EUROPEAN JOURNAL OF cultural studies

Los Angeles, London, New Delhi,
Singapore and Washington DC
Vol 12(1) 5–20; 1367-5494
DOI: 10.1177/1367549408098702
www.sagepublications.com

Intimate adventures

Sex blogs, sex 'blooks' and women's sexual narration

Feona Attwood
Sheffield Hallam University

ABSTRACT This article examines women's sexual narration in sex blogs, sex 'blooks' and other popular representations of female sexuality. It asks how sex blogs draw on women's association with autobiographical forms and on the connections between accounts of female sexuality, the confessional and notions of authenticity. It focuses on the popular and award-winning sex blogs *Belle de Jour* and *Girl with a One Track Mind*. Both have been turned into books (2005 and 2006), and are early examples of the 'blook', a genre which has been described as 'the world's fastest-growing new kind of book'. This article examines these in relation to other key postfeminist texts such as *Sex and the City* (1996, 1998–2004 and 2008), and to the broader cultural context where women are increasingly presented as active and autonomous sexual narrators and sexual adventuresses.

KEYWORDS *Belle de Jour, blook, chick lit, erotica, Girl with a One Track Mind, postfeminism, Sex and the City, sex blog, sex talk*

Since their evolution from online diaries in the late 1990s, weblogs (blogs) have become an established feature of participatory culture, their popularity often attributed to the fact that they are such easy, inexpensive, flexible and interactive means of expression (Herring et al., 2005). Although much academic and journalistic discussion of blogging focuses on news and other influential blogs, most blogs take the form of single-authored, personal diaries. Initially associated with men, women now frequently use online forms of self-presentation. The rise of the 'camgirl' in the 1990s represents a particularly visible instance of this: Jennifer Ringley's site, *Jennicam* (www.jennicam.org), which appeared from 1996 to 2003 and achieved a kind of celebrity for its 'star', ran a 24-hour webcam stream from her bedroom. Journal blogs also attract women: at least 50 percent of journal bloggers are female (Herring et al., 2004). Sarah Pedersen (2005) has argued that journal blogs appeal to women because they provide a safer space for them to inhabit than other forms of computer-mediated communication such as discussion forums or chatrooms. While women blog

for a variety of reasons, their main motivation appears to be the validation that they receive from communicating in public, or as one blogger put it, from the experience of inhabiting 'a public forum where someone non-judgemental is theoretically listening' (Pedersen, 2005: 9).

Blogging about sex is dominated heavily by women. Audacia Ray (2007) notes that for many women, sex blogs become an outlet for expressing truths about their sexuality which they have been unable to share with their friends and lovers. The internet functions as 'a safe space to explore, allowing them to make incremental steps toward feeling out their comfort in the world beyond their computer screens' (2007: 97). However, blogging about sex carries low status in the wider blogging community (Ray, 2007); sex writing is 'viewed as a cheap trick to get more hits, links, and controversy' (2007: 101), and this is one reason why sex blogging is often anonymous.

This article will examine female sexual narration in two contemporary bestselling erotic memoirs: Belle de Jour's *The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl* (2005) and Abby Lee's *Girl with a One Track Mind: Confessions of the Seductress Next Door* (2006), derived from the award-winning sex blogs *Belle de Jour* (http: //belledejour-uk.blogspot.com) and *Girl with a One Track Mind* (www.girlwithaonetrackmind.blogspot.com). These are early examples of the 'blook', or book derived from a blog; a genre which has been described as 'the world's fastest-growing new kind of book' (see www.lulublookerprize.com). My interest here is in the proliferation of female-authored sexual narratives in a range of Anglo-American texts – sex blogs, film, television drama, popular fiction and autobiographical accounts in third-wave feminist texts, their constructions of authenticity and sexual adventure and their categorization as postfeminist.

Loose-lipped women

Daniel Chandler (1998) has argued that one of the fascinating things about the internet is the way that it has offered ordinary people unprecedented access to means of public self-presentation, allowing users to produce themselves in text, blurring the private and public and disrupting notions of a stable self by reconstructing it in dynamic and changing ways. Blogging is both 'solitary pursuit' and 'public confession' (Ray, 2007: 98), an embodiment of what Andreas Kitzmann (2004: 86) has called 'public privacy', where self-documentation takes the form of a 'personal showcase' in a public media space. However, the popularity of journal blogs with women can also be linked to the longstanding identification of diaries and other autobiographical forms of writing as women's genres. More generally, talk about personal and intimate issues is associated with women and with women's media such as the talk show, romantic novels and women's magazines. In the past, these forms were marginalized – part of a wider denigration of a feminine culture as gossipy, banal and

focused on trivial problems – but in recent years, they have moved to the centre of mainstream media where they have been joined by a range of 'first-person' reality genres which feature 'ordinary people performing themselves' (Gill, 2007: 178).

Talk about sex has become increasingly visible in women's media. Now, erotica is seen often as a women's genre in book form, online and in new sex magazines for women such as *Scarlet*, which combine erotic stories with discussions about sex. As Jane Juffer (1998) has noted, the category 'erotica' has made sexually-explicit media acceptable and accessible for a female audience. The appeal of much contemporary women's erotica rests on a claim to locate sexual practice in everyday life and to reflect the truth of women's sexual identity, creating an imagined community of female readers. This association of sex with female producers and consumers is also evident elsewhere. Female 'sexperts' are increasingly visible online and in print, and sex talk has become associated with women's television dramas such as *Sex and the City* (1998–2004). According to Foucault, the modern age has been marked by a fascination with sex, with an 'insatiable desire to hear it speak and be spoken about' (Foucault, 1990[1978]: 77), and in particular, a desire to hear women 'speak frankly of their sexual adventures' (Williams, 1990: 1). This desire has been understood as motivating pornographic depictions of women's sexual pleasure, but as Linda Williams notes, the 'confessional magic' of pornography is often 'nothing more than a male fiction about loose-lipped women' (1990: 277). Similarly, female sexual narration in fiction, from John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* (1985[1748]) onwards, has been often dismissed as simply ventriloquizing men's fantasies about female sexuality; women are therefore seen as unreliable sexual narrators. They excite considerable suspicion when they speak about sex and they often adopt pseudonyms to write sexual fiction, as did 'Pauline Reage', the author of *The Story of O* (1998[1954]), or they remain anonymous, like Anaïs Nin, who did not claim the erotica she wrote in the 1940s for several decades. Williams argues that more recently women 'have begun to speak of pleasure in pornography, and not through male ventriloquists' (1990: 230), but suspicion about the authenticity of their accounts continues. This extends to other sexually-explicit texts: Kerri Sharp, the editor of the erotic Black Lace imprint, complains that 'many journalists believe Black Lace books to have been written by men under female pseudonyms' (quoted in Hardy, 2001: 448).

The anonymous bloggers of *Belle de Jour* and *Girl with a One Track Mind* excited exactly the same sorts of responses. Both were the subjects of intense press speculation about their identities and there were attempts to 'out' them. The hunt for 'Belle', launched in March 2004 and led by *The Times* newspaper, focused on analyses of her writing, and fascination with Belle's identity became a subject of intense discussion for broadsheet journalists. Praising her wit and her ability to write about sex 'with a mind behind it', Jeanette Winterson (nd) called for an end to the search

for the 'real' Belle and to 'whining like disappointed children who have found out there is no Father Christmas'.

However, suspicion about Belle's identity was widespread. The *Sunday Times* piece, 'Who Is "Belle de Jour"?', claimed that a reading of her blog suggested that the author was 'a middle-aged man with an award for bad sex'. Belle was 'a male fantasy', 'too good to be true: a stiletto-heeled sex bomb with the erudition of a college professor' (Woods and Hellen, 2004). A critic for the *Sunday Telegraph* (2005) drew a similar conclusion: Belle's posts were 'the intimate fantasies of a middle-aged male hack'. A more extended blog critique of Belle's work, 'belle de hypothesis' (2006), dismissed it as based on a cynical formula designed to arouse and flatter male readers. The formula allowed 'each perceived male fantasy' to be 'worked into the storyline over time … right through to and inevitable as the money shot'. It was disguised with 'moments of bitingly cynical asides, heartrending personal episodes, shopping trips, visits to the parents and pints with friends'. The refusal to accept Belle's blog as a genuine account hinged on two factors. The first was the inability to believe that a prostitute could be as articulate, intelligent and well-read as the blog suggested, 'the presumption that a person's occupation is a reflection of their intelligence or value to society', as Belle (2004) noted herself in the *Telegraph*. The second objection, less clearly expressed, depended on the apprehension of Belle's writing style as inherently masculine, as reported in the *Independent*:

> She lists like Hornby. She talks dirty like Amis. She has the misanthropy of Larkin and examines the finer points of sexual technique as if she is adjusting the torque on a beloved but temperamental old E-type. (Guest, 2005)

For some, this was matched by an unfeminine sensibility, as the *Sunday Telegraph* concluded:

> Belle never wears M & S knickers, she walks away from sex without looking back and her mascara doesn't run. She has no girlfriends and screws all her boyfriends. She never has an aggressive or physically repulsive client and she claims that, with all of them, she enjoys the sort of things every straight man can only dream his girlfriend would do. (*Sunday Telegraph*, 2005)

In particular, Belle's approach to sex (particularly paid sex), by turns lusty and matter-of-fact, could not be read as authentically female and her story, like those of female sexual narrators before her, was interpreted as a 'male fiction'.

Astonishingly, Belle has managed to maintain her anonymity throughout the publication of her two memoirs and the appearance of a TV drama series starring Billie Piper and Toyah Wilcox, and she continues to maintain her blog. 'Abby Lee', the pseudonym of the author of *Girl with a One Track Mind*, was not so fortunate; the *Sunday Times* revealed her identity in 2006 after attempting to bully her into going public. 'Lee', real name, Zoe Margolis, recounts how the paper sent her an email which

proposed to out her and her mother, threatened to publish an unflattering photograph of her and suggested she present herself for a photoshoot wearing 'colourful eveningwear' (her mother told her, 'Fuck them' and she declined the offer; Lee, 2007). Her fictitious persona attracted rather more sympathy and affection than Belle's, although like Belle, her writing met with some suspicion. Zoe Williams (2006) reported that Lee's book 'stretched my credulity a little'. Williams thought that this was probably

> because I have mindlessly imbibed some sexist bilge about women not liking a lot of sex, but also because blogs so often do turn out to be hoaxes, this kind of sex diary – by which I mean, very open, and written by a woman – never feels totally real. As authentic as the writing feels, it could well be a composite of different people, or, at a push, a man with an imagination.

Whilst the suspicion excited by these tales of women's sexual activity can be understood in relation to the history of taboos on women's sexual speech. However, the characterization of the blogs and the blooks they subsequently became also needs to be understood in the context of contemporary models of feminine sexual narration, most notably those in 'postfeminist' popular literature, film and television, where women's sex talk is increasingly audible. Here there is a fascination with the reality and pleasures of women's sex lives. However, for some critics these texts are problematic from a feminist viewpoint: for example, Esther Sonnet (1999) suggests that contemporary postfeminist texts emphasize sexual openness, empowerment and pleasure, not as a means to sexual equality, but as an individual matter. Similarly, Rosalind Gill (2007) argues that such texts embody a postfeminist sensibility which embraces ideals of choice and individual fulfilment, but imagines these only within the confines of consumerism, a dedication to forms of work devoted to producing a conventionally 'sexy body' and the disavowal of feminism. Two key texts – *Sex and the City* (Bushnell, 1996) and *Bridget Jones's Diary* (Fielding, 1996) – are of particular importance in the development of a voice for this kind of talk and the presentation of contemporary single women's sexual adventures.

Sex and the contemporary single girl

The television series, *Sex and the City* (1998–2004), and film (2008), derived in turn from the novel by Candace Bushnell, drew on a range of forms including 'fictionalised autobiography, newspaper feature columns and lifestyle magazine writing' (Bignell, 2004: 161), a hybridity of form also found in Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary*.[1] Both were based on newspaper columns by Bushnell in the *New York Observer* from 1994 onwards, and by Fielding in the *Independent* in 1995. They appeared as novels in the year that the Spice Girls' 'Wannabe' topped the music

charts in the UK and *Ally McBeal* first aired on US television, marking 1996 as a key moment in the popular articulation of postfeminism in comic drama, 'chick lit' and 'girl power' (Whelehan, 2005). Like *Belle de Jour* and *Girl with a One Track Mind*, they excited discussion about the authenticity of their representations and the correspondence of author and character – many commentators drew attention to the close fit between Candace Bushnell and the central protagonist of *Sex and the City*, Carrie Bradshaw and, as Imelda Whelehan notes, many thought that Bridget Jones was a real person: 'she received fan mail and marriage proposals as a result' (2005: 184).

This interest in authors and characters and their representative nature in discussions of *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* incorporates a set of cultural 'foremothers': Carrie has been likened to Isadora Wing, the heroine of Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying* (1974[1973]) and hailed as 'the spiritual granddaughter of Helen Gurley Brown' (Gerhard, 2005: 38), whose self-help book, *Sex and the Single Girl* (1962), was re-released in 2003 on the back of *Sex and the City*'s success in precisely these terms: 'Before there was *Sex and the City*, there was … *Sex and the Single Girl*' (cover text). Jane Austen is called on frequently as a predecessor for both texts, most obviously in the case of *Bridget Jones's Diary*, which is loosely modelled on Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (2007[1813]), and which borrows the name of Austen's hero, Darcy, for its central male protagonist. Both Candace Bushnell and Helen Fielding have been compared to Jane Austen; indeed Stephanie Merritt (2003) notes that in profiles of Candace Bushnell, it has become customary to 'employ some manner of comparison with Jane Austen, usually invoking a designer accessory – "Jane Austen in Manolos"; "Jane Austen with a martini".

The insistent referencing of *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* in terms of their relation to other authors and texts is an indication of how novel they appeared at the time and the difficulty and importance of 'placing' them for readers. It can also be seen partly as an attempt to locate them as important texts for and about women, and partly as an attempt to confer quality and cultural significance on them; characteristics not regularly associated with women's popular media. Both novels and the dramas derived from them have achieved the difficult objective of earning praise for their quality while proving extremely popular – both award-winning and bestselling. This is a feat also accomplished by the identity erotica which Jane Juffer describes as a form producing a 'complex notion of aesthetic value' (1998: 107), because it combines 'quality' with progressive sexual politics and popular circulation (1998: 123). Like women's erotica, *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary* have been criticized and ridiculed, but they have been recognized by many as important texts capturing the *zeitgeist* as stories about the lives of young single women and the 'modern manners' of contemporary urban centres – New York and London. Like erotica and other 'chic' representations of

sex, they have also become a focus for debates about the representation of contemporary female sexuality.

The novelty and importance of *Sex and the City* is often linked to the presentation of women's experiences of, and *talk* about, sex in which women emerge as confident agents and narrators. Jonathan Bignell has argued that although the first-person narration used in *Sex and the City* draws on depictions of the 'learning and self-improvement, confession and self-doubt' found in women's magazines and talk shows, where typically women are presented as failing, the combination of women's problems with the show's 'sophisticated character comedy, witty phrases, moments of insight and minor revelations' (2004: 171) works to emphasize the characters' abilities to cope with problems. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe claim that the characters' sex talk 'challenges prohibitions and breaks the silence, so that women can begin to tell their stories and speak about sex differently' (2004: 196). This view is supported by Jane Gerhard, who claims that *Sex and the City* shows women as 'the subjects of heterosexual sex, not its object' (2005: 45). A more critical view is taken by Rosalind Gill, who argues that the show's 'apparently liberated sex-talk operates as a cover for much more traditionally feminine desires, such as marriage and monogamy'. It 'constitutes a reinvention of the codes of romance for a postfeminist consumer culture', in which sexual 'skills' and disciplined bodies are depicted as 'women's primary capital' (2007: 247–8).

These differing views of the progressiveness of the series are part of a larger debate about how politically empowering a postfeminist stance focused on women's pleasure and autonomy can actually be, particularly where these are signified by style and sensibility as they are in *Sex and the City*, rather than by politics. Carrie's voice and her status as a sexual narrator is an important component of her postfeminist status. Crucially, she is a 'sexpert', a lifestyle writer whose strapline boasts that she 'knows good sex'. Her expertise comes from experience and being a 'practitioner', rather than from theory or formal training. As Jane Arthurs (2003) notes, this is an extension of the way in which Carrie combines detached observation and intense emotional involvement in her own life. This combination enables her to be a reflective narrator and agent, and this is underscored by the way that individual episodes are often articulated around a particular question that Carrie needs to pursue: 'Can women have sex like men? (season 1, episode 1), 'Are all men freaks? (season 2, episode 3), 'Can there be sex without politics?' (season 3, episode 2). These scenarios also show Carrie 'collecting stories and dispensing wisdom' (Akass and McCabe, 2004: 178) – a function that is integral to her work and her own life. In effect, Carrie becomes her own agony aunt, processing her life experiences into forms of public knowledge. She is a self-made woman with the ability to keep what Anthony Giddens has called an ongoing '"story" about the self' (1991: 54), going through a continuous dialogue with the social and sexual mores of her culture.

Carrie's expertise is borne out of her enthusiasm for new experiences and adventures. This appetite for life is demonstrated in the title sequence of *Sex and the City*, where she is shown confidently and happily traversing the streets of New York, at home in the city. Helen Richardson (2003) has argued that Carrie can be seen as a female *flâneur*. The *flâneur* is an essentially modern figure associated with the development of contemporary urban life, a person who strolls about the city, observing and commenting on what they find there. This figure has been seen as the predecessor of contemporary journalists, social commentators and society columnists (Richardson, 2003), precisely the occupational group to which Carrie belongs. The centrality of New York is important in emphasizing this: according to the show's creator, Darren Star, the city is 'the fifth character on the show' (quoted in Sohn, 2004: 146) – a role stressed further after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, with an episode 'I Heart NY' dedicated to 'our City of New York … then, now, and forever' (quoted in Sohn, 2004: 197).

The sight of Carrie walking through the city is a recurring feature and crucial component of the series. However, as Richardson (2003) notes, the role of *flâneur* and urban adventurer is a tricky path for a woman to tread. This is not only because choosing the city and adventure over home and security may be a dangerous option. The link between women and public urban life is not commonly made and the continued use of the term 'streetwalker' for a prostitute emphasizes how connotations of sex rather than citizenship attach to women in public places. Indeed, the difficulty of Carrie's position, both within the fictional world of the series and in debates about the show, centres on the significance of her sexual agency and adventuring.

The different aspects of Carrie's persona – *flâneur* and streetwalker, powerful public figure and vulnerable private individual – are dramatized in the title sequence of *Sex and the City*. As Akass and McCabe note, Carrie is shown as an 'omnipotent observer', whose knowledge of the city (and sex) is confirmed 'through her navigation of the urban space' and her 'disembodied gaze', which quite forcefully directs our way through the sequence (2004: 178). However, the sequence also sets up a joke. A bus, bearing Carrie's glossy 'sexpert' image in an advert on its side, drives through a puddle, splashing her. This joke counterpoints Carrie's glamorous media image with the self represented by her fairy princess attire (she wears a pink vest and tutu), and the puncturing of the pretensions of both relies on 'a comedic play between gender identities and cultural performance' (2004: 178). Who the joke is on is a matter of opinion, depending on the position taken on Carrie's sexuality and whether the writer believes that this can be a source of power. For Nancy Franklin, this merely demonstrates Carrie's powerlessness; she reads the sequence as evidence that Carrie is 'pretty much the definition of an unreliable narrator' (quoted in Akass and McCabe, 2004: 179). For Akass and McCabe it is

instead what establishes Carrie's status as storyteller and gives her the key to unravelling patriarchal fictions about women. In this she is allied with a generation of feminists who claim the right to explore sex, becoming 'sexual adventuresses who, unlike our foremothers, don't dare to assume that we know what "female sexuality" is all about' (Stoller, 1999: 84).

Sexual adventuresses

The claim to represent women's sexuality, either by reference to an essential female sexual identity, or to contemporary urban life or to the *zeitgeist*, is central to the fascination of women's sexual narration in texts such as *Sex and the City* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*. It is also crucial for the appeal of women's sex blogs and much contemporary erotic fiction for women. Further, the figure of the sexual adventuress, strongly related to the role embodied by Carrie Bradshaw, is central to these. Writing in the *Observer*, Louise France (2006) describes a trend for very sexually active protagonist/narrators in a range of new books for women, including

> a memoir by a winsome-looking ballet dancer with a predilection for sodomy; a semi-autobiographical novel by an anonymous Muslim woman about her sexual coming of age; a confessional account of teenage proclivities in Catholic Italy; a candid career guide to life as a Manhattan prostitute; and a novel centred on a single act of fellatio. (France, 2006)

Some of the books that France describes have attracted a great deal of press attention, notably Catherine Millet's *The Sexual Life of Catherine M* (2003), described by Edmund White as 'One of the most explicit books about sex ever written by a woman' (book cover), and Melissa P's *One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed* (2005). These draw on the figures of 'aesthete' and 'girl', characterized respectively as highly educated and middle class (Millet is the editor of a Parisian art magazine) and youthful and apparently innocent (Melissa P's character is a schoolgirl in search of love). However, the protagonists of *The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl* and *Girl with a One Track Mind: Confessions of the Seductress Next Door* are more familiar versions of the sexual narrator as adventurous urban singleton – the zeitgeist figure represented in *Sex and the City*. As in chick lit such as *Bridget Jones's Diary*, they are also women adapting to a harsh world in which love and marriage have lost their promise and the prospect of a successful career seems to be disappearing. However, whereas chick lit heroines are often naive, underconfident and in need of 'rescuing from independence' (Gill, 2007: 238), these characters are more feisty and self-determining than their chick lit counterparts as they wrestle with the problems of economic independence and the reconciliation of love and passion. Belle is self-sufficient, literary, matter of fact and witty; the unnamed 'Girl' in *Girl With a One Track Mind* is a 'sarcastic socialist seductress' (2006: 199) who is intelligent, funny and intense.

Although they are not aspirational figures, they are not the appealingly inept failures of chick lit either. Unlike the chick lit heroine, who is 'too neurotic to be good in bed' (France, 2006), they are also sexually voracious. Girl tells us that she 'can't stop thinking about men's cocks' (2006: 35), is constantly 'gagging for a shag' (2006: 51), and is endlessly gleeful about sex. She describes how, watching her gay neighbour give his lover a blow job, she 'wanted to cheer out loud' (2006: 33). The sex she has is energetic, focused on mutual pleasure and always orgasmic, while Belle describes sex which is 'joyous' and intense (2005: 178). Belle's relationship to sex is inevitably more complicated; she describes her work as a whore as 'steady … but not demanding' (2005: 1), sometimes mixing pleasure and conversation with business. Where chick lit heroines are focused on romance and Mr Right, Belle and Girl are much more interested in sex for its own sake. They experiment with a range of sexual practices – threesomes, sex in public, fisting, anal sex, using porn – and sex functions in a variety of ways, as a source of pleasure or connection and, for Belle, of income. What is more, by stepping outside feminine norms to experiment with casual or paid sex, the protagonists are able to reflect on more conventional types of relationships or work with a detached eye. As in *Sex and the City*, sexual adventuring becomes a source of reflection and self-development.

Chick lit and other postfeminist forms have been criticized for reproducing restrictive feminine ideals, especially those involving the labour of attracting men. As Rosalind Gill (2007) writes, the heroine's body and her self must be constantly worked on. However, while Belle and Girl spend an enormous amount of time grooming – both are obsessed with buying and trying on new lingerie, for example – this does not appear to lead to the obsessive monitoring or self-hatred that chick lit characters endure. Indeed, lingerie seems to be as valued for its sensual qualities as for its properties of attraction, and the 'curvy' heroines view their bodies as sources of pleasure as well as objects of appreciation. Sexual attractiveness is about style and attitude rather than conventional prettiness. As Belle notes, 'Holding your stomach in when your clothes are off is not fuckable. Slapping your ample behind and inviting him to ride the wobble is' (2005: 216).

Both protagonists experiment with romantic relationships alongside their more casual encounters – Belle with 'Boy' and Girl with 'Blog Boy' – and the tension between their desire to be independent and uncommitted on the one hand, and secure and loved on the other, is what structures their narratives beyond the recounting of sexual episodes. Feminism is one of the discourses drawn upon in investigating this tension, most explicitly in *Girl with a One Track Mind*. Girl describes her introduction to debates about feminism, sex and pornography at university, placing herself squarely as a sex-positive feminist for whom pleasure is paramount. However, she is also concerned – as many sex-positive feminists have been – with the significance and place of sexual pleasure in the context

of a politics of intimacy. She will not sleep with men who are attached, is thoughtful even with her most casual lovers and worries about the hurts, confusions and jealousies that might be caused by mixing up sex and friendship. Sex and romance do not always sit together easily and the determination to have both results in some confusion and heartache. But Girl believes that men and women are more similar than they are different; 'men want and need love and companionship *just as much* as their female counterparts and women seek sexual passion and gratification *just as much* as men do (2006: 104–5; emphasis in original). By the end of the novel, she has decided that she wants someone with whom she can connect mentally and emotionally. All the same, this must be someone who 'understands and appreciates that I'm a girl who wants to be thrown on the dining room table and fucked hard from behind when our kids are asleep' (2006: 310). Although she ends the novel alone and hurting at the failure of her romance with Blog Boy, she still believes this is possible.

Sex blooks and women's popular culture

The new audibility of female voices in popular media has received a mixed reception among commentators, often critiqued as part of a more extensive discussion of the personalization, psychologization and sexualization of first-person media. This approach tends towards the view that postfeminist accounts of women's sexuality are inauthentic; a stark contrast with Abby Lee's description of her work as a means 'to challenge the view that women's sexuality is passive and defined in terms of male fantasy' (quoted in Williams, 2006). For Angela McRobbie, contemporary forms of self-documentation such as the diarizing of *Bridget Jones's Diary* are 'self-monitoring practices' (2004: 260). They embody a kind of late-modern reflexivity that works to internalize disciplinary techniques. From this kind of perspective, they are merely part of a broader contemporary representation of female sexuality as 'something requiring constant attention, discipline, self-surveillance and emotional labour' in contrast to the depiction of male sexuality as a form of 'youthful, unselfconscious pleasure-seeking' (Gill, 2007: 257).

Where it is critiqued, this kind of self-surveillance is generally allied to a move from the sexual objectification of women to their sexual subjectification. This is accomplished through what Hilary Radner has called a 'new "technology of sexiness"', which operates as a form of self-policing narcissism, increasingly expressed as central to contemporary feminine identity (quoted in Gill, 2007: 258). Rosalind Gill argues that this works to produce a particular kind of sexual self whose 'agency' depends on the construction of 'a subject closely resembling the heterosexual male fantasy that is found in pornography' (2007: 258). Furthermore, this new form of ventriloquism is only an option for those women deemed straight, young, slim and pretty enough to perform it. It is a crucial component

of what is seen as an increasingly dominant postfeminist sensibility 'organized around notions of choice, empowerment, self-surveillance, and sexual difference, and articulated in an ironic and knowing register in which feminism is simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated' (Gill, 2007: 271).

One could argue for a less pessimistic reading of contemporary accounts of female sexual adventure: one which is based on a more mundane understanding of authenticity related to what writers and readers of women's popular fiction see as recognizable and important in women's intimate lives. As Imelda Whelehan (2005) argues, one feature of early feminist criticism was its demand for representations of 'ordinary' and 'authentic' life, and while women's sexual confessions in pornography and other sexually-explicit media generally have been understood as inauthentic, popular feminist and women's fiction since the 1960s have attempted to depict women's intimate lives often in ways that female readers recognize as authentic and real. What is more, the 'confessional form has been perennially popular among women writers' and has been especially suited to exploring the realities of women's lives, 'too often dismissed as trivial and unremarkable' (Whelehan, 2005: 215). Some books in this tradition have met with huge success: popular feminist novels such as *Fear of Flying* and chick lit novels such as *Bridget Jones's Diary* 'created a small quake in publishing history' (Whelehan, 2005: 4). In this respect they are comparable to women's identity erotica and to dramas such as *Sex and the City*, both often claimed by their audiences as recognizably how women talk and feel about sex. As Whelehan argues, the types of fiction she describes are 'in dialogue with feminism' and 'tell us something about their contemporary cultural context', often working to 'expose points of friction' (2005: 5) not explicitly addressed by feminist theory or activism. In particular, the inability of feminism to solve women's more intimate problems – 'how to conduct heterosexual relationships, how to negotiate self-identity, and how to deal with "power"' – has meant that 'it is not really surprising that these themes crop up again and again in the writings of young women, whether or not they are explicitly engaging with feminism' (2005: 218).

Whelehan describes a shift from popular feminist novels full of 'blood and rage' (2005: 219) to the 'anxious genre' (2005: 188) of chick lit. Erotic memoirs such as *Belle de Jour* and *Girl with a One Track Mind* are different and while they are certainly self-conscious, they eschew anxiety and self-deprecation for a much more playful and assured use of humour and the lusty pursuit of sexual pleasure. Undoubtedly this tone is connected to a broader recreationalization and commercialization of sex in contemporary culture, the development of forms of auto-sexuality and the search for sexual experiences which involve 'excitation' and 'adventure' (Illouz, 1999: 174). However, unlike the forms described by Gill and McRobbie, they are neither only about disciplinary techniques

focused on women's development of selves that will please men, nor do they simply abandon reflexivity to copy men's popular texts which address their audiences as thoughtless and predatory sex machines. Instead, they are concerned with sensuality and sexual gusto, with the messy processes of developing a workable ethics of sex, and with striking some kind of balance between pure pleasure and personal adventure and more complicated desires for closeness and relationships.

This search, with its determination for pleasure and its sense of the difficulties of navigating intimate life, is found in other contemporary texts for women which are focused on sex: for example, the sex advice of writers such as Flic Everett (2002, 2004) and Emily Dubberley (2005), popular discussions of sexual ethics such as Easton and Liszt's *The Ethical Slut* (1998), the manifesto-making of third-wave feminists who declare themselves not 'afraid of any f-words – from feminism to fucking to fashion' (Karp and Stoller, 1999: xiii) and the autobiographical accounts of women's sexual experience in third-wave feminist collections such as Rebecca Walker's *To Be Real* (1995) and Merri Lisa Johnson's *Jane Sexes it Up* (2003). As Whelehan notes, in this latter kind of text, women's desire to reconcile 'less "correct" aspects of their lives to their politics' is made explicit: for example, Walker's book is 'intimately confessional and seeking to cross (and demolish) the perceived boundaries of feminist taboos' (2005: 170). The emergence of texts such as these certainly seem to show the growing centrality of a 'technology of sexiness' to contemporary femininity, often characterized by a spirit of adventure, an emphasis on developing personal knowledge through experience, and an impulse towards pleasure which is balanced by a concern with relationships and broader humanist principles about relationships. In Giddens' (1992) terms, this amounts to a determination to combine episodic and relational forms of sexuality in the scope of an individual female life. Rather than disregard this as 'inauthentic', we might recognize that the elements of this adventure – pleasure, self-determination, relationships, ethics – are important aspects of existence, not mere disavowals of social and political life. Instead, it would be good to explore what kinds of promises it makes to its audiences, what it might tell us about contemporary articulations of female sexuality, and what it might contribute to the project of developing a contemporary politics of adventure and intimacy.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge the support of the AHRC in funding a period of study leave which enabled me to research women's online sexual self-presentation.

Note

1. A film version of the novel appeared in 2001 (dir. Sharon Maguire) followed by a sequel novel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* in 1999, with a film version in 2004 (dir. Beeban Kidron).

References

Akass, K. and J. McCabe (2004) 'Ms Parker and the Vicious Circle: Female Narrative and Humour in *Sex and the City*', in K. Akass and J. McCabe (eds) *Reading Sex and the City*, pp. 177–98. London: I.B. Tauris.

Arthurs, J. (2003) '*Sex and the City* and Consumer Culture: Remediating Post Feminist Drama', *Feminist Media Studies* 3(1): 83–98.

Austen, J. (1813/2007) *Pride and Prejudice*. London: Penguin.

belle de hypothesis (2006) 'Fictional Account of a London Publishing Scam'. [Accessed 10 April 2007: http: //erotic-review-coterie.blogspot.com]

Belle de Jour (2004) 'I Am a Young Woman. I Have Sex for Money. And I Love to Write. This Is My Story', *Telegraph* (29 Mar.). [Accessed 6 April 2007: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2004/03/29/babelle29.xml&page=1]

Belle de Jour (2005) *The Intimate Adventures of a London Call Girl*. London: Phoenix.

Belle de Jour (2006) *The Further Adventures of a London Call Girl*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Bignell, J. (2004) 'Sex, Confession and Witness', in K. Akass and J. McCabe (eds) *Reading Sex and the City*, pp. 161–76. London: I.B. Tauris.

Bushnell, C. (1996) *Sex and the City*. London: Abacus Books.

Chandler, D. (1998) 'Personal Home Pages and the Construction of Identities on the Web'. [Accessed 23 April 2005: http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/short/webident.html]

Cleland, J. (1985[1748]) *Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure*. London: Penguin.

Dubberley, E. (2005) *Brief Encounters: The Women's Guide to Casual Sex*. London: Fusion.

Easton, D. and C.A. Liszt (1998) *The Ethical Slut: Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities*. San Francisco, CA: Greenery Press.

Everett, F. (2002) *Sex Tips for Girls*. London: Channel 4/Pan Macmillan.

Everett, F. (2004) *How to be a Sex Goddess*. London: Carlton.

Fielding, H. (1996) *Bridget Jones's Diary*. London: Picador.

Foucault, M. (1990[1978]) *The History of Sexuality: Vol.1: An Introduction*. London: Penguin.

France, L. (2006) 'Bedtime stories', *Observer Magazine* (5 Mar). Accessed 21 March 2006: http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,1723561,00.html]

Gerhard, J. (2005) '*Sex and the City*: Carrie Bradshaw's Queer Postfeminism', *Feminist Media Studies* 5(1): 37–49.

Giddens, A. (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Giddens, A. (1992) *The Transformation of Intimacy: Sexuality, Love and Eroticism in Modern Societies*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Gill, R. (2007) *Gender and the Media*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Guest, K. (2005) 'The Intimate Adventures of a London Call-Girl by Belle de Jour: A Tomboy in Stilettos', *Independent* (21 Jan.). [Accessed 21 April 2007: http://arts.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article15918.ece]

Gurley Brown, H. (2003 [1962]) *Sex and the Single Girl*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade.
Hardy, S. (2001) 'More Black Lace: Women, Eroticism and Subjecthood', *Sexualities* 4(4): 435–53.
Herring, S., I. Kouper, L.A. Scheidt and E.L. Wright (2004) 'Women and Children Last: The Discursive Construction of Weblogs', University of Indiana at Bloomington. [Accessed 21 March 2007: http://blog.lib.umn.edu/blogosphere/women_and_children.html]
Herring, S.C., L.A. Scheidt, E. Wright and S. Bonus (2005) 'Weblogs as a Bridging Genre', *Information Technology & People* 18(2): 142–71.
Illouz, E. (1999) 'The Lost Innocence of Love: Romance as a Postmodern Condition', in M. Featherstone (ed.) *Love and Eroticism*, pp. 161–86. London: SAGE.
Johnson, M.L. (ed.) (2003) *Jane Sexes it Up: True Confessions of Feminist Desire*. New York: Thunder's Mouth Press.
Jong, E. (1974[1973]) *Fear of Flying*. London: Grafton Books.
Juffer, J. (1998) *At Home With Pornography: Women, Sex and Everyday Life*. New York: New York University Press.
Karp M. and D. Stoller (eds) (1999) *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*. New York: Penguin.
Kitzmann, A. (2004) *Saved From Oblivion: Documenting the Daily from Diaries to Web Cams*. New York: Peter Lang.
Lee, A. (2006) *Girl with a One Track Mind: Confessions of the Seductress Next Door*. London: Ebury Press.
Lee, A. (2007) 'Three', *Girl with a One Track Mind*, 1 January. [Accessed 4 February 2007: www.girlwithaonetrackmind.blogspot.com]
McRobbie, A. (2004) 'Post-feminism and Popular Culture', *Feminist Media Studies* 4(3): 255–64.
Merritt, S. (2003) 'The Queen of Sly Society', *Observer* (3 Aug.). [Accessed 27 January 2007: http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/generalfiction/0,6121,1011240,00.html]
Millet, C. (2003) *The Sexual Life of Catherine M*. London: Corgi.
P, Melissa (2005) *One Hundred Strokes of the Brush Before Bed*. London: Serpent's Tail.
Pedersen, S. (2005) 'Women Users' Motivation for Establishing and Interacting with Blogs', paper presented at the Media, Communications and Cultural Studies Association Conference, Lincoln, January.
Plummer, K. (1995) *Telling Sexual Stories: Power, Change and Social Worlds*. London: Routledge.
Ray, A. (2007) *Naked on the Internet: Hookups, Downloads and Cashing in on Internet Sexploration*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
Reage, P. (1998[1954]) *The Story of O*. New York: Blue Moon Books.
Richardson, H. (2003) '*Sex and the City*: A Visible *Flâneuse* for the Postmodern Era?', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 17(2): 147–57.
Sohn, A. (2004) *Sex and the City: Kiss and Tell*. London: Boxtree/HBO.
Sonnet, E. (1999) 'Erotic Fiction by Women for Women: The Pleasures of Post-feminist Heterosexuality', *Sexualities* 2(2): 167–87.

Stoller, D. (1999) 'Sex and the Thinking Girl', in M. Karp and D. Stoller (eds) *The BUST Guide to the New Girl Order*, pp. 75–84. New York: Penguin.
Sunday Telegraph (2005) '"I Dressed. We Discussed Iris Murdoch, and I Left"' (16 Jan.). [Accessed 23 April 2007: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml?xml=/arts/2005/01/23/bobel23.xml]
Walker, R. (ed.) (1995) *To Be Real: Telling the Truth and Changing the Face of Feminism*. New York: Bantam Doubleday.
Whelehan, I. (2005) *The Feminist Bestseller: From Sex and the Single Girl to Sex and the City*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
Williams, L. (1990) *HardCore: Power, Pleasure and the 'Frenzy of the Visible'*. London: Pandora.
Williams, Z. (2006) 'I Don't Write to Titillate. I Censor Like Crazy to Make My Blogs Less Erotic', the *Guardian* (11 Aug.). [Accessed 22 March 2007: http://www.guardian.co.uk/g2/story/0,,1842121,00.html]
Winterson, J. (nd) 'Belle du Jour', *The Times*. [Accessed 26 September 2007: http://www.jeanettewinterson.com/pages/journalism_01/journalism_01_item.asp?journalism_01ID=83&journalism_01_Category=The%20Times]
Woods, R. and N. Hellen (2004) 'Who Is "Belle de Jour", the High-class Hooker whose Web Diary Is Set to Be a Literary Sensation?', *Times Online* (14 Mar.). [Accessed 4 April 2007: http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/article1045532.ece]

Biographical note

Feona Attwood is a principal lecturer in media and communication at Sheffield Hallam University. Her research is in the general area of pornography, cybersex and the sexualization of mainstream culture. Currently she is editing collections on online pornography and the sexualization of culture. ADDRESS: Sheffield Hallam University, Furnival Building, Arundel Street, Sheffield S1 1WB, UK. [email: f.attwood@shu.ac.uk]