'[4] The single woman novel is a genre that takes great pleasure in conspicuous consumption, and that plays with the opportunities afforded by the multiplication of consumer goods for women who are in a position to afford them. In order to be in a position to consume, the central characters of these novels are independent, privileged young women, usually university educated, and with jobs in the glamorous end of the middle-class professions: Tasha of *Straight Talking* is a television producer (like Bridget Jones), Libby, of *Mr Maybe*, a PR woman. Although the heroines rarely demonstrate any career ambition (ambitious women are frequently derided and often characterized as rivals to the heroine, both professionally and in love), their jobs are important to them, if largely because they supply the means for an urban lifestyle that is dedicated to consumption. The heroines are women who have confidence in themselves and, to a large degree, in their appearance, a confidence that is validated by their ability to afford designer labels. Tasha prepares for an evening out, secure in the knowledge that '. . . the finishing touch is a dab of MAC taupe lipstick. I do look good . . .'[5] While this is undoubtedly about the heroine preparing to be an object of the male gaze, there is also considerable pride in the consumer sophistication of the lipstick's brand name, and in her ability to afford it.

The reader of these novels is addressed as a woman who shares the heroine's metropolitan lifestyle of restaurants and shopping; often written in the first person (as in Jane Green's and Tyne O'Connell's series of novels), their tone is one of shared confidences. The reader is assumed to be an adept consumer, to have a familiarity with designer labels, and is expected to have the knowledge to recognize the sophisticated brand names that fill the pages of these novels (even when these references are coded, as in 'D&G', 'Calvins'

3 Jean Baudrillard, 'Consumer Society', in Mark Poster (ed.), *Jean Baudrillard: Selected Writings*, London and Cambridge: Polity Press, 1988, pp. 29–56 (29).

4 Jane Green, *Straight Talking*, London: Mandarin Books, 1997, p. 3.

5 Green, *Straight Talking*, p. 161.

or 'Manolos'). These are novels written for young women who are skilled and experienced in contemporary discourses of consumption; their design suggests that they are clearly targetted at the readers of such consumer and lifestyle publications as *Elle* and *Marie Claire*. Their covers echo the covers of such magazines, and often refer to the colours and patterns of each fashion season, as in the shocking pink, lime green and leopard-skin cover of Jane Green's 1997 novel *Straight Talking*.

As Rachel Bowlby has charted, consumption has been associated with women since the development of the large department stores in Europe in the late nineteenth century.[6] Sean Nixon extends this argument to male consumption in the late twentieth century, but begins by explaining:

> The very spectacle of consumption—the windows filled with goods, the lighting, the displays, the other shoppers, the places to meet—has . . . historically been signalled as a feminine domain, and associated with femininity. From the department stores at the turn of the century with their clientele of middle-class ladies, to the 'consuming housewife' of 1950s advertising, the dominant imagined addressee of the languages of consumerism has been unmistakably feminine. Consumption, associated with the body, beautification and adornment in particular, has historically spoken to a feminine consumer, producing her as an 'active' consumer but also as a 'spectacle' herself—to be looked at, subject to a predominantly masculine gaze.[7]

The heroines of these fictions are certainly active consumers, but not only in the interests of creating themselves as 'spectacle'. Their pleasure in consumption is not limited to fashion and beauty goods for their own adornment, but extends to the consumption of men themselves. In these novels, masculinity becomes a spectacle for women: the hero of *Chloë*, William, is referred to literally as an object of desire ready for consumption; the heroine and her friend describe him as 'ten times more scrumptious than . . . egg-mayonnaise granary sandwiches. In fact, make that fifteen . . . as divine as the fudge brownies? Easily.'[8]

These narratives are concerned with the deployment of consumer skills in order to seduce a man, but those skills are also used to effect the commodification of masculinity itself. Shopping for men in these novels is both about employing consumer skills in order to identify (or even to create) an appropriate partner for the heroine, but it is also the opportunity to select from a range of different men. The plot descriptions on the back covers of the novels often involve a list of male names, one of whom will be revealed in the narrative as the hero. The title of Jane Green's *Mr Maybe* indicates that the search for a romantic partner is a matter of consumer choice for contemporary young women. The heroine, Libby, is a successful and financially independent PR woman, whose expectations of a male partner are that he

6 Rachel Bowlby, *Just Looking: Consumer Culture in Dreiser, Gissing and Zola*, London: Methuen, 1985.

7 Sean Nixon, 'Have You Got the Look? Masculinities and Shopping Spectacle', in Rob Shields (ed.), *Lifestyle Shopping*, London: Routledge, 1992, pp. 149–69 (151).

8 Freya North, *Chloë*, London: Arrow Books, 1997, pp. 326–7.

will be able to match her in the consumption of designer labels. The potential hero is Mr Maybe rather than Mr Right because he is desirable but impoverished and inappropriately dressed.

The desirability of men is assessed in these fictions through the male characters' display of the appropriate commodities; more important than their career trajectory or their politics (Libby is happy to switch from Conservative to Labour supporter) is the possession of the right labels. The hero of Robyn Sisman's novel *Perfect Strangers* is perfect precisely because he is absent, known only through the objects that surround the apartment that the heroine has swapped with him in New York. His desirability is signified through the commodities in and the design of his flat, which the heroine inhabits without ever having met him: 'The living room had white walls, parquet floors and pretty pastel fabrics . . . One end had been turned into a study area, with bookshelves, a leather club-like sofa and a sleek, modern desk with a fax and a computer on it—a Mac 6400, she noticed. Not bad.'[9]

It is not just the computer here that is 'not bad', but also the apartment and its owner, even though he is absent. This conflation of man, property and commodities is a recurrent device in these novels. A potential male partner in *Mr Maybe* is assessed in these terms: 'He was everything I'd ever been looking for. He was a property developer, which is a bit boring I know, but he wasn't boring. He was handsome, well dressed, had a beautiful flat in Maida Vale, a Mazda MX-5 . . . Well, the list goes on and on really.'[10]

The assessment of clothing, interior design and commodity consumption in these novels frequently borrows from the language of lifestyle and women's magazines. There is a direct cross-over between fiction and journalism in this genre of women's writing, in which the personal columns, autobiography and fiction merge across different media. Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones' Diary* began as a newspaper column,[11] as did Candace Bushnell's *Sex and the City*, later to become a television series.[12] Kathryn Flett's *The Heart Shaped Bullet* began as a weekly Sunday newspaper column; her book may be subtitled 'A True Story', and be an autobiographical account of the end of her own marriage, but it works within a discourse of contemporary femininity that is shared with these novels.

Design, style and skilled consumption are central to *The Heart Shaped Bullet*; Flett consistently assesses people in terms of their tastes and shopping habits, her future husband is approved because 'he loved Bath Olivers (which he bought from Harrods)'.[13] The breakdown of their relationship is charted in the exchange of his increasingly unsuitable gifts to her, her love for him is expressed in the care with which she chooses furnishings for their flat. Flett articulates her anxieties about the marriage, and expresses her disdain for comfortable coupledom, entirely in terms of commodities and a stratification of brand names:

9 Sisman, p. 43.

10 Jane Green, *Mr Maybe*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1999, p. 8.

11 Helen Fielding, *Bridget Jones' Diary*, London: Picador Books, 1998.

12 Candace Bushnell, *Sex and the City*, London: Abacus Books, 1997.

13 Kathryn Flett, *The Heart Shaped Bullet*, London: Macmillan, 1999, p. 56.

> . . . was it really any different if, instead of a neat modern home on an estate in the 'burbs, with a World of Leather three-piece suite, a copy of TV Quick on the IKEA coffee table, a Ford Probe in the drive, a Blockbuster video and a curry on Fridays, a nice M&S-catered dinner party on Saturdays with a few of your best friends, at which the men talked about Manchester United and the women talked about Princess Diana, you instead chose to live in an *Elle Decoration*-style loft in the centre of London, with a copy of *Blueprint* on the Conran Shop coffee table, a 4WD in the residents' parking bay, an Indonesian takeaway and a video (with subtitles) on Fridays, a nice dinner party with a few of your best friends on Saturdays, catered by, say the Real Food Store, at which the men talked about Arsenal and the women talked about Princess Diana's psychotherapy habit? These things were, when it came down to it, just a matter of style.[14]

As Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, 'these things' are by no means 'just a matter of style', but are an assertion of class difference and assumed superiority. Flett herself acknowledges that her own lifestyle is closer to Conran than IKEA; her comprehensive knowledge of brand names distinguishes her own taste from that of the ordinary consumer, to become in itself a display of distinction. As Bourdieu has put it: 'The competition for luxury goods, "emblems of class" is one dimension of the struggle to impose the dominant principle of domination.'[15]

Flett as one-time editor of a style magazine, and a consumer writer herself, might be expected to be concerned with questions of style and taste; she is, as a style journalist, exactly what Bourdieu defines as a 'tastemaker', an 'ardent spokesman in the new bourgeoisie of the vendors of symbolic goods and services'.[16] Flett's authoritative command of lifestyle choices, however, extends beyond magazine journalism and is also to be found in contemporary fiction; the same preoccupations with branded commodities and consumer choice are repeatedly echoed in these novels, and often in remarkably similar language. Jane Green's heroine, Tasha, also expresses her disdain for an ordinary married couple in terms of their choice of comestibles: '. . . Marks & Spencer canapés . . . they look pretty, so people think they're being so clever and smart by serving them. And this was a Marks & Spencer, cheap-sparkling-white-masquerading-as-champagne-and-mixed-with-cassis kind of party. The boring kind.'[17] The first-person narrator of *Straight Talking* is anxious to demonstrate her knowledge of contemporary style throughout the narrative; like Flett, she presents herself as someone in a position to recognize 'emblems of class'. Tasha works for a day-time lifestyle magazine programme, owns a designer label wardrobe and has friends who can afford to buy designer lingerie and to eat with her in fashionable restaurants. Tasha is presented with a choice of three men over

14 Flett, p. 69.

15 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984, p. 232.

16 Ibid., p. 310.

17 Green, *Straight Talking*, p. 15.

the course of the narrative, but the hero declares himself to the reader, if not immediately to the heroine, through his style credentials. The hero is himself a retail designer, as the heroine admiringly confides to the reader: 'In fact, you've probably had a cappuccino in one of his restaurants, or possibly admired a staircase he's designed in your favourite designer store in town.'[18] The hero and heroine's partnership is destined in an alliance of shared tastes and cultural capital, as Bourdieu has explained: 'Taste is a match-maker, it marries colours and also people, who make "well-matched couples" initially in regard to taste.'[19]

The eponymous heroine of *Chloë* has the consumption of men made easy for her by an inheritance from an earthly, rather than fairy, godmother. A small legacy provides Chloë with an independent income and instructions to search England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland in search of 'a small patch that you can at last call Home':[20] an itinerary that offers the heroine a choice of four different men. Godmother Jocelyn is clearly established as a woman of means and taste, connoted by the luxury brand names that she has left behind: a Dunhill handkerchief, a Hermés scarf, Mitsuko scent. Her legacy to Chloë is not only one of property, but also one of cultural capital; the presiding spirits of the novel, and the heroine's confidantes, are Mr and Mrs Andrews, and Chloë's taste for Gainsborough's painting is also her godmother's bequest. The painted couple are also made present for the reader in a reproduction which prefaces the novel; a reference to high art which not only confirms the cultural capital of the heroine but also that of the novel's author, who is described as holding 'a Masters Degree in History of Art from the Courtauld Institute'. The choice of *Mr and Mrs Andrews* is significant; as John Berger has pointed out, Gainsborough's painting is a portrait of 'landowners . . . their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and their expressions'.[21] Mr and Mrs Andrews provide for both heroine and reader an image of secure bourgeois and propertied marriage; they clearly represent what the godmother anticipates for her goddaughter, and the heroine for herself.

Although Chloë is established as an attractive and independent young woman (she has a flat in Islington, a boyfriend and a career in higher education), the novel begins from the assumption that there must be more to life: 'Chloë; time to free yourself from the self-obsessed shackles of the lowly paid and not very good inner London Polyversity where you've shouldered the role of student-communication-liaison-officer for four thankless years.'[22] Each destination on Chloë's journey holds out the promise of a different lifestyle, and offers her a new kind of man. Each man and location are presented as candidates for Chloë's definition of 'home'; each site offers a certain charm, and is described in great detail and in language that would be appropriate to an estate agent or an interior design magazine. In Wales: 'The farmhouse was neither old nor particularly picturesque. It was a sensible

18 Ibid., p. 76.

19 Bourdieu, p. 243.

20 North, p. 20.

21 John Berger, Sven Blomberg, Chris Fox, Michael Dibb and Richard Hollis, *Ways of Seeing*, Harmondsworth: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972, p. 107.

22 North, p. 16.

structure well suited to its purpose.'[23] The man who comes with this household is, like the house, 'a sensible structure' well suited to his purpose; although startlingly handsome, his job as a farm hand renders him inappropriate as a life partner. Not man, lifestyle or house can provide the bourgeois comforts that the heroine implicitly requires.

Ireland also offers attractions, but not the security demanded for the heroine. The location is 'a fat little cottage, white-washed and with green doors and frames. It was dark inside but not gloomy for an abundance of ornaments . . . offered glints of colour from every direction.'[24] The man who accompanies this environment is similarly over ornamented and gloomy; as a fine artist, he has pretensions that do not sit comfortably with Chloë's bourgeois aspirations. It is, unsurprisingly, England which finally offers the home and man who are most 'heimlich' for the heroine. The hero is a ceramicist, who is first encountered through his craft; the implication is that the man must be as covetable and as tasteful as the objects he creates: 'Their creator could only be as beautiful as they were, and William's ceramics were quite the most lovely things she had ever seen. Genuine, secret, and so very strong, quiet and serene . . .'[25] William is not a bohemian artist, but a craftsman, and both his profession and environment are appropriate to the heroine's expectations; he lives in a charming Cornish cottage which is furnished with simple but emphatically stylish charm.

The stories of Chloë and William are paralleled throughout the novel, as Chloë encounters and admires his work at different destinations; their shared destiny is made evident in their shared aesthetic tastes. William's desire for Chloë is couched in terms of the aesthetics of his craft, she becomes an aesthetic object, ready to be moulded by him: 'he . . . remembered again her russet curls vivid against the grey of his glaze. At once he had an idea for a vessel . . . Something fairly slender but subtly curving, smothered with *terra isgillarta*, the rich slip he would then burnish until it shone almost wet.'[26] The narrative is at pains to point out that William is a successful craftsman, his work is flourishing commercially and is approved by the appropriate style magazines; his pots have featured in *Homes and Gardens* and *Country Life*. The romantic alliance of hero and heroine is neatly predicted by one of Bourdieu's classifications of class distinction: their romance dramatizes a merger between the heroine's bourgeois cultural capital (embodied in Chloë's inheritance) and William's skills as a craftsman. As Bourdieu puts it: '. . . artists, craftsmen and art-dealers, who earn their living from industrial and commercial profits, and are close in those respects to other small businessmen, are set apart from them by their relatively high cultural capital, which brings them closer to the new petite bourgeoisie.'[27]

The consumption of men is not always as easily managed narratively as it is for Chloë. If identifying a hero from a range of different men proves to be difficult, then it is always fictionally possible for the heroine to create her

23 Ibid., p. 61.
24 Ibid., p. 137.
25 Ibid., p. 390.
26 Ibid., p. 9.
27 Bourdieu, p. 123.

own ideal man. The consumer skills that the heroine deploys in her own self-presentation can also be applied to a man, and effect his transformation. By endowing a man, even the most unlikely candidate (one hero begins as a trainspotter), with the requisite fashion items and the cultural capital of style magazine knowledge, it is possible to construct a perfect partner. As one character (another PR woman) puts it:

> It is rather like moulding our own man. I can't really explain it, but it is something rather alien to women, something I never imagined I would be part of. I mean, you are always hearing about older men taking ignorant young girls and turning them into the perfect mate. But generally women don't aspire to doing that with a mate.[28]

Jane Gordon's *My Fair Man* refers in its title and in an epigraph at the beginning of the novel to *Pygmalion*, but there the resemblance to George Bernard Shaw's play ends. If Professor Higgins's transformation of Eliza Doolittle is designed to demonstrate that class is not a product of nature but of culture, Gordon suggests that class is entirely a matter of style. The heroine literally steps over the hero in a Covent Garden doorway, in an encounter that heightens her possession of cultural capital and his lack of it. She is coming out of the opera, *en route* to a fashionable restaurant, he is selling *The Big Issue*. Hatty, the heroine, offers the hero a crash course in what Sean Nixon has called 'forms of popular knowledge open to men—knowledge concerning adornment and style'.[29] The novel is concerned to demonstrate that these forms of knowledge are no longer restricted to men, but have become available to women through style journalism. The hero Jimmy's transformation is effected through the acquisition of requisite fashion and designer brands; as soon as he enters the heroine's world, he is supplied with 'a white Paul Smith T shirt, some Calvin Klein Y-fronts and a pair of . . . . button-fly jeans',[30] and immediately becomes an object of desire.

The hero is transformed through the terms of style magazines into an object that could appear in their pages; at the hairdressers he is presented with

> . . . a copy of a glossy magazine called *FHM* that was full of big pictures of lager, aftershave . . . and a lot . . . of the kind of clothes he was now wearing. . . . He looked . . . like something out of the magazine that was propped open in front of him. The beautiful—slightly homoerotic—image of the boy in the Kouros ad, or the model in the full-page ads for Calvin Klein jeans.[31]

Through the heroine's consumption of male style products (she buys him a wardrobe and a library of style magazines), Jimmy becomes an object worthy of consumption himself. To become finally a worthy partner for the heroine, however, it is necessary that he should succeed in his own right, and so

28 Jane Gordon, *My Fair Man*, London: HarperCollins, 1998, p. 101.

29 Nixon, p. 166.

30 Gordon, p. 55.

31 Ibid., pp. 89–90.

achieves success as a novelist. The novel's romantic dénouement occurs on his territory rather than hers, at the launch party for his book at a Newcastle dockside, his home base, rather than the cosmopolitan London which he has conquered and which is the heroine's world. Jimmy prospers to the point that he becomes the toast of London society, and appears as a celebrity in the pages of same magazines that created him:

> It seemed as if everywhere she turned she saw Jimmy. *The Big Issue* cover had just been the start of his media exposure. He had subsequently featured in a variety of magazines and papers from *GQ* to *Gay News* . . . his beautiful face popped up in the People columns of *YOU*, *Hello!*, *Tatler*, *Harpers* and *Vogue*.[32]

Like the hero of *My Fair Man*, Robert Llewellyn's *The Man on Platform 5* is transformed into a metropolitan success, largely through the purchase of designer clothing. Although written by a man, the narrative follows an identical pattern, one in which a man's transformation is effected by a woman's consumer skills. Like Hatty, Eupheme, the heroine, gives the hero a course in cultural capital, demonstrating how to order in a restaurant, and which designer labels are in vogue:

> Eupheme dragged a now-silent Ian into the Nicole Farhi store . . . Nothing was right. . . . 'Aha, of course, Donna Karan', she said . . .'You see DKNY is the youthful kind of street arm of the Donna Karan company, but Donna Karan proper, well, that's a totally different thing. This isn't like DKNY at all. Do you understand?[33]

Eupheme's fashion advice and cultural knowledge are explicitly gleaned from style magazines, which are recurrently cited as authoritative sources of information on the stylistic requirements for acceptable forms of masculinity. Ian's education, 'from dud to dude' (as the cover-line puts it), takes the form of immersion in the cultural capital of style journalism: 'On the journey he read *GQ*, *Time Out*, *Esquire*, *Premiere*, *Loaded* and *What PC* . . . given to him by Eupheme to study and memorise.'[34]

Although both these Pygmalion narratives offer a gender reversal of the Professor Higgins role, in that it is the heroine who initiates and is the agent of change (and, importantly, provides the cultural and financial capital), the romantic resolution invariably involves the hero achieving success on his own terms. Like Jimmy, Ian succeeds in becoming an object of respect and admiration for the heroine and her social world. The geekiness of *The Man at Platform 5* is finally legitimated when he becomes a millionaire with a new computer programme he has written. The initially impoverished hero of *Mr Maybe* confirms that he is Mr Right because he finally reveals that he is public school-educated, owns Ralph Lauren shirts and has achieved a publishing deal for his novel. It is a structural invariable of these novels,

32 Ibid., p. 319.

33 Robert Llewellyn, *The Man on Platform 5*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1998, p. 74.

34 Ibid., p. 141.

just as it is for Mills and Boon romances, that the hero should demonstrate his professional superiority before the obstacles to romance can be overcome. Success for women in these fictions is conferred not by their own achievements, but by association with those of a male partner.

The narrator of these fictions will often deliberately distance the heroine from any suggestion of feminism, while simultaneously endorsing her successful career. Hatty's feminist posturings are humbled by Jimmy's success and dismissed by the end of the novel. Libby despises Mr Maybe's socialist feminist friends, largely because of their lack of dress sense. The heroine of *Straight Talking* initially seems to address the reader in the language of female solidarity, but makes it quite clear that she is firmly distancing herself from any feminist position, and that her camaraderie with women is a poor substitute for partnership with men:

> You can always recognise a fellow member of the sisterhood. . . . Once upon a time, in their twenties, the sisterhood were men's women. All their friends were men . . . But now in your thirties you've changed. You've become women's women. There's a weary air about you. . . . I'm assuming you're a member of the sisterhood . . .[35]

Female friendship is instead expressed in terms of shared tastes and consumption patterns; these novels invariably feature a scene in which the heroine and her closest friends go shopping together. The most emotional moment in *Straight Talking* is a scene in which the heroine and her friends try on designer wedding dresses, all but one choosing a dress before they have found a prospective groom: '. . . the four of us made a pact. Whoever is the first to get married has to dress the bridesmaids in Armani.'[36] Flett's account of her own wedding day is dominated by descriptions of the style and cost of her dresses. There is a conflation and a confusion in these novels between romantic desire for a man and for the commodities of luxury and fashion which he is expected to provide. The hero in these scenarios becomes an accessory, a commodity to be selected in accordance with an already written style agenda.

It is a recurrent feature of these novels that the designation 'feminist' is seen as an insult. Suze, the advertising executive of *Perfect Strangers*, is typical in her response to the accusation: '"*Feminist*?" Suddenly Suze was furious. Her head snapped back. ". . . It's not feminist to think men and women can treat each other like human beings."'[37] It is hard to recognize what it is that is not feminist about this statement, but it is a denial that is repeated in different forms in all these novels. Suze here expresses an expectation that she be treated equally, while denying that there is any political dimension to that demand, a recurring paradox throughout the narratives. Kathryn Flett articulates precisely the same contradiction:

35 Green, *Straight Talking*, pp. 8–9.

36 Ibid., p. 250.

37 Sisman, p. 224.

> I wasn't exactly what you'd call Political, and hadn't ever described myself as 'a feminist' but I didn't lose much sleep about the possibility of being able to compete with men (or win, come to that); it was simply a given. Obviously I had to have a career in place before I even thought about marriage.[38]

Despite their assertions of the right to a career and independent income, there is a very traditional fantasy of femininity in these novels. The white wedding often remains the heroine's dream; the resolution to the romantic hermeneutic is no less conventional than those of the Mills and Boon romances. While the heroines may be expected to work by authors and by readers, their desire is still for a male provider. What does distinguish these novels is that their heroines face the difficulty not of attracting a man, but of finding a man who is in a more powerful position than their own. The romantic pursuit is for the equivalent of Mr Big in *Sex and the City*, a male partner who is more economically, socially and professionally respected than the heroine. As Evelyn of *What's a Girl to Do?* suggests: 'Like most *fin de siècle* girls I was looking for someone who could offer me more than I could offer myself.'[39]

Marriage, like the wedding, is frequently imagined in terms of commodities. The heroine of *Straight Talking* confesses the conventional nature of her aspirations, with a simultaneous attempt to ironize the dream with the contemporary edge of a brand name. Nonetheless, the expectation of a traditional marriage remains ultimately unchallenged, as it is in all these novels:

> I was never supposed to be single at thirty years old. I was supposed to be like my mother, wasn't I? Married, a couple of kids, a nice home with Colefax and Fowler wallpaper and a husband with a sports car and a mistress or two. Well, to be honest, I would mind about the mistresses, but not as much as I mind being single. What I'd really, really love is a chance to walk down that aisle dressed in a cloud of white . . .[40]

The title of Marian Keye's *Lucy Sullivan Gets Married* suggests a similar unreconstructed fantasy, and the plot begins from the desire and pursuit of a husband. While presenting their heroines as modern and independent, the genre of the single woman novel is one that ultimately accepts a status for women and gender relations that belong to a pre-feminist generation. Lucy Sullivan, like Bridget Jones, fails initially to recognize the right male object of desire because he is approved by her mother, and is too close to home initially to appear desirable; just like Bridget Jones, Lucy ultimately comes to recognize that Mother knows best.

These novels powerfully evoke a sense of dissatisfaction in young women's lives, a dissatisfaction that is expressed in the pursuit of love, and

38 Flett, p. 21.

39 Tyne O'Connell, *What's a Girl to Do?*, London: Review Books, 1999, p. 168.

40 Green, *Straight Talking*, p. 1.

that is assumed in these romance narratives to be answered by a man. Flett wistfully articulates the impossible combination of desires that is recurrently echoed in these novels:

> Why did I feel I *deserved* something more, actually *believe* that the noxious concept of Having It All was a divine right? What I sought—a successful career, a wonderful man, perfect children, a beautiful home, inner peace, intellectual stimulation, exotic travel and knees like Princess Diana—was, I knew, at least in part an agglomeration of powerful but pernicious glossy magazine fantasies, but the fantasies were too powerful to be resisted, even by a woman who helped to peddle them.[41]

The regularity with which various versions of these anxieties recur in contemporary popular women's writing suggests that these irreconcilable demands are material contradictions in the expectations of femininity in the late twentieth century. As expressed in these fictions, it would seem that contemporary femininity is expected to be, and women are demanding of themselves that they be, simultaneously glamorous and maternal, cosmopolitan and a homemaker, modern, working women and stay-at-home wives. As Flett succinctly puts it: 'cool, modern, Nineties, urban, rural, full-time working career woman, wife and mother.'[42]

Consumption is offered in these novels as a means of reconciling these conflicting demands and of achieving a resolution; the fictional heroine is constructed as a contemporary woman who is presented with an apparent infinite variety of lifestyle choices, and those choices are clearly presented as consumer choices. Lauren Langman has argued that the pleasures of consumption are in the possibilities of a multiplicity of modes of being. She suggests that shopping can provide a 'commercially produced fantasy world of commodified goods, images and leisure activities that gratify transformed desire and provide packaged self-images to a distinctive form of subjectivity. A decentred selfhood has become a plurality of intermittent, disconnected, recognition-seeking spectacles of self-presentation.'[43]

These are narratives that are indeed about packaged self-images and that celebrate the commodification of desire, but the spectacles promoted in them can be read as no more 'disconnected' than the heroine's selfhoods are 'decentred'. If the characters in these novels are preoccupied with self-presentation, there are definite constraints on which forms of packaging are deemed appropriate, and which are not. There is a distinct logic to this fictional world of commodified goods and images, and a distinct set of rules to the understanding of both male and female self-presentation. The heroes of *The Man on Platform 5* and *My Fair Man* are impossible partners before their transformation, because they are insufficiently versed in the art of consumption. The narrative drive of these novels is about the successful

41 Flett, p. 23.

42 Ibid., p. 69.

43 Lauren Langman, 'Neon Cages: Shopping for Subjectivity', in Shields (ed.), pp. 40–82 (40).

deployment of consumer skills, which is rewarded by romantic success. There are definite recommended modes of being in these narratives, their recommendations those of the style magazine 'tastemakers'. As Bourdieu has argued, the rules of lifestyle journalism are not without their implications for women:

> Through their slyly imperative advice and the example of their conspicuously 'model' life-style, the new taste-makers propose a morality which boils down to an art of consuming, spending and enjoying. Through injunctions masquerading as advice or warnings, they maintain, especially among women . . . a new form of the sense of moral unworthiness.[44]

The dissatisfactions of contemporary femininity that are recurrently expressed in these novels could be read as just such a sense of 'moral unworthiness'. The heroines exist in a constant state of anxiety that they might prove to be unworthy consumers. Each narrative features a scene in which the heroine anxiously presents her potential mate at a party of her friends; the characters are preoccupied with the fear that their lifestyle, clothing and choice of man will not be approved by their peer group. Consumption is less empowering in these novels than it is a perpetual minefield, with enormous scope for getting the brand name wrong.

Rob Shields, following de Certeau, has argued that consumption can be a form of agency. He suggests: 'There is a need to treat consumption as an active, committed production of self and of society, which rather than assimilating individuals to styles, appropriates codes and fashions, which are made into one's own.'[45] The heroines of these novels are certainly active and committed consumers, and their consumption is undeniably concerned with the production (or, rather, the construction) of self. Nonetheless, the anxious repetitions with which this consumption is reported, and the prevalence of brand names suggests that that construction can only exist within a limited lexicon of consumer products. There is a strict hierarchy of labels in these narratives: Marks & Spencer and IKEA are despised, Joseph and the Conran Shop celebrated. Fashion and style products are cited to connote a particular kind of lifestyle; goods are not only bought for pleasure, but so that they should be recognized as signifiers of style and class. In these novels, skilled shopping can give the heroine the emblems of distinction; and it can confer them on a man in order to transform him into an object worthy of consumption.

The heroines of the single woman novel assume all the gains of the twentieth-century women's movement. They take their work and independence for granted, but leave traditional gender relations and patriarchal structures profoundly unchallenged. The generic expectation of the single woman novel is that, while the heroine is expected to have an independent

44 Bourdieu, p. 311.

45 Rob Shields, 'Spaces for the Subject of Consumption', in Shields (ed.), pp. 1–21 (2).

career and income, and to consume without hindrance, simultaneously the romantic hero is expected to be a provider and to surpass her in his economic power and consumer potential. Having it all, the title of a 1991 Maeve Haran novel,[46] is, in the contemporary popular narrative of single women's lives, about having it both ways.

46 Maeve Haran, *Having It All*, London: Michael Joseph, 1991.