

WORD OF THE MONTH MAY 2013

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AUSTRALIA & NEW ZEALAND

chook lit

noun **1** fiction written for older women. **2** romance fiction set in rural Australia.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

Chook lit is an alteration of the term *chick lit* 'literature that appeals to women; literature that is by, for, or about women'. *Chick lit* as a term is first recorded in the 1990s, and is associated especially with books about young professional urban women, such as Helen Fielding's *Bridget Jones's Diary* (1996). It is often derogatory. The *chick* in *chick lit* means 'a woman or girl', and was originally 1920s slang. *Chook* has two meanings in Australian English: it is first recorded in the 1850s as a colloquial word for a domestic fowl (still in common use), and from the early 1900s evidence appears in the written record for a transferred sense of *chook* meaning 'a woman', especially 'an old woman'. It usually has derogatory connotations. Both senses of *chook* are connected with **chook lit**, as we shall see.

The first evidence for **chook lit** occurs in 2004:

John Abbott was amused by a comment from Claire, his librarian wife, who described the book she was reading at the weekend as '**chook lit**' or ... "chick lit for the older woman". (Sydney Morning Herald, 29 October, 2004)

Here the use of *chook* 'an old woman' is a pun on *chick* 'a woman or girl'. **Chook lit** was thus originally the preserve of the middle-aged baby boomer generation, who want to read about women with a little more life under their belt than the twenty-somethings. This sense of **chook lit** (which, as one wit puts it, is probably better than 'old boiler books') continues until 2011, when it is hijacked by another literary genre—rural romance fiction:

She is a pioneer of '**chook lit**'—a rural romance genre her publishers say is a red hot winner. Rural romance is snaring the hearts and minds of women readers from city and country. (Melbourne Sunday Herald Sun, 16 October, 2011)

Here the *chook* part of **chook lit** is also playing on the sense of *chook* meaning 'chicken'. Indeed, real chooks do appear in these novels as part of the scenery, as do other features of outback life—utes, B & S balls, kelpies, cattle, rodeos, home preserving, big rigs, and Blunnies. Certainly a sense of humour is present; you can find innuendo about the size of a bloke's tractor, for instance. But there is also a belief that outback traditions and values are a more authentically Australian experience than can be found in the city, as this description of a B & S ball illustrates:

Rural youth, defiant and proud, who had turned their backs on the consumerism and political correctness that had infiltrated through Australia's cities. ... Here, in this paddock on this weekend, there'd be no designer drugs. No doof-doof music. No baggy skate pants revealing bumcracks. ... Instead, Kate knew there'd be booze and boots and 'bloody-oath, mates' and good, old-fashioned piss-wrecked fun. (Rachael Treasure, *The Rouseabout*, 2007)

The rural romance is the literary genre of the moment in Australia. A variety of romance fiction, the rural romance is set in outback Australia on farms,

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on cattle stations, and in small bush communities. These books are written largely by female writers who live in rural and regional Australia, or who have had some experience of doing so. First-hand descriptions of life on the land—shearing, mustering, harvesting, agricultural shows, field days, wool-classing, dog trials—are a feature of this genre, and seem to be aimed squarely at an Australian readership; there are few apparent concessions to an international audience in the use of language in these works. It is hard to know, for example, what a northern hemisphere reader would make of 'hoggets' who have been 'freshly wiggged and crutched' (i.e. weaned lambs that have not yet been shorn, with wool clipped from around their tails and eyes) in Treasure's novel *The Rouseabout*.

Rural romance (from authors such as Treasure, Nicole Alexander, Fiona Palmer, and Fleur McDonald) is increasing in popularity, and the evidence for this sense of **chook lit** suggests that it has now largely overtaken the earlier meaning of the term, 'fiction for the older reader'.

Both senses of **chook lit** are being considered for inclusion in the second edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.