

Books I Hate (and Also Some I Like): with Anita Felicelli

written by Katharine Coldiron | February 26, 2019



[Anita Felicelli](#) is exactly the kind of woman I want on my team. She's a writer of stories, essays, and criticism; she's sharp and funny without being mean; she's a wide and ready reader; and when I warned her about a book I'd reluctantly recommended in a different review, she told me, "I like fucked up."

Anita's debut collection, [Love Songs for a Lost Continent](#), has been praised by Porochista Khakpour, Laura van den Berg, and critics at the San Francisco Chronicle and LARB (where Anita's own criticism has [appeared often](#)). Her novel, *Chimerica*, is [forthcoming from WTAW Press](#). In the meantime, her work has appeared in the New York Times, Slate, Electric Literature, and many other places. Also, she has the distinction of being one of my only interview subjects who was enthusiastic, rather than dubious, about appearing in this series.

Tell me about your hatred of books.

I feel guilty for using the word "hate" in connection with books, but to be honest, I hate what's popularly known as chick lit. And by chick lit, I don't mean books about women and their inner lives (I mostly review books by women; in fact, I prefer books by women), but the genre that I remember being uber-popular in the '90s. I hate when people try to claim chick lit is somehow feminist simply because it's about *women*, when so often it's poorly thought-through domestic fiction about white cisgender middle-class women in heterosexual relationships with very specific sorts of concerns that would not pass the Bechdel test and that involve productivity and capitalist consumption. There is nothing challenging in them.

All that said, hate is a strong word. Maybe revulsion is better?

I dislike these books, too. I also feel that I don't really understand the existence of them, when romance novels cut to the chase and are no less realistic.

Yes, true. Romance novels are better.

Give me three examples of books you hate.

I haven't read a book I hated in years and years. I no longer finish books I hate. I mean, I can tell within the first fifty pages I am going to hate it, and I put it down so that I don't waste my time. Back when I didn't understand I could do this in my early twenties, however, I finished books I hated, and often I enjoyed hate-reading them. Three books I hate: I hated Samuel Richardson's proto-chick-lit *Clarissa, or, the History of a Young Lady*. I came to hate *Bridget Jones's Diary*. I hate-read *Confessions of a Shopaholic*.

I can't believe you made it through *Clarissa*! I'm not doubting you, I just...am aware of that book.

Ha ha, yes, sometimes I doubt myself. Who was that person who read *Clarissa*?

For undergrad, I read a lot, and I mean a *lot*, of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century British lit, so you know Aphra Behn, Laurence Sterne, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Henry Fielding, Charles Dickens, Jane Austen, George Eliot, et al. And the only book I couldn't stand from all that reading was *Clarissa*, one of the most influential novels in all of British literature. And people were so unhappy with its unhappy ending, the only good thing about the book! They wanted her to marry the rapist Lovelace! There is so much wrong with society.

You have my admiration. But tell me more about why chick lit.

I hate novels that are just about narrating an aggressively ordinary upper middle class white woman's domestic life, and pretending that there is nothing political, nothing divine, nothing strange, nothing surreal about all the relationships between all the humans, whether these are marital relationships or familial relationships or the relationships between strangers on the street. I just feel like you can get all the surface stuff you find in chick lit from any screen-based medium. There are tons of chick-lit blended with romantic comedy that take the form of TV shows and movies, and those mediums are ideally suited to not digging beneath the surface aesthetics of things. I've watched and enjoyed tons and tons of rom-coms: *When Harry Met Sally*, *Thirteen Going on Thirty*, *Love & Basketball*, etc. But books are a different form and work differently and have a different responsibility, I think. They should challenge, they should push at your psyche a little more.

Huh! I've always shrugged along with opinion that chick lit is sort of dumb, but entertaining, and doesn't really do any harm. And I consider all books to be gateway drugs to better books. But I think you're arguing that dumb books serve no unique purpose, and that they lower the bar for all books.

Yes, absolutely. Dumb or derivative books or mediocre books crowd out time we could spend paying attention to interesting or challenging books. They get all the money and the marketing just for producing complacency in their readers, for telling them something they already know, while anything unsettling, anything bookish, anything that might require the reader to

question what they think they know, is too often pushed away.

Maybe I hate chick lit because it aspires to something I could never aspire to while trying to convince me *no but you really could aspire to it*. I will never be considered ordinary or even normal in America, but chick lit tries to tell me that to be those things is a very worthwhile aspiration.

I love the weird. I love the manic and the orderly-disorderly. I love the rebellious and transgressive. Authors that revel in eccentricity have produced the most memorable American literature. The most interesting people in any society are not the ones that conform to the status quo, who are already at the top, but the ones who understand that the margins of groups is where things are interesting, contradictory, meaningful, worth examining compassionately.

Bam. Yeah.

Also I hate the endings in chick lit: everything wraps up too neatly. The author simply hands you the insights you're supposed to take from the work, instead of trusting you to make meaning and work out what you, the individual, think.

Do you think this hatred has colored your reading of other works?

Maybe. I'm pretty sure my hatred of chick lit has had some ripple effects in my reading life. More than ten years ago, I stopped reading a lot of literary domestic fiction because of its relative proximity to chick lit and its premium on normalcy (with the addition of literary prose, deeper insights, and a slower pace). I didn't make a conscious choice about it, but I just noticed how much better and worth my time other books were.

For example, I don't read Anne Tyler's novels any more, even though I loved her insights and occasional quirky flourishes back in the very early '90s when I read *The Accidental Tourist* and a bunch of her other novels. I don't read her work, or the work of authors that have a kinship to her—not at all because I hate them or anything. It's worthwhile to aestheticize the ordinary in novels, I think. I connect with many contemporary authors who do this. But I avoid certain domestic, literary realist novels because I'm deeply skeptical of the glorification of that particular vision of America as a dominant literary trend. (I mean, why were literate people so shocked by the outcome of the 2016 election? Because they bought into that particular vision of America, an inaccurate and fundamentally escapist vision of America.)

Bam again. Do you think your taste has altered anything about your writing? Have you made promises about what your writing would never do, for example, based on a book you hated?

I don't think my hatred has altered my writing so much as revealed my writing, or what I was always writing toward. I don't think I'll ever write a book about people in the center or at the top of any society—those who are keen on upholding the status quo—and not, at least quietly, make fun of that impulse to uphold power structures. It's too ridiculous to write about it in

a totally straight voice. I won't write a book describing capitalism and the manufacturing of desires and the purchase of things without critiquing those phenomena. I cannot imagine anything more depressing, and why people want to read these books...I know, but don't really wish to know.

But never is a long time, and with a rebellious streak that is sometimes directed at the last iteration of myself and three small children, I'm almost always stressed about money, so never say never.

What was the last book you read that you recommend?

I think the last books I personally recommended (not by reviewing it) were Jean Toomer's [Cane](#) and Alyson Hagy's [Scribe](#).

I've been reading Harlem Renaissance novels over the last year. My spouse and I were talking in the kitchen about how amazing and eye-opening the short novels I was reading were, how they raise concerns you rarely see addressed directly in contemporary American novels, or at least not the ones that get all the buzz. He loves modernism, and I thought for that reason he'd like *Cane* best of the novels I'd recently read and so I recommended it.

Scribe is a brilliant, short dystopian infused with Appalachian folklore that I recommended to my spouse and also to a few friends because I love it so much and it's so haunting. A mysterious man seeks out the services of a woman known for her ability to write letters. I really love this book.

I [reviewed it](#)! And loved it. Such a beautiful book. Do you keep books or give them away?

My inclination is to try to hoard books, but my spouse tries to give as many as possible away to the library and Goodwill. I've come to believe that's probably best, since I can't find anything, and it's the immaterial stuff remaining after a book is read, rather than the tangible form, that makes a book worthwhile.

Have you ever physically thrown a book across a room?

No, this sounds like something I would do because of having strong, intense feelings about books, but I was raised in a half or three-quarters Hindu household. You're supposed to treat books like divine or sacred instruments. You don't step on them. You don't mutilate them or mishandle them. (This rule doesn't stop me from writing barbed comments in books, though).

[household envy rises] What are you reading right now, and do you like it or hate it?

I'm reading Can Xue's [Blue Light in the Sky and Other Stories](#) and Tana French's [The Witch Elm](#). I like them.