The Girl Instinct

A Post Feminist Look at the Relationship Between Foil and Hero in the Plum Novels by Janet Evanovich

B.A. Essay

Gunnhildur Eva Arnoddsson

May 2012
The Girl Instinct

A Post Feminist Look at the Relationship Between Foil and Hero in the Plum Novels by Janet Evanovich

B.A. Essay

Gunnhildur Eva Arnoddsdóttir
Kt.: 190180-4419

Supervisor: Dr. Anna Heiða Pálsdóttir
May 2012
Summary

This essay explores, from a post feminist perspective, the relationship between
the main character and the sidekick in three novels, by Janet Evanovich, which belong
to the genre of chick lit: One for the Money (1994), Hard Eight (2003) and Smokin’
Seventeen (2011). A chick lit novel is post feminist literature aimed at female readers in
their 20s and 30s. These novels generally follow a similar theme of love, friendship,
career, sex and consumerism; however they also deal with the more serious issues of the
ongoing quest for equality and the female working environment. In the post feminist era
of today women are fighting for what is important to them, their rights to choose how to
live their lives, if and when to have a family and which career they would like to pursue.
The three novels are part of the Plum Series, eighteen novels about Stephanie Plum and
her life as a female bounty hunter. She befriends a former prostitute, Lula, who becomes
her sidekick. I look at this relationship between the women, as it is the typical one of
protagonist and sidekick: they are opposites. However the sidekick has much to offer to
the relationship, and complements the hero. The women deal with female
objectification, abuse, being shot at, and also with weight issues while they enjoy
devouring fast food and doughnuts. Another matter of interest are the problems
Stephanie has, with cars and the tools of the trade of bounty hunting, that make her
seem out of place in the profession. Lula, on the other hand, has no problems with these
perceived masculine tools, even though she wears stiletto heels and short skirts. The
women’s relationship statuses and sexual experiences are also considered important for
a post feminist analysis, as Lula is a retired prostitute while Stephanie is a promiscuous
divorcée who has problems with commitment.
Content

1. Introduction ........................................................................................................ 2
2. Janet Evanovich and the Plum series ................................................................. 3
3. Chick Lit as a Genre .......................................................................................... 4
4. The Plum Series ................................................................................................. 7
5. A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips ..................................................... 9
6. Tools of the trade ............................................................................................. 10
7. Marked by sexuality ......................................................................................... 13
8. The ideal friend ................................................................................................ 15
9. Conclusion ....................................................................................................... 17

Works Cited ......................................................................................................... 19
1. Introduction

Chick lit is a well known literary genre and has a large group of readers, mostly female readers which are in the 20s and 30s age group. Chick lit novels are written with these women in mind and as such they deal with a similar theme overall. The stereotypical emphasis is on a protagonist, her personal and professional life and a love interest; however most of the books do not end with the protagonist marrying the man of her dreams, although they often do end up together. The chick lit novel is also concerned with consumerism and has its fair share of embarrassing moments and it relays how the protagonist is dealing with her problems on the work front. It also focuses on the important relationship women share as friends and this important bond between women is even shown to be more important than finding a suitable mate, as women are capable of living a fulfilling life without a domestic partner in their lives. They lean on each other for support and advice with everything from professional matters to their private personal issues. This relationship between the main character and her sidekick can best be analysed from a post feminist perspective, as the women deal with their working environment and their quest for equality.

The writer Janet Evanovich wrote the Plum series about Stephanie Plum and her escapades as a bounty hunter. Stephanie tries to capture people that fail to appear in court on a specific date, also known as skips. The Plum series are novels that cover, amongst other things, friendship, cars, sex, careers, crime and violence. In the novels, three of which I make reference to: One for the Money (1994), Hard Eight (2003) and Smokin’ Seventeen (2011), a form of female relationship is realized between the protagonist and her sidekick, as the two women become partners through thick and thin and depend on each other, as women have done through the ages.

Chick lit is considered to be post feminist fiction, meaning that the emphasis on feminism has changed so much that it is seen as outdated because the average young woman in the second decade of the 21st century has different priorities in her life than her second-generation feminist mother or her first-generation grandmother had. There has been a change in how women evaluate what is important in their lives, moving from having to fight for the right to vote or to have a job, and into the new millennium where such rights are generally taken for granted and the patriarchal society is under siege. Today women are fighting for, amongst other things, their choice of profession and family, if they want to pursue both or neither and how they want to go about having it all. In the past women have worked in male professions and have altered themselves to
fit in, but times change and now the professions should change to fit both sexes. Post feminists also believe that the equality of the sexes has been reached and women are no longer victimized. It has a new focus as it is concerned with the problems that the women of today are facing and how they experience life, how their love lives are not necessarily at the center of their universe but there instead are their jobs or families. The chick lit genre has been received as a welcome change by young women who are seeking assurance of their opinions as post feminism brings a drastic change into society. The Plum series touches upon these subjects in one way or another in an interesting way. When looking at the female relationship, in the Plum series novels, it is important to know what chick lit is and how post feminism is portrayed in the novels. This I do by drawing out the similarities as well as the differences of the two women and reflecting them in comparison to the post feminist ideals, that feminism is dead and women are now fighting for different rights.

2. Janet Evanovich and the Plum series
In 1994 the first book in the Plum series by American writer Janet Evanovich (b. 1943) was published. She had previously written and published a dozen romance novels before changing her writing style to suit the crime novel. She is a prolific writer and has had a book or two published every year since 1989. Evanovich is a bestselling author in America, with her books appearing frequently on the New York Times Best Seller List, under the Mass-Market Fiction section. To name a few of those books, Finger Lickin’ Fifteen appears on the July 11, 2010 New York Times Best Seller List and Smokin’ Seventeen and One for the Money both appear on the January 1, 2012 list. Evanovich has also had one of her books, One for the Money, produced into a motion picture under the same name. It premiered in the beginning of 2012. Prior to creating the main character in the Plum series, Stephanie Plum, Evanovich “spent two years retooling – drinking beer with law enforcement types, learning to shoot, practicing cussing” (Evanovich, “Janet’s Bio”). Evanovich grew up in Trenton, New Jersey, and that is also the setting for the Plum novels.

The Plum series novels have been published over a seventeen year period, with the first novel, One for the Money, published in 1994 and the latest one, Explosive Eighteen, in 2011. The book series about Stephanie Plum are all named in numerical order from one through eighteen. Although there are a few more books about Stephanie
Plum that have been published, they all have the word Plum in their title and are referred to as “between-the-numbers holiday novella” or “between-the-numbers novel” (Evanovich, “Plum Series”). The book series cover Stephanie Plum’s life and shenanigans, her feisty character and how she deals with problems on both the work front and in her personal life. She is a working class white woman with a college education, who is somewhere in her early thirties although her age does not seem to change during the series. Stephanie takes up the profession of a fugitive apprehension agent, or in other words a bounty hunter, at her cousin’s bail bonding company. She is more or less single through the series but has a complicated relationship status with a local cop and an even more complicated relationship with her mentor, a former Navy Seal. Stephanie finds a friend and co-worker in Lula, a former prostitute, whose life she saves in the beginning of the book series. Lula may have been hired to work as a file clerk but she quickly gets bored with the filing and starts helping Stephanie catch the skips.

3. Chick Lit as a Genre

Young women’s literature is generally referred to as chick lit, as chick is slang meaning girl or woman, according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. The term chick lit was coined by Jeffrey DeShell and Chris Mazza in 1995. They meant for the term “not to embrace an old frivolous or coquettish image of women but to take responsibility for our part in the damaging, lingering stereotype” (Mazza 18) and they also point out that women’s literature and women writers are referred to by gender, whereas male writers and male literature are not gender categorized; they are referred to only as writers and literature (Mazza 28). Hence it was meant to be an ironic term; they could not have foreseen what followed. The term chick lit developed from the ironically coined term into a term that instead of promoting feminist values it valorizes and embraces women writers in their 20s and 30s who write about women of the same age, who are struggling through life, focusing on their lives, love, jobs and worries, essentially what women feel important at that time in their life, and are also able to make fun of themselves.

As a genre chick lit is written for women and it has a certain identity, a common denominator. The books, most often, have a similar look as the covers are, according to A. Rochelle Mabry “often brightly colored” (194) and according to Stephanie Harzewski they often “feature stylish female clothing or high heels” (35). This imagery
links the books with consumerism which is true to chick lit, as the main characters in these novels are women who enjoy buying material things for themselves. However there are hardly any images of men on the book covers even though the novels do cover the love interests of the protagonist, presumably this is because the books are about a woman’s journey and growth and do not revolve around her love interest. The content of chick lit books is similar, as they follow a certain pattern that focuses on the life of the protagonist, not just her love life. According to Erin Hurt:

The field of chick lit has grown enormously since the mid-1990s, yet many of the titles share a similar structure and theme: first-person narration in the present tense; protagonists in their mid-twenties to early thirties; a focus on heterosexual romantic relationships and consumption; a generic focus on the individual to the exclusion of making any broader societal claims; and the “satisfaction of a conclusion that ties up all plot strands.” (Wells 67 qtd in Hurt 136)

Although the chick lit novels follow a certain pattern they do post the different problems women are dealing with, a constant issue is the love life of the protagonist, and other problems range from weight issues to family problems and almost everything in between.

Chick lit as a literary genre is considered to be a relatively young. As mentioned above, its name was first coined in 1995 and according to Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, “When we consider the origins of chick lit, a single urtext clearly presents itself: Helen Fielding’s *Bridget Jones’s Diary*” which was published in 1996 (“Chick Lit: the New Woman’s Fiction” 4). Chick lit has been criticized for being made only for the entertainment value, leaving nothing behind. It has even been questioned whether it is to be considered as literature, as “chick lit writers are exclusively women and its readers overwhelmingly so, perceptions of the genre are affected by entrenched views that women’s writing is inferior to men’s” (Wells 48). For women’s literature to be considered of less value than men’s is nothing new and female writers of the past have had to challenge the acceptable literature written by men by taking up a male pseudonym, such as the Brontë sisters who wrote under male pseudonyms and even the famous British author J.K. Rowling changed her name for the Harry Potter books, out of fear that young men would not read a book written by a woman (“Best Selling Author”). This critique of chick lit young genre has, according to Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, even provoked professors in women’s literature to discourage their
students “from considering chick lit a legitimate area of scholarship” (“A Generational Divide” B13), as it has been viewed as a passing fad. There is no denying that chick lit is popular, it has taken the leap from literature to the big screen, with books like *Sex and the City* making it to the small screen with several television series and then to the big screen. *Bridget Jones’ Diary* and *One for the Money* have also been made into movies. Chick lit has even progressed into sub genres like mommy lit and even lad lit. Publishers around the world have taken notice of the genres’ popularity with women. This interest has led to the profitability of the genre which can be seen as both an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage would be that many writers have surfaced and the genre is progressing, developing into sub genres. There are also the monetary gains to be had as the following of this genre is large. The disadvantage has to do with so many people, writers and publishers, wanting their piece of the pie that is chick lit, that it may become a fill-in-the blank novel where the focus is on finding new ways to milk money from consumers.

Women occupy a large part of the consumer markets and according to Michael J. Silverstein and Kate Sayr, “women represent a growth market bigger than China and India combined—more than twice as big, in fact. Given those numbers, it would be foolish to ignore or underestimate the female consumer” (2). Hence the financial aspect is there and cannot be ignored. However, the commercial and marketing forces are not the only ones with their fingers in this lucrative pie, there is also the political aspect to consider.

It is important whether women feel that feminism is no longer needed and that equality has been reached or if they feel that there is still a gap between the sexes. Feminism is a political standpoint and in order to change society the politics must change with it. Post feminism has been seen as the backlash against feminism and according to Suzanne Ferriss and Mallory Young, post feminism has also been referred to as a third wave of feminism, with the younger generation pressing on with matters that are important to them and not their predecessors, issues such as whether women should start a family or a career, or if they should choose a different career to be able to have a family and tend to both as they would like (“A Generational Divide” B14).

Post feminism breaks the pressures of the second wave feminism, where women were expected to be the ideological superwoman, “an expectation that women can and should do everything well – work (and work out), mother, make love” (Rosenfelt and
Stacey 354). Post feminism can also be related to commercialism, with the constant advertisements, hidden and in plain sight, in books as well as magazines.

By casting women in a new light post feminism is perhaps a new way for women to fight for their rights. According to Pamela Caughie, a professor of English and Women's Studies “Post feminist fiction does not conform to a set of beliefs about the way women are or should be” (qtd in Mazza 19). Hence, women do not come in a standardized package and they are not programmed in a certain way. Women are also not all fighting for the same rights. In the western countries women have the right to vote and choose whom to marry or if they want to marry, they can get an education and become world leaders. Feminists fought for these rights; however the generation taking over takes them for granted. If post feminism is to be taken at face value, with feminism having reached its goals, and women now able to fend for themselves and choose to have it all or to not have it all, then there is nothing left to fight for. However, things are not quite that simple as post feminism is still a form of feminism and it is focused on finding the new path. With writers being referred to by gender and the writings of women under scrutiny for being only entertainment, it is questionable whether or not equality has been reached.

4. The Plum Series
Stephanie Plum, the protagonist in the Plum series, is described as a slim, dark haired, Italian-Hungarian woman. She is in her 30s in the first book and her age does not change throughout the series. She is a sometimes single divorcée who lives with her pet hamster but otherwise on her own in Trenton, New Jersey. Her clothing of choice is very casual, jeans, sneakers and a T-shirt, and she puts on mascara to boost her confidence. Stephanie is, in the first novel, in dire need of money as she is unemployed so she takes a job as a fugitive apprehension agent (hereafter referred to as a bounty hunter) at her cousin’s bail bonding company, after blackmailing him into offering her a job. However, as she has no qualifications to become a bounty hunter she is mentored by a former Navy Seal, who is also a bounty hunter. Her first bounty case happens to be a local cop, who is in fact a former flame of hers. Stephanie is desperate to apprehend him, as bringing him in would have a good effect on her financial situation. However, his apprehension does not go as planned and Stephanie seeks help from a streetwalker named Lula, when looking for him. There is a turn of events where Lula, after being
beaten brutally and sexually abused by a client, is left on the fire escape outside Stephanie’s bedroom window as a warning to her. After that incident Stephanie goes after Lula’s attacker, and a friendship is formed between the two.

Lula, the foil, is a 5’5” plus size African-American woman. In the beginning she is a prostitute, but after her attack she starts work as a filing clerk for the same bail bonds office as Stephanie works for and moves on to become Stephanie’s partner. Lula likes to wear flashy spandex clothing that is a few sizes too small for her as she “enjoys testing the limits of seam and fabric, squishing herself into a size 2 petite” (Smokin’ 11). She is obsessed with her appearance and changes her hair very often, and can run down the skips in her high heels as “Lula can go all day in five-inch spikes” (Smokin’ 170). According to Lula that is because she has “got perfect weight distribution between my boobs and my booty” (Smokin’ 170). Lula lives in a small apartment, sans kitchen but has a walk in closet instead (Smokin’ 148), and she drives a manly muscle car, a flashy red Trans Am. Lula likes to eat out as she has an appetite for fast food.

The differences between the protagonist, Stephanie Plum, and her sidekick, Lula, are striking. Lula’s appearance as a brassy, black woman, who wears clothing and makeup that makes her noticeable in a crowd, changing the color of her hair very regularly, gives Stephanie the look of a rather down to earth, normal woman who is, if anything, dull in comparison to Lula. It is this difference that helps their working relationship according to Julie D. O’Reilly: “Beyond appearance and behavior, sidekicks’ narrative functions contribute to the normalizing of their protagonists. First, they allow for the protagonist to have an appearance of propriety that their detecting or bounty hunting requires” (66). Despite the fact that Lula seemingly does not have a lot to give in their relationship other than adding humor to the stories by being the trigger-happy sidekick, that is not so. Lula gives “Stephanie the entrée she needs to gain information—information that her age, race, and/or class status would otherwise prevent her from accessing” (O’Reilly 66). One of Lula’s most valuable traits in their relationship is her former occupation and her sense of style that gives Stephanie a way into the seedy neighborhoods without attracting much attention. In One for the Money Stephanie admits that the bars in a seedy Trenton neighborhood “might be my best source, but they felt dangerous to me and beyond my abilities” (141). Stephanie also adds “Truth is, I wasn’t used to being a minority” (141).

The relationship between the two follows a typical template of the relationship between the protagonist and the sidekick. Stephanie saves Lula and later in the novels
the two share a workplace, although not same job. Lula either offers or is asked by
Stephanie to join her on outings when trying to apprehend the skips and they strike a
balance in their working relationship that works, with Lula complementing Stephanie in
areas where she is lacking in skill. Even though they appear to be opposites in
appearances and backgrounds they do find common ground to base their relationship on
and they become good friends that discuss their personal lives with each other, have
each other’s backs when in dangerous situations as well as sharing a taste for fast food,

5. A moment on the lips, a lifetime on the hips
Both the protagonist and the foil in the Plum series eat junk food, doughnuts and drink
coffee almost daily and they also indulge in alcohol on a regular basis. Fast food is
Lula’s main source of nutrition as she mostly eats out because she does not have a
kitchen in her apartment. She is also an emotional eater who eats when she is hungry,
tired, agitated, excited or just having a bad day or even a good day and therefore it is
hardly a surprise that she is a large woman. Like Lula, Stephanie has an appetite for
junk food but it is in addition to the home cooked meals her mother makes, as she
frequently dines with her family who lives near her. Stephanie’s kitchen is more often
than not almost empty except for the gun she keeps in the cookie jar. The women are
not always happy with the way they look, even if the image of the perfect body is just
that, an image. None the less women are living with what Alison Umminger refers to as
the “self-imposed and culturally sanctioned tyranny of hating their own bodies” (240).
Lula is portrayed as being proud of her body and refers to herself as being full figure but
she takes offence to being called fat and becomes aggressive and angry (Smokin’ 287).
Lula often diets without much change to her appearance while Stephanie chooses to
exercise to keep herself in shape. Weight issues are covered in chick lit novels and
according to Umminger “these novels point to something greater than a narcissistic
obsession with one’s physique or sexual desirability; in virtually every novel, being thin
has not only romantic but also financial rewards and repercussions. Looks are a form of
currency…” (240). Neither Lula, nor Stephanie seem to be interested in changing their
lifestyles to improve their health for the long term. They are only looking for ways that
provide a quick fix in changing the way their bodies look and they want the results to be
visible immediately. This indicates that although they have different body types they are
dealing with a negative body image and looking for ways to alter their appearances by losing some weight or at least some inches, even if they only seek short term solutions

The women are well versed consumers who do take care of their appearances. Lula is constantly changing her look and Stephanie has a penchant for buying shoes, but is described wearing similar clothing most of the time. It is clear that neither Lula nor Stephanie accept the typical role of the woman in the kitchen, role of a housewife, as they do not cook. Dinner is cooked for them, they are invited to dinner or they buy their food ready to eat. A possible reason is that they are running low on both time and money most of the time, therefore their choice in fast food is not hard to explain. Fast food is inexpensive and that it is something they desire, as neither has money in abundance. Another factor is that fast food and doughnuts are easy to come by when looking for diners or stores that are open day and night and when crunched for time.

It is their taste in doughnuts that is interesting as they stop for doughnuts almost daily. There is a profession that has traditionally been linked with sitting around eating doughnuts and drinking coffee: police officers. The women are not police officers although they share this connection. Stephanie is friendly with the police, as she has friends in the force who try to look out for her and teach her how to handle and shoot a gun. Her sometimes boyfriend is a cop and she both gives and gets information from him regarding various cases that the women are working on. Stephanie is comfortable around the police and even enjoys eating doughnuts with them on occasion, stating that when an officer, a friend of hers, stopped by “He was in uniform, holding two Dunkin’ Donuts bags… We were good enough friends that we didn’t have to talk while we ate” (One 127). Lula, on the other hand, makes herself scarce when the police arrives, as she does not want to be associated with the boys in blue, presumably because of her previous life and occupation.

6. Tools of the trade
A bounty hunter cannot apprehend his skip by using only his hands and feet, he or she needs the right tools for the job. The tools of the bounty hunter trade are guns, stun guns, handcuffs, and a vehicle to transport the skips to the police station. These are traditional tools which Stephanie has serious problems using while Lula, the foil, appears to be accustomed to use most of them.
The problem Stephanie faces with her gun, for example, is that she is afraid to use it as it might cause serious harm, and therefore she usually keeps it in a cookie jar in her home. Interestingly this is something that has been done in the private investigator TV show *The Rockford Files* where the male PI kept his gun in a cookie jar, to hide it and because he was also frightened of causing harm, so it is not just women that are uncomfortable with operating guns. On the occasions Stephanie does have the gun with her it is more often than not without bullets. In *Hard Eight* and *Smokin’ Seventeen* she refrains from using her gun, preferring to use mace or a stun gun. The stun gun causes her problems as it has been known to malfunction, causing her skips to run free. On one occasion after her stun gun fails her, Stephanie resorts to throwing her stun gun at the skip but he still runs free (*Hard 87*). The handcuffs she loses fairly often, with her skips breaking free from her with the handcuffs on (*Hard 57*). At one point she even gets handcuffed to a shower curtain rod with her own handcuffs by a skip (*One 125*). It is not an overstatement to say that her methods in using weapons are not conventional, and on top of all this her weapons regularly fail to work. Despite Stephanie’s lackluster gun skills, and hesitance to use weapon she does hit her targets on more occasions than Lula does.

Stephanie has really bad luck with the cars she uses as hers are blown up, stolen, stripped or even crashed, and for this reason she often resorts to driving a blue Buick, a classic called Big Blue, and is owned by her grandmother. Consequently her mentor also keeps lending her new cars, as Big Blue is neither easy to hide nor is it convenient to do surveillance in, due to its size and color. Because most cars are destroyed while in Stephanie’s care, her mentor has Stephanie as a line item in his budget, under Entertainment, as she is seen as a source of comic relief (*Smokin’ 194*) for him and his employees. The cars Stephanie owns are beat up and old, however, the cars she borrows from her mentor are new, always black, powerful and a lot more expensive than hers. These cars are fast and sleek, the epitome of masculinity and similar to their owner, the mentor. Stephanie has trouble with keeping cars in one piece, except for the one she does not want to drive around in, and this brings about the question of why she has such problems. Is she being portrayed as a helpless female that needs rescuing, or is this a symbol of her relationship with men? She borrows and drives around in her mentors’ cars, never buying them from him nor paying for them when they get damaged. She also engages in sex with him on occasion, without an actual relationship forming between them. The only car she has owner like privilege over, but does not want to own or likes
to drive, is trusty Big Blue, whose name can be transferred to her on and off again boyfriend’s job, as he is a cop, a member of the boys in blue.

Lula is the opposite of Stephanie when it comes to these tools of the trade. She is not afraid of guns and always has her gun loaded, carries it hidden and has it with her most of the time. She is not afraid to use her gun when she feels it appropriate or necessary. She may be a bad shot but she is armed, dangerous and her weapons work. Lula drives red sports cars and is known for not wanting to put the skips in her backseat as they might soil her car. The masculine cars Lula drives and her ability to handle the tools indicates that she has more of what is generally considered to be masculine attributes than the protagonist.

This brings about questions of whether the author is trying to make Stephanie seem out of place in a profession thought of as being mostly male and is perhaps trying to force her into the masculine role. Another reason can be that she is supposed to be seen as a breath of fresh air in the bounty hunting business, redefining the profession as she always gets her skips even if all those manly tools of the trade fail her. She is forcing the trade to change, re-modeling it to suit a woman or to make room for women. Lula is the masculine counterpart; however that is only in action as Lula is more feminine than Stephanie in appearances. As a former street walker one can suspect that Lula is accustomed to protecting herself from violence, she owns and operates her gun without problems when she feels it necessary. It is a liability for a bounty hunter to have serious problems with the tools of the trade and that is where Lula’s gun toting skills come in handy. She is perhaps a little too trigger happy but she does not hesitate to pull the trigger when their lives are in danger.

Both women do break the laws on several occasions when on the job. They carry their guns in their pocket books, hidden, most of the time, which is illegal. They have also been known to break and enter into houses when looking for their skips or looking for clues on where to find them, which is definitely illegal. Bounty hunters are not all that different from police officers, they hunt down the skips and bring them to the police station just as officers do with criminals. They can carry handcuffs and stun guns and can also have a permit to carry guns. However, Stephanie and Lula are not police officers as they are working on behalf of the bail bonds man and not for the good of the public, as the police do. Although Stephanie and Lula do spend a considerable amount of time in the company of the police, gathering information, getting assistance with transporting skips into the police station, and are on good enough terms with the police
to share a doughnut with them on occasion, they are well aware of that the police officers find humor in being called out to assist them with work related issues or when they get called to the scene when Stephanie’s troublesome vehicles explode. The duo needs the police to be on their side because they continually request their assistance for more than the mandatory tasks that the police deal with. Having the police on their side is better for them as they have a criminal streak and clearly think of themselves as having the same rights as the police have.

Throughout the novels Stephanie and Lula manage to wrangle in the skips, Stephanie collects her fee, the amount depends on the bail set for the skip, and is a bit better off financially by the end of each novel. This is according to Wells known as the marker of how “it is certainly true that the love plot, much more than any professional plot, drives the great majority of chick lit. Many writers … make sure that their heroines end the novel better off professionally than they began, but it is requited love, not significant career advancement, that brings about the novels’ conclusions” (54). This is not quite accurate when it comes to the Plum novels. Although neither woman is in a relationship by the end of the first book, One for the Money, things do start to look up for Stephanie by the end of Hard Eight, but then by the end of Smokin’ Seventeen neither woman is in a relationship. Despite their relationship status in the end of each novel they are becoming more efficient at bringing in the skips and as they collect a fee for each skip they bring in their careers are advancing.

7. Marked by sexuality
With the two women getting better at their job and their skills evolving they still work hard to make enough money to make ends meet. They even pass around flyers with digitally altered and enhanced image of them as an advertisement for their employer, with the slogan “If You’re Bad We’ll Send our Girls out to Get You” (Smokin’ 185). However, there is hardly any wonder why the women partake in passing around these flyers, as it might further their job opportunities and more work means more money for them as “looks are a form of currency that aid… one’s ability to secure that promotion, get that next job” (Umminger 240). Lula, who has dealt with male objectification, sees this as an opportunity and is only too happy to pass the flyers around and have a billboard hanging over the offices with this image. Stephanie, on the contrary, is humiliated and fills in the image of her face with a black marker when passing the flyers
around. This incident conveys an image that feminism has long fought against, the objectification of women, with Lula and Stephanie portrayed as a commodity. The women have such different reactions to this occurrence is because Lula and Stephanie have such different views on what is appropriate behavior.

Sex is an integral part of chick lit and it shows the main character having sexual relationships “with men other than the narrative’s intended hero, but without ‘punishing’ her or questioning her actions” (Mabry 201). This guilt free sex image is realized as Stephanie engages in sex with both her mentor and her on and off again boyfriend, although not with both at the same time. She has a work related relationship with her mentor but they have undeniable chemistry. He comes to her rescue time and time again, and helps her out with work related matters, cars and guns; however at the end of the day he makes it clear that he wants her, albeit only for sex, and that he expects to be reimbursed for all his help with sex. Despite this she knowingly asks him for favors and she does engage in sex with him, even if she is in a complicated relationship with her on and off again boyfriend at the same time. Her mentor first sees her naked when she is handcuffed in her bathroom in the first novel (One 125), they kiss and engage in sex in the eighth one (Hard 268), and they engage in sex on several occasions in the seventeenth one (Smokin’ 130). Their sexual relations are never forced as she is a willing participant. Stephanie’s situation can be taken to mean that she is a strong and independent woman who takes care of her primitive needs. However, her actions also give her the air of being a promiscuous woman who enjoys having an active sex life and also indicating that Stephanie is selling herself, as exchanging sex is a business transaction. Her opposite is Lula, the former streetwalker, who in the three books covered here, does not appear to have a significant other nor is she having sex, as having sex as a street walker can be categorized as sexual violence against women, if the woman is forced into that situation. Lula was in the business unwillingly if her words are to be taken seriously, as she says, “I know what’s good for me I wouldn’t be standing out here at all, would I?” (One 195) to her co-worker when they are heading out to work. Lula is not forced to give up her career as a street walker, although it may not have been her profession of choice when she started out. She is a strong woman, a rape victim survivor, and she gives Stephanie advice on her sex life, as she is a self proclaimed “retired professional” (Smokin’ 144). This image of free love that Stephanie engages in and is depicted in chick lit makes it “easier for their readers to relate to” the
main characters (Mabry 202). And the fact that the women discuss their sexual experiences with each other is an indication of the trust in their relationship.

Stephanie abandons her career as an underwear buyer for a career in a mostly male profession. This is of significance as this is her choice and not an easy one as she gets harassed for being a woman on the job. Lula, the foil, however changes her profession from being a streetwalker, one of the oldest female professions in the world, and takes up a job as a file clerk. This change is also significant as Lula is subjected to rape and beating as a streetwalker but manages to move on from that dangerous world to become a file clerk, which is a relatively safe job. The main characters are therefore on the one hand taking up a mostly male occupation where her life is in danger and being harassed becomes a regular occurrence, and on the other hand leaving a mostly female occupation where being in danger is normal and so is getting harassed on a regular basis and yet she is helping the protagonist deal with being in danger, often forcing herself into these situations with the protagonist.

8. The ideal friend
The definition of a hero is “the central figure in an event” or “one who shows great courage” according to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. There is only one protagonist in the novels and as such she is the main hero, but the sidekick that helps her out plays a significant role in the novels and can also be seen as a hero. Lula, the sidekick, is more than just a co-worker to Stephanie as she saved her life and because she went after the perpetrator that assaulted her. Despite this Lula can be seen as Stephanie’s hero. Lula is a survivor and uses her experience along with her quick wit to assist the protagonist with capturing the skips. As a friend Lula sticks up for Stephanie, helps her out and is generous with her advice and opinion regarding Stephanie’s relationships, which are complex because she is a divorcée who has commitment issues with her on and off again boyfriend, the couple are unable to agree on if and when they are in a relationship. Adding to the already complex relationship problems is Morelli, the boyfriend, who does not want her to work as a bounty hunter, and her not wanting to give way to his wanting. There is the state of the sex in exchange for assistance deal she has with her mentor and then there is Stephanie’s relationship with her family. Stephanie’s mother is critical of her, not hiding how she feels about her career choice, and wants her to get a normal job, or the fact that she is not re-married with children. During the series her
mother tries to set her up with various men, by inviting them over to dinner with the family, without luck. In *Smokin’ Seventeen* her mother invites over a man she feels would be appropriate for Stephanie and he then turns out to be a serial killer. Her father mostly keeps his head down, wants dinner on the table on time and stays out of his daughter’s private life. Stephanie’s grandmother is young at heart, wants Stephanie to date, have sex and enjoy life. However, she also wants Stephanie to get married and have a family but is not pushing the subject. Stephanie’s grandmother carries a large hand gun and is not afraid to use it (*Smokin’* 226). Through all of these relationship issues Lula is there for her friend and not just as a friend but also as a role model, someone to look up to.

Lula is an independent woman who has been freed from her past and is in control of how she wants to live her life. There is no mention of Lula having a family and Harzewski says “That many chick lit heroines are orphans…indicates the legacies of the… classic heroine-centered novels” (38-39). Lula follows her instinct rather than instructions and that often lands her in trouble. She is not dimwitted, even enrolls into night school in *Hard Eight*. She also has a sarcastic sense of humor saying that “It’s not like my former occupation as a ho helps me out, you know, I don’t think my final exam’s gonna be about hand jobs” (*Hard* 19). Lula’s role as a strong and single woman who is no longer under the influence and mercy of men and male power is an inspiration for Stephanie, who is under pressure from her family to change her career, find a man, marry and start a family. Lula has none of these and is not under the same pressure her friend is to grow up.

When Stephanie was a child she dreamt of being a superhero (*Hard* 228), so even the main hero has a hero she looks up to. Lula has taken that place of a hero in her friend’s eyes as she has shown Stephanie that not only is it possible to turn your life around and move on to bigger and better things, and that it is possible to live life as a single woman. Lula is making it on her own, but it is not for everyone as that is Lula’s path, and Stephanie must find her own path. Lula saves Stephanie’s life in the novels, is a buffer between Stephanie and her family and even puts herself into harm’s way time and time again to protect her friend. The women are each other’s ideal friend.

The age of the women is unclear as the protagonist is in the beginning of each novel in her 30s and her age does not change throughout the series, while the sidekick’s age is not mentioned in the novels. Age is important in chick lit as most women in their 20s and 30s are building their careers and have serious romantic relationships, and
according to the United States Census Bureau the median age, in 2011, for a woman’s first marriage is 26.5 years. As neither the protagonist nor the sidekick is aging, it is likely that they will not grow up and move on to a different kind of norm than what they are currently dealing with. However, even if the women do not age in the novels they do grow as persons, having come from different backgrounds and having very different views on what they consider to be normal, they grow in their chosen occupation.

9. Conclusion
When examining the status of chick lit as post feminist fiction and focusing in particular on the relationship between the main character and the sidekick in the Plum series it is important to know what the series are about. The Plum series are novels that cover, amongst other things, friendship, cars, sex, careers, crime, violence and plots. The protagonist remains the same age in the three books covered in this essay, which were published during a 9 year period, and the novels all revolve around a similar subject, although the emphasis changes throughout the series. A constant issue is the relationship between the protagonist and her sidekick, the status of the protagonist’s love life, family, sex, guns, cars and the skips.

The Plum novels are categorized as chick lit – a branch of post feminist fiction – because the writer is a woman and the novels are about a woman of a certain age dealing with her life. Women have had their writings subjected to scrutiny for not being literature, as if what is important to women of a certain age today is irrelevant and not worthy enough to be considered to constitute a literature genre. However, with post feminist fiction leading the way, the norms are changing. Women are buying chick lit as it appeals to them. Post feminism is about moving away from the fulfilled feminist dreams women had about being in control of their own lives and fate, and moving into the new era where women feel that they have those rights and need not fight for them any more. Chick lit is concerned with how to deal with the choices women have and what they perceive to be the problems they need to deal with today, such as careers, weight issues, relationships and love life, to name a few.

The relationship between the female main characters in the Plum series novels is a good and honest one, although it is apparent that the protagonist, Stephanie, and the foil, Lula, are opposites in almost every way. Stephanie can be described as the normal white female who is afraid of weapons and can not handle manly tools while Lula, a
black, full figured, life experienced woman, knows how to protect herself and will shoot first and ask questions later. Lula’s character is interesting, however not enough is written about her in the novels for the reader to really get to know her. Such is the character of the foil, interesting but not so much that it takes the attention away from the main character.

The duo’s cumulative experiences span dating, having sex with multiple partners, rape, abuse, being shot at and enjoying the perks of shopping for food or clothing, just to name a few. Adding to that the pressures of a new job for both of them, being threatened by criminals and learning the skills needed to become successful in their new jobs as they go along, it is considerably easy to see how their relationship evolves fast from acquaintances to great friends, as they stick together and try to take care of one another. In the novels covered here the friends do not have the same opinions or views on life and love, however they share a taste for fast food. The sidekick is single and not looking for love while the protagonist is having sex with two men, without any consequences on her complex dating situation, and trying hard to decide which of the two men she could imagine spending her life with. They react differently to being objectified, one seeing it as opportunity and the other as a humiliating experience, and yet they respect each other and their choices in life. The women learn from each other through their friendship. Stephanie looks to Lula for both advice and help with her life and Lula rises to the challenge by teaching Stephanie to have faith in herself and enough trust in her friends and family to not be afraid to fail and have them know. Lula even risks her own life to save Stephanie, and that is a statement in itself.
Works Cited


