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The Sunday Times

The Sunday Times

September 25, 2005

The Sunday Times

Chick lit overtaken by the old hen party

Kira Cochrane

Literary romance has dawned for the more mature woman and she's loving it

'One of my dates was with a British man who sounded so yummy on the phone that I had visions of us falling in love, moving in next door to Fergie and dining with Elton,' says the American author Sherry Halperin.

"The first notion I had that I might be wrong, though, was when he suggested we meet at a deli for lunch — not exactly the upscale place I had in mind. I turned up to find a 78-year-old man wearing a tweed coat in LA, at the height of summer. I asked exactly what he was looking for in a woman and he said that he used to be a baker but had burnt his hand on some brioche and now needed someone to look after him through his old age."

This is just one of the many disastrous dates that Halperin chronicles in *Rescue Me, He's Wearing a Moose Hat!*, describing the tribulations of romance after being widowed at 51. Following the success of Jane Juska's *A Round-heeled Woman: My Late-Life Adventures in Sex and Romance*, it is one of a rash of new books highlighting, as Halperin comments, that "your life and sexuality don't just switch off when you hit 50".

And this publishing trend extends well beyond memoir. In commercial fiction the glossy twentysomething characters of chick lit are being joined by more realistic middle-aged heroines whose experiences of life and love are often more complicated and affecting.

In her last book, Jilly Cooper included a love affair between two 50-year-olds, and she intends to push it even further in her next one, *Wicked!*, with a romance between octogenarians. Then there are titles such as *Farewell My Ovaries* and *The Hot Flash Club*, which flag up their subject matter with aplomb, while others take a more subtle, but no less pertinent, look at the realities of life in middle

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age.

Termed variously (and very unpopularity) as “grey chick lit”, “HRT lit”, “hen lit”, “granny lit” or “matron lit”, this market is providing an alternative for grown women who like commercial fiction but are tired of reading (and writing) about young heroines whose key concerns include chasing their first promotion and tracking their biological clock.

At the forefront in Britain is the imprint Transita, which began in May and publishes a range of novels specifically by and for women above the age of 45 (a time when, as one of their taglines reads, “menopause is simply a pause between men!”). Harlequin Mills & Boon is creating a new line, Next, that features older heroines finding romance after divorce or widowhood, and Penguin is apparently on the lookout for books that include interesting and realistic middle-aged heroines.

Nikki Read, founder of Transita, was inspired to start the imprint while out at a wine bar. “A group of fiftysomething women came in — all clearly having a great time — and there was a fiftysomething couple there, too, who seemed to be at the start of their relationship.” It underlined for Read that, “middle age is no longer a gradual decline into old age — it’s actually a time to start again. I’m 52 now, but I’m having a much better time than I did at 32. Once the kids have left home there’s still plenty of time to celebrate life”.

Jenny Haddon, author and chairwoman of the Romantic Novelists’ Association (whose newsletter highlighted this trend), agrees. “The forties and upwards are an incredibly interesting part of women’s lives. Older people are often much funnier than younger people — their experience allows them to dismiss the insignificant things that sometimes outrage and obsess 22-year-olds.


“In recent years greater affluence has also naturally given older women more choices. I do think we’ll be seeing a lot more books about this time in women’s lives. What’s really key is that they’re not consolatory literature. They’re about what happens next.”


This journey seems constrained only by imagination. Although it’s only now being reflected in fiction and culture, women of the baby-boom generation have long been reinventing the concept of ageing. In the romantic arena, Francesca Annis, Amanda Redman et al have demonstrated the energising effects of a younger man — and they’re not alone. It was announced last week that 10,000 women a year now marry men who are eight or more years younger than them, a figure that’s doubled in the last decade.


As Halperin says: “When my husband died, I made a list of all the things that I wanted to do — snorkelling in Belize, parasailing, writing a book — and I realised that just because I’d turned 50 there was no giving up on my dreams and ambitions. My husband had died, but I hadn’t. I had to start enjoying myself.”

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“If you look at the demographics, I’m amazed that nobody’s thought of this before,” says Linda Gillard, whose novel, Emotional Geology, was one of the first published by Transita. “It’s primarily middle-aged women who both write and read books, yet popular fiction hasn’t reflected this . . . middle-aged women are generally in the background, relegated to the role of wife or mother.

“When I started writing my book, I searched on the shelves for something that spoke to me but all I could find were clones of Sex and the City, heroines who were only concerned with shoes and handbags.”

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