"I'm single because I was born that way."
-Mae West, 1967

"I am going to die. But I will die married."
-Eve, *Otherwise Engaged*, 1999

**STANDING IN LINE AT THE MOVIES, I'M LISTENING** to a friend chat with an old acquaintance who happens to be in line behind us. As they bemoan the state of San Francisco housing, the acquaintance mentions that her older sister just purchased a hunk of East Coast real estate. "She bought a six-room apartment," she says proudly. A dramatic pause, and then the kicker: "Without him."

Him? Who's him?

Oh, him. Right. I feel as though I've been transported into one of those General Mills International Coffee ads, where a knot of women sit around someone's living room with their Café Hazelnut Mochas, reinforcing female stereotypes for all they're worth. This woman is waiting for my friend to respond excitedly, but what is she supposed to say?
"Wow, that's wonderful that your sister is able to summon the courage to buy an apartment without first meeting and marrying a tall, perfectly stubbled, George Clooney-looking software executive who will foot the bill for everything and then let her pick out all the pretty furniture"? Or, "Gosh, it's great that your sister isn't afraid to look like a pathetic spinster, what with having her very own apartment and all"?

It's weird to hear women still mouthing the kind of stuff that even Cosmo seems to know better than to print these days. But then, it's kind of a weird time to be a single woman. On the one hand, the choice to be single is acknowledged and validated in ways that seemed unthinkable as little as a dozen years ago, when the famous you'll-have-a-better-chance-of-being-killed-by-a-terrorist-than-getting-married-in-your-30s reports flowed in from every media venue around. Slowly, the ranks of the never-married are swelling, and with about 40 million single women in America, it's a demographic that's getting noticed.

On the other hand, what's getting noticed about single women in 1999 can be summed up with two words: Bridget Jones. The current era of the single woman might as well be described as post-BJ, since it seems that no pop cultural mention of either women or singlehood can pass without trotting out her booze-swilling British ass as evidence that we're all self-flagellating, thigh- and marriage-obsessed neurotics. Never mind that single women are owning their own businesses in record numbers, matching men dollar for dollar in spending, and remaking the arts in their own image. It's much easier to market to single women by dwelling on what they aren't—married, and by extension settled comfortably into society. Pick up a book, peruse a diamond ad, watch your television, eavesdrop on people at the movies: We're tapping a well of long-extant stereotypes, fears, and assumptions about single women and selling them back to ourselves at a bargain price.

BRIDGET JONES SUPERSTAR
The publication of 1995's The Rules may have set the wheels of pop culture's retro-cycle in motion, but the unprecedented success of Bridget Jones's Diary sent them into hyperdrive. Helen Fielding's London Independent column turned novel put a goofy, semi-ironic face on the same story women have been fed for years by the likes of glossy magazines, television dramadies, and self-help tomes—the one about the single career woman who, rapidly approaching 30, goes into what can only be called a marriage frenzy. But whether the million-plus women who bought and loved the book were responding to its gently satiric prodding of the beauty myth or letting its sarcasm fly right over their heads is beside the point—marketers everywhere saw a publishing zeitgeist waiting to happen and quickly positioned Bridget to be its patron saint. The new-ish crop of books featuring single female protagonists, all released in the spring and summer of 1999, testify.

Take Melissa Bank's The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing, a book of interrelated short stories that, according to its promotional copy, "explores the life lessons of Jane, the contemporary American Everywoman who combines the charm of Bridget Jones [and] the vulnerability of Ally McBeal." Or Suzanne Finnamore's Otherwise Engaged, a comedy of prenuptial manners that replaces Bridget's now-famed fear of "dying alone and being found three weeks later half-eaten by an Alsatian" with the more prosaic "I'll die a spinster, a gaggle of cats sniffing my bloated corpse." Or Amy Sohn's Run Catch Kiss, the story of a sex columnist courting relationship disaster with her tell-alls; the
Independent, in a slice of praise that takes the fiction-as-reality thing to an unreasonable level, dubbed Sohn "the thinking person's Bridget Jones."

And please, please take Kathy Lette's Altar Ego, a "comic" novel that ostensibly celebrates female commitmentphobia ("as far as this thirtysomething is concerned, the word commit should only be used next to the word murder," reads the jacket) but in reality is another stereotype-riddled tale of a grab at the brass ring of matrimony, albeit one whose glib attitude is supposed to make up for its staleness.

There are others: In the Drink, Kate Christensen's darker-than-dark-humored tale of a hapless, lovelorn, and unappreciated ghostwriter with an unbridled hankering for the sauce; and A Certain Age, Tama Janowitz's story of a woman whose ridiculously high standards preclude finding The Right Man. Finally, there's Melissa Roth, who, in the nonfiction On the Loose, tracks three single women through one year in their lives in order to capture the "'real world' of single living."

If these books have any individual characteristics to separate them from one another, you wouldn't know it from the reviews and the lumped-together marketing to which they've been subjected. Sure, the characters share certain things: They're attractive women in their 20s or 30s; they're educated, self-aware, and quick with a snarky retort or a wise aside; they live in New York, San Francisco, or London; they work in publishing or advertising; they worry about finding a flattering dress; their families appear every few chapters, Greek chorus-style, to shake their heads in synchronized dismay. Within their respective pages, the characters are small-s single; with the exception of On the Loose, their singleness is simply part of a narrative life that doesn't itself purport to define the word. In a marketing context, however, they are Single Women-shameless, helpless, man-hunting single women—and their subtleties and differences are ignored in the publicity spotlight's lurid glare.

more...
WHERE ARE WE GOING AND WHY AM I IN THIS BORDERS HANDBASKET?

Don't blame the authors. As long as women have been writing, they've been writing about young, single women searching for love, success, and happiness (though, please remember, not necessarily in that order). Still, it's hard to recall a time when so many female authors have been hyped so arduously and favorably all at once, and this Lilith Fair of literature would be wholly gratifying if not for one major thing: The books, marketed by their publishers as the spawn of Bridget Jones and addressed by reviewers as the direct result of Fielding's success, are made weaker on their own (in most cases) considerable merits.

New York magazine's rundown of the trend, entitled "Success and the Single Girl," crowned BJD "The Gold Standard" before dismissing the new crop of books as no more than clones. (The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing becomes "Intellectual Bridget"; In the Drink is "Dipso Bridget.") This easy categorization makes for snappy copy, but in doing so it dispenses with the vast literary context in which these books exist. It's as though everyone from Jane Austen to Alice Adams has been completely wiped from the cultural blackboard and the only ones left to represent in the single-gal arena are this year's girls.

"One reviewer called Run Catch Kiss 'A wobbly attempt to follow in Bridget Jones's Manolo Blahniks,'" says Amy Sooh, whose New York Press column, "Female Trouble," formed the basis for her cheerfully pot-potmouthed debut novel. "She doesn't even wear Manolo Blahniks! What frustrates me is the idea that anyone who sits down to write a book is doing it to mimic someone else."

No question, comparing one book to another helps move the units. It doesn't matter that Run Catch Kiss has more in common with Portnoy's Complaint than it does with BJD, or that Melissa Bank's subtle, delicious writing recalls the prose of Lorrie Moore far more than it channels Fielding's frenetic, sugar-high stylings. The single-girl market is what's hot right now, and it behooves publishers to shoehorn as many books as possible into the demographic while the fire's lit. This is a dubious benefit for writers, who, as Sooh knows all too well, have little say in the process. "I fought hard with my publisher not to have Bridget Jones comparisons on the book jacket," she admits. "It's good for them, from a marketing perspective. But it's not necessarily the way I want to go down in history."

It's well worth noting, though, that certain commercially undesirable factors disqualify a book for hard-core Bridgetized marketing. It's no accident that My Year of Meats, Ruth Ozeki's brilliant novel about a single Japanese-American television producer who unwittingly stumbles into a massive beef-ranching scandal—one of the smartest and most original books to come out in the past few years—hasn't found itself linking arms with BJ and her ilk. It's as though everyone from Jane Austen to Alice Adams has been completely wiped from the cultural blackboard and the only ones left to represent in the single-gal arena are this year's girls.
neurotic mother, and her quirky coworkers—have zeitgeist written all over them. But both its author and its main character are Asian-American; add to that an explicitly political premise deftly connecting the plight of DES daughters to beef industry profiteers and linking corporate dishonesty to domestic abuse: You don't have to even start doing the math to know that wouldn't reap the same caliber of PR booty as its single-girl sister.

**SLINGIN' SINGLES**

What these books do have in common is that they center on single women, and, as such, provide ruminations on what it means to be single. Duh, right? Sure—the problem is that the marketing doesn't reflect the fact that characters like *In the Drink*’s Claudia Steiner and *The Girls' Guide*’s Jane Rosenal don’t, in fact, spend the entire narrative plotting to snag the honeymoon suite. *In the Drink* doesn't suggest that perhaps Claudia would forgo a self-destructive bender or three were she in a happy relationship. *Run Catch Kiss*’s heroine, Ariel Steiner (no relation to Claudia), may wallow in interior monologues that might be more at home in a Meg Ryan movie ("What if I was still living alone in my Carroll Gardens studio at age forty-five? Sara would have a house out in Greenwich, a stockbroker husband, and a litter of kids and cats, and I'd still be frequenting the same East Village bars we used to go to together"), but her smart-ass, no-panties attitude also reflects that she knows bliss doesn't automatically follow when a new man hops into her bed.

Claudia's version, and Ariel's version, and Jane's version of singlehood don't necessarily treat the term "single" as a provisional tag, something to be endured until they find the person who promises to lift that semantic albatross from around their necks. *Otherwise Engaged*’s Eve, on the other hand, flaunts her equation of marriage=salvation on every page with ruminations like "The ring is my lump-sum payment for everything bad that has ever happened to me. I don't feel I can tell people this, or they will spoil it." *Altar Ego* presents us with a group of characters whose brain-free couplings and de-couplings prop up every tired prejudice ever floated about both single women and marriage (women only marry rich; feminists discard their principles when Mr. Man comes calling; women only concentrate on their careers when they can't get a husband, etc.). Then there's *On the Loose*, which compares and contrasts the lives of three single women in Los Angeles, New York, and San Francisco—or, at least, attempts to. For all the diversity that could be gleaned from both the premise and the locations, Roth gives us a trio of central-casting white girls, each working in the corporate world (two in entertainment, one in advertising), and all of similar socioeconomic backgrounds. The writing makes it almost impossible to tell whether these women have any characteristics that set them apart from each other, and in the course of following their interchangeable lives—an aren't-we-groovy mélange of bad dates, film premieres, record-release parties, and expense-account vacations—it becomes equally difficult to care. If this was fiction, we'd simply write them off as airhead caricatures. But *On the Loose* is a nonfiction work that claims to capture what it's like to be a single woman in the '90s, so the fact that its one-dimensionality is meant to resonate with actual women seriously rankles. You can't even get past the jacket blurb without stumbling into a played-out cliché of singlehood like "Jen...adopts kittens despite the old-maid stereotype, and takes a risk to figure out what makes her happy." The upshot is that while some of these books do support the stereotypes that fuel the parade float of marketing, the ones that don't are swept up for the ride, smiling and waving in bewilderment alongside homecoming queen Bridget.

**THE WORLD ACCORDING TO CANDACE**

It's interesting that *Sex and the City*, the book and subsequent TV show, has been credited with providing the pole for Fielding's cheerily neurotic single-girl flag-waving, since it
actually functions as a far more interesting ur-text for this new era of spinster-baiting than
BJD. Candace Bushnell’s long-running *New York Observer* column, which predated
Fielding’s by several years, never approached the same level of marriage mania; rather, it was
upmarket sociosmut commentary on the sex lives of Manhattan’s media elite, and the women
whose lives were detailed in the column, including Bushnell herself, didn’t share Bridget’s
fondness for whining over personal deficiencies. "We all sat back smugly, sipping tea, like
we were members of some special club," she writes. "We were hard and proud of it, and it
hadn’t been easy to get to this point—this place of complete independence where we had the
luxury of treating men like sex objects. It had taken hard work, loneliness, and the realization
that, since there might never be anyone there for you, you had to take care of yourself in every
sense of the word." It’s an observation that’s much more in line with Marcelle Clements’s *The
Improvised Woman*, a book that compiles interviews with single women of all ages and
backgrounds, than it is with any of the books in the current single-girl niche.

*Sex and the City* may be populated by characters whose shallow, name-dropping hunger for
money and status is just as discomfiting as Bridget Jones’s hankering for marriage and a set of
matching towels, but it at least allows for the possibility that one can be content and valid
without a wedding band. A threatening concept, apparently; though *Sex and the City* is lauded
for its groundbreaking sexual straightforwardness and cutting gender observations, the post-
BJ brand of singlehood still gets more play in the culture at large. (Viking, which published
both *BJD* and *The Girls’ Guide*, even arranged for Fielding and Bank to host a lecture at New
York’s 92nd Street Y on the subject of "What Single Girls Want.") *Sex and the City*’s
premise—that women in their 30s and 40s who have enough money and power don’t need men
for anything but sex—is certainly not too radical to appeal to women themselves (after all,
who bought all those copies of the book?), but as single-girl marketing gospel it’s a whole
’nother story. Think about it—if trend-spinners start suggesting to single women that marriage
is pointess and men simply carnal lollipops, we might start to rethink a hell of a lot more
than just our sex lives. By sticking to the status quo—in this case, the flutter-your-eyelashes,
wait-for-him-to-call machinations of Bridget—nobody gets any crazy ideas.

**SUBTEXT AND THE SINGLE GIRL**

What the marketing of these books shows shouldn’t come as any surprise: Single women may
be a blossoming demographic, but the industries courting our cash are the same ones whose
doors still swing on the flimsy hinges of stereotypical gender difference. Advertising to women has only recently begun to address the idea that some women choose to stay single; witness the Diet Coke television ad that "allows" a single women signing up for a dating service to realize that her life may in fact be just fine without a man.

In a *Village Voice* article called "Women Are Easy: Why TV Ad Agencies Take Female Viewers for Granted," Susan Faludi mused on the gender bias that still rules advertising: "For all the talk about market research, when it comes to gender, people switch from the local part of the brain to creaky nostrums about what works for men and for women, and what doesn't." Which is why, even when we see a sexy, lone woman in a car commercial, the car itself isn't being marketed to her. (And that's to say nothing of the one that features a mother palming off her single daughter on a likely male by faking her own car's brake failure.) The ads that are slowly popping up to address the single woman, in fact, fit right in with the same conception of singlehood advanced by the trend in single-girl lit—that is, they play on the twin specters of marriage and physical insecurity, reframing them to flatter the single woman. Take a print ad for De Beers, the company that essentially invented the concept of the diamond engagement ring ("A diamond is forever"). They're now wooing the women who may not be accepting an emerald-cut one-carat from Mr. Billfold, but who are sporting the cash and enough unself-conscious pride to purchase their own rocks. Below the ad's image of a semi-silhouetted woman in a diamond solitaire necklace is this copy: "It beckons me as I pass the store window. A flash of light in the corner of my eye. I stop. I turn. We look at each other. And though I'm usually not that kind of girl, I take it home."

The copy recasts diamond-craving as something naughty; the single woman eyeing the stone isn't a demure bride-to-be but a coy, self-assured hussy who claims not to be "that kind of girl," when the fact that she's buying a diamond for herself automatically signals that she just might be. On the one hand, it's a nod to self-sufficiency and sexual agency: the *Sex and the City* of ads. On the other hand, De Beers knows full well that women associate the company with engagement rings, and this ad serves as a reminder of the buyer's marital status: She's defined against the company's bread-and-butter customers, and what's reinforced is her singleness.

Then there's the ad featuring a close-up of a smiling young woman and the message, "Amber O'Brien, 25, is having the time of her life. Recently, she decided it was time to have breast augmentation." The ad, for Mentor breast implants, cloaks its hard sell in a contrived fact file ostensibly about Amber herself: It lists her "Pet Peeve" ("People who pressure you into doing things"), her "Proudest Achievement" ("Buying a condo"), and her "Life Mission" ("Always be open to new ideas"). The total effect is as subtle as sequined pasties on a pair of silicone double-Ds: Amber is a "real" woman, successful and solvent enough to own her own condo, and buying fake hooters is simply another achievement that highlights her open-mindedness.

Like the recent glut of single-girl fiction, ads like these give unpartnered women the oh-so-generous gift of recognizing them as a viable consumer entity while simultaneously tweaking their insecurities (or what are assumed to be their insecurities). Positioning diamonds and breast implants—things that are generally assumed to be done with or for a man-as choices made for their own sake, without the phantom "him" to influence the purchase, validates the single woman, albeit within advertising's m.o. of exploiting her fears. It's a big fat tease—in applying positive, if abstract, signifiers of empowerment, self-sufficiency, and well-being to products loaded with negative associations for the single woman (dangerous implants, rings that only "the lucky ones" get to wear), we think we're seeing a reexamination of single
women in consumer culture. But the De Beers ad doesn't fundamentally change the line with which we connect its conceptual dots; it simply takes the familiar progression of
relationship=diamonds=happiness and excises the first element. And the implant ad? Not even close.

On the other hand, almost all of the entries in the post-BJ era of chick-lit go where the ads can't afford to-revising assumptions of what it means to be single and coupled, recognizing societal strictures and how they affect our own ideas of what is or isn't "normal." Books like The Girls' Guide and Run Catch Kiss present us with relatable, smart heroines whose search for love is only one part of a larger need to find a comfortable place in a world they know full well rewards those who settle into the status quo. And only a very small number of their heroines ask us to believe that they're walking off into the sunset, ring on finger, in the last paragraph. But the marketing of the literature itself purposely masks this, ignoring the picture painted by the books themselves in favor of one that supports the single-girl shill proclaimed by Bridget-boosters as the Real Thing. Marketing hoodoo that relies on a conception of singleness that still translates to "looking for a man" rather than "alone and fine with it, thank you" will never offer the single woman a fair vision of herself-one that acknowledges that there's more than one route to happiness, and that the road there isn't always paved with empty bottles of gin and Slim-Fast.

Andi Zeisler recently bought a Tom Waits CD and some toothpaste, without him.