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BOOKS

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# Chick Lit Has a New Heroine

## The semi-glamorous life of the new media maven

BY MOLLY FISCHER

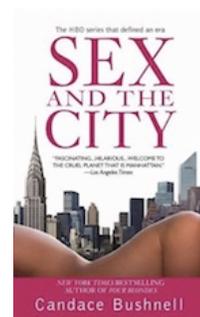
Print journalism was once a reliable career path for the heroines of so-called chick lit. We had Carrie Bradshaw, who got her start as a columnist in [Candace Bushnell's pages](#); Andrea Sachs, [Lauren Weisberger's Vogue](#) serf; and Becky Bloomwood, aka [Shopaholic](#), ironically employed at a personal finance magazine. Jennifer Weiner [gave us](#) [Cannie Shapiro](#), feisty entertainment reporter; Jane Green gave us [Jemima J.](#), somewhat less feisty, still working at a newspaper. The authors inventing these heroines had often worked as journalists themselves. They knew what they were talking about; they had stories to tell.

Print journalism promised excitement (colorful characters, a dash of creativity) but also reassuring stability—a place where women could clock in for manageable daily adventures then clock out for afterhours drama. But as print journalism has become a decreasingly reliable real-world profession, a new brand of chick lit has emerged. It is set against a somewhat less glamorous backdrop: the blogosphere.



From Jessica Grose, formerly of [Jezebel](#) and [Slate](#), comes [Sad Desk Salad](#), about a Brooklynite named Alex Lyons who writes for a women's site called Chick Habit. Karin Tanabe, formerly of [Politico's Click](#) blog, will soon publish [The List](#), about a D.C. native named Adrienne Brown who writes for a political outlet called the Capitolist. Then there's Janis Thomas's heroine in [Something New](#), a suburban mom unhappily staring down her forty-third birthday when she stumbles into blogging. [Sad Desk Salad](#) and [The List](#) both bear blurbs comparing them to [The Devil Wears Prada](#), but they suggest a distinct breed, one with fewer expense accounts and more page-view panic. Gone are the celebrity encounters and expensive accessories. Now there are coworkers who communicate

PHOTO BY John Loo



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solely by IM and smartphones that must remain perpetually aglow. But if new media chick lit presents a version of journalism that's decidedly bleaker, there's a surprising new romance to the genre as well: the romance of work.

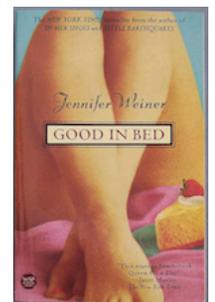
In *Sad Desk Salad*, Grose offers an affectionate send-up of the slovenly-blogger stereotype, creating a quick-witted heroine who lusts after egg sandwiches and takes comfort in an extravagantly stinky muumuu. Alex Lyons, Grose's protagonist, is a Wesleyan graduate who won college prizes for advocacy journalism, then worked at a music website after graduation. Now she wakes at 6:20 in the morning to read RSS feeds on her couch and churns out ten posts a day. Her routine is derailed when a mysterious reader starts a "hate blog"—and, around the same time, an anonymous tipster sends in a video of a parenting guru's college-age daughter snorting coke. Over the course of one tightly paced work week, Alex swallows her scruples, posts the video, and unravels the hate-blogger mystery, weathering the personal and professional fallout for both. In the end, things work out fine for her. When we leave Alex, she's accepted a job as online editor at a glossy magazine, where her new boss immediately asks if she's got anything like that coke video in the hopper.

## THE SADISTIC SCHEDULING OF ONLINE NEWS BECOMES A KIND OF FETISH.

Grose's new media heroine may be ambivalent about the moral defensibility of her work, but Tanabe's (for the most part) is not. Adrienne Brown, protagonist of *The List*, has spent a few years post-Wellesley living in Manhattan, dating bankers, and covering society for *Town & Country*. At 28, she decides that the time has come to

conquer political journalism by working at the Capitolist—a "new-media empire" that promises meteoric ascent to the young "geniuses" who toil in its "sweatshop"/newsroom. Still proudly clad in her "so not Washington" wardrobe, Adrienne moves back in with her parents to write for the Capitolist's Style section. The shadow of old media looms large: long ago, her mother worked as a D.C. gossip columnist, which meant carousing lavishly and smoking lots of pot. Adrienne, however, must answer all email messages within three minutes, starting at 5 a.m. Acting on little more than a hunch, Adrienne sets out to pursue what she deems a career-making scoop—an affair between a young journalist (her colleague) and a senator. She rents a camera with a telephoto lens and wriggles commando-style through the woods outside the hotel where she's spotted them. Her suspicions are vindicated. She sits on the story, does the requisite legwork—filing hourly Style posts from her Blackberry all the while—but finally rides her sex pix to professional glory.

*Sad Desk Salad* and *The List* continually remind us that their heroines are paying their dues; sex and drugs make good copy, but for the most part, work is a slog. In Janis Thomas's *Something New*, though, protagonist Ellen Ivers discovers writing as an uncompensated labor of love—a release from the tedium of suburbia. Ellen abandoned her career as "a mildly successful journalist" long ago to marry and have kids. Then



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#### *Sad Desk Salad: A Novel*

By Jessica Grose

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#### *The List: A Novel*

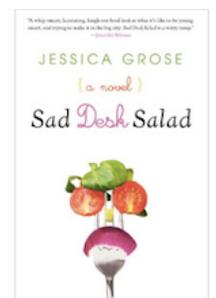
By Karin Tanabe

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#### *Something New*

By Janis Thomas

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she hears about a competition: *Ladies Living-Well Journal* wants readers to write daily posts for their website. The best blogger wins \$10,000 and an ongoing gig. And so Ellen begins to blog about her domestic woes, ultimately detailing her illicit encounters with a sexy policeman-soccer dad. The blog racks up hits, and of course, Ellen wins. Throughout, the blog and the affair sustain one another, yet the liberation that soccer dad offers Ellen proves less rewarding than her online triumph. In the end, *Something New* aligns with *Sad Desk Salad* and *The List* in presenting work as its central adventure.

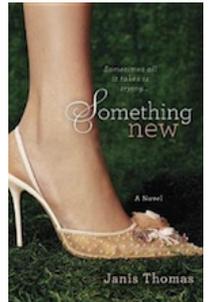
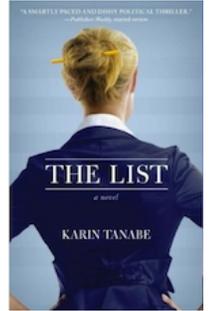
**W**here chick lit once tantalized readers with romance or fancy clothes, the vicarious thrills of its new-media incarnation are more mundane and more rooted in the mechanics of actually doing a job. These aren't obvious raw materials for a genre that trades in fizz—and yet the authors contrive them into something perversely snappy. The sadistic scheduling of online news becomes a kind of fetish; the giddy loss of privacy—the vanishing boundaries between the professional and the personal—propels the plot. The celebrity that comes with journalistic success raises the stakes, but it's celebrity of a specialized and limited sort, focused on insider cachet rather than mainstream fame.

Within this diminished scope for success, the books read as expressions of a particular kind of anxiety. Back in 2001, Jennifer Weiner's *Good in Bed* heroine parlayed her reporting into friendship with movie stars; she sold a screenplay. The new-media heroines, however, just want to make sure they get to stay in the newsroom, or maybe to move up to a better one—or, in Ellen's case, to join a newsroom at all.

## THE AUTHORS QUESTION THE MORALITY OF THEIR HEROINES' ACTIONS, BUT NOT THE PREMISE THAT THEY WIELD POWER.

Whether delivered with Grose's appealing good humor or Tanabe's strident superficiality, there is an underlying message that this work *counts*. We are told repeatedly that these characters can destroy lives and dominate news cycles; the authors question the morality of their heroines' actions, but not the premise that they wield power. These women really are famous enough (in their sphere) to merit dedicated hate blogs. Their brutal hours really do prove worth it in the end. So perhaps what most clearly differentiates the new media chick lit from the old media chick lit is its affirmative spirit: the authors aren't offering takedowns of a glamorous world, they're validating the blog post peons. The old version of journalism was either pretty easy or very fancy. The new version is hard and lowly, and its disciples accordingly impressive.

This self-importance is crucial to the real romance these books offer—the fantasy of a job that matters, that you're good at, that earns recognition, and that rewards the sacrifices it demands. Work has moved to the heart of the story. And amid the job's



drudgery, there remains a breathless reverence for the experience of writing and publishing. The lady journalist, it turns out, is not a print-bound fantasy of some *His Girl Friday* past. Ink-stained fingers and hot presses can swap out for new professional clichés: pageviews, timestamps, IP addresses. Posting supplies an instant of awe: “In the minute or two after publication,” says Grose’s Alex, “before any page views or comments have registered in the lavender-hued boxes to the right of the post, it’s like the world—or at least the Internet—is suspended. It’s so quiet in the apartment I can hear the soft sigh of my laptop’s hard drive.”

A sense of serendipity lingers over the adventures of new-media chick lit. Its heroines hardly remember the experience of winning her prize-winning posts: they’re “a stroke of good fortune, the fates smiling down on me, because it’s almost as though someone else is at the computer.” Working in journalism is no longer a convenient context for fantasy; the job—ever more improbable—has become the fantasy itself.

*Molly Fischer is a writer in Brooklyn.*

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