

Poynter.

[Latest News](#)[Top Stories](#)

How bloggers became the new chick lit heroines

by [Mallery Jean Tenore](#)

Published Feb. 4, 2013 9:30 am

Updated Feb. 4, 2013 11:02 am

The Carrie Bradshaws of the literary world are out of vogue. “Sex and the City”’s Bradshaw and other female protagonists in chick lit from the ’90s and early 2000s had glamorous jobs in print journalism. Now, bloggers who work long hours and wear muumuus instead of [tutus](#) are the new literary heroines.

[In a recent New Republic piece](#), Molly Fischer looks at three new books — Karin Tanabe’s “[The List](#),” Janis Thomas’ “[Something New](#)” and Jessica Grose’s “[Sad Desk Salad](#)” — that each feature female bloggers. Their plots, Fischer writes, focus less on the romance these characters have with their significant others and more on the romance of their work.

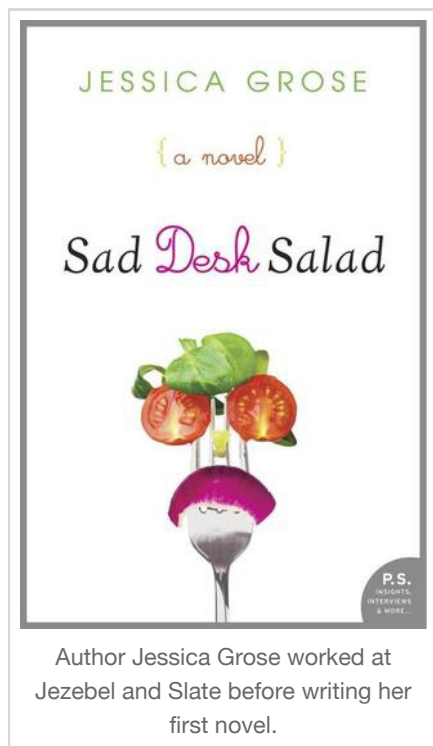
“Where chick lit once tantalized readers with romance or fancy clothes,” Fischer writes, “the vicarious thrills of its new-media incarnation are more mundane and rooted in the mechanics of actually doing a job.”

As journalism has changed, so have literary portrayals of it. Some authors seem less inclined to describe journalism as an ideal industry where women can “clock in for manageable daily adventures then clock out for afterhours drama,” Fischer writes. They’re instead portraying “a version of journalism that’s decidedly bleaker” — one that’s marked by the need to churn out lots of stories and generate lots of page views.

Take Adrienne Brown, the main character of “The List.” She writes for the Web and lives with her parents because she can’t afford to live on her own. She wakes up before 5 a.m. and writes 10 stories each day, sometimes on her smart phone. Then there’s Alex Lyons, the main character of “Sad Desk Salad.” She works 12-hour days, scouring the Web for blog post ideas that will satisfy her highly demanding boss. She knows her job is always on the line. As unpleasant as these jobs seem, they’re relatable. And real.

We see this reality reflected in TV shows, too.

Hannah, the heroine of “Girls,” is a struggling writer who can’t find a job in her field. Like Alex from “Sad Desk Salad” — whose staple piece of clothing is a smelly muumuu — Hannah wears clothes that make her look “[lovingly disheveled](#).” Both characters are far removed from the film characters of [Andie Anderson](#) (played by Kate Hudson) in “How to Lose a Guy in 10 Days,” and [Andrea Sachs](#) (played by Anne Hathaway) in “The Devil Wears Prada.”



[Grose](#), author of “Sad Desk Salad,” told me she chose to make her protagonist a blogger because she wanted to show the challenges that come with a modern-day, entry-level media job.

“I think it’s just a reality now that if you’re trying to break into most industries, especially media, it ain’t going to be glamorous. We’re not living in the flush Clinton ’90s/very early aughts, which was the heyday of what’s commonly referred to as chick lit. I also think young women are more interested in reality these days,” Grose said.

“Unfortunate outfits and regrettable jobs and horrid boyfriends in crap apartments. That’s much more

entertaining than shoes you’ll never be able to afford and having sex with your bra on like Carrie Bradshaw.”

There’s a sense that people appreciate reading about characters who experience this reality. “People want ‘Girls,’ ” Grose said, “not ‘Sex and the City.’ ”

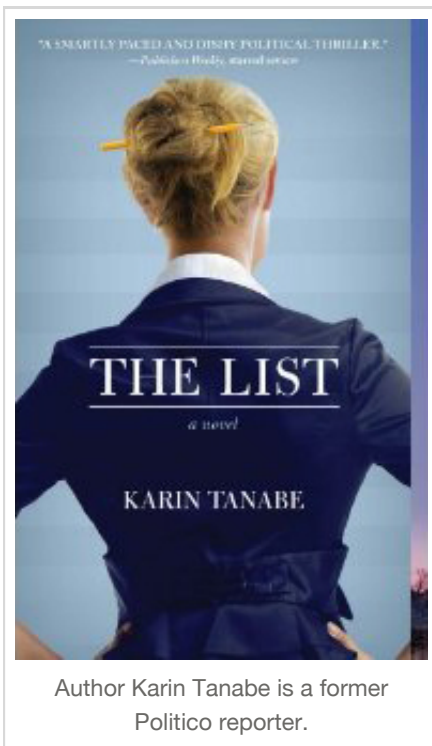
In reading about fictional characters who face real-life challenges, we realize we’re not alone. Fischer, a freelance writer, sees similarities between the characters in the books she highlighted and the women who wrote them.

“I thought Jessica Grose was a smart, funny writer (I’d always enjoyed reading her work at Jezebel and Slate), so when ‘Sad Desk Salad’ came out, I was curious to see how her voice and experiences would work in a sort of genre-novel context,” Fischer said via email. “As for why the books portray the working world that they do — I guess I saw it as a natural product of their

authors' experiences.”

[Tanabe](#), a former Politico reporter, knows firsthand how much has changed in journalism. Adrienne, the protagonist in her book “The List,” has experienced the journalism world that’s reflected in both the earlier and newer chick-lit books. She came from the world of New York magazines but then left to work for a daily paper with a huge Internet presence. While there, she becomes preoccupied with getting good stories and writing them as quickly as possible.

Tanabe said the demands of her character’s job are similar to those that many real-life women face.



“I don’t have many girlfriends who go out for three martini lunches with their version of Mr. Big. But I do know a lot of girls who work 60+ hour weeks and just hope they don’t make a wrong move so that they can keep on trucking at that pace. And usually in flats, not Carrie’s Manolos,” Tanabe told me.

“I made my character a journalist trying to stay afloat in the new media world because a) I knew the world very well after working at Politico and b) I think everyone likes an inside scoop to an industry which is often glamorized, but very different when you step into the daily lives of the employees. I started my job at Politico at 6 a.m. and my protagonist Adrienne Brown starts even

earlier than that. There’s nothing glamorous about trolling Twitter pre-dawn!”

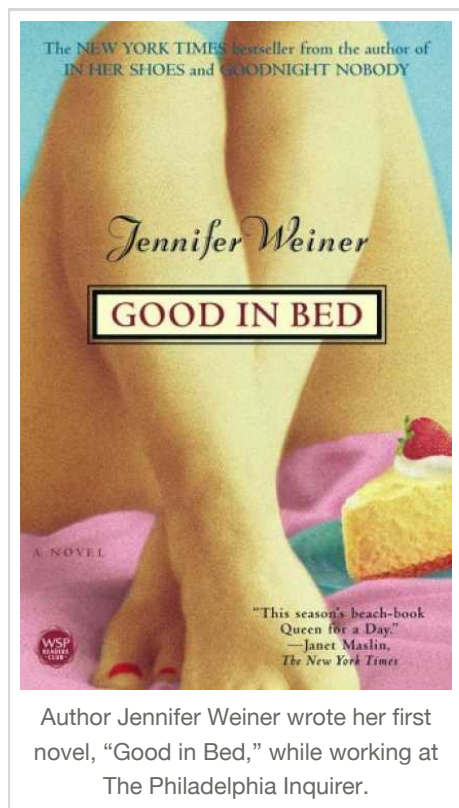
Janis Thomas, author of “Something New” said via email that she thinks “the new trend in Chick Lit of writing about bloggers instead of successful, metropolitan journalists is more indicative of the shift from the old ‘glamour girl’ heroine to the ‘every-woman.’”

Ellen Ivers, the protagonist in her book, is a mother and a wife who’s bored with her life. Hoping for a newfound sense of purpose, she takes on blogging. There will always be a place, Thomas said, for the Carrie Bradshaws and [Jemima J’s](#) of the literary world.

But the distance between them and the modern-day reader — and the

modern-day journalist — has widened.

“Many women today want to read about characters like themselves,” Thomas said. “It’s what the heroine learns, how she grows and changes that the reader is most concerned with. Whether the character is a successful journalist or a stay-at-home mom blogger — those occupations are the backdrop for the story, and while they might have an effect on what she does during the day or how she communicates with others, we’re still trying to figure out who she is at her core.”



Author [Jennifer Weiner](#) said via email that the new chick lit books like “Something New” are not so much a departure from the older ones, but a continuation. Weiner’s 2001 book “[Good in Bed](#)” featured a female protagonist, Cannie Shapiro, who worked as a pop culture reporter at a newspaper called The Philadelphia Examiner.

“The women who had newspaper jobs in the 1990s — back when there were newspaper jobs to be had — would probably be content providers today. Their heroines would have had fictitious versions of the same jobs ... and maybe, instead of the cute guy they saw on the subway platform, they’d be lusting after 10,000 page views,” said Weiner, a former journalist

at the Philadelphia Inquirer.

“What makes chick-lit work is the voice of the heroine – funny, frustrated, relatable, a young woman trying to find her place in the world who sounded like the reader, or her sister, or daughter, or best friend.”

Of course, relatability depends on the reader. There are readers (myself included) who share Carrie Bradshaw’s desire to dress up in blue satin Manolo Blahnik pumps and drink cosmos at fancy restaurants. Sometimes we want to read about characters who can live out the desires we can’t. It’s easier, though, to relate to characters who are more grounded in the real world.

The characters in both the newer and the older chick lit do share something

important in common: they prove, at some point or another, that no job is perfect.

“Cannie might have hung out with a movie star, but she had to first run the gauntlet of snooty publicists. Bridget Jones (who worked as a television reporter) and Jemima J might have gotten the guy, but they got their share of crap assignments, too,” Weiner said.

“Even though today’s book’s happily-ever-after might be significantly scaled down — instead of selling a screenplay, you got to keep your job, or you’re famous for three hours of the day’s news cycle — the bloggers dreamed up by Jess Grose and Karin Tanabe and Janis Thomas would probably have plenty to talk about with their dead-tree-media big sisters.”

Tags: [Writing tips and techniques](#)

RELATED POSTS

[Poynter bloggers fill in while Romanesko takes a short break](#)

[Chat Replay: How do I better develop characters in my writing?](#)

[WP hires three bloggers to work with Ezra Klein](#)

[Bloggers wonder how successful Andrew Sullivan’s new approach will be](#)

[Bloggers at Reuters’ FindLaw sue for overtime, meal breaks](#)

RELATED TRAINING