

Why Hemingway Is Chick-Lit

By Lakshmi Chaudhry

“When women stop reading, the novel will be dead,” declared Ian McEwan in *The Guardian* last year. The British novelist reached this rather dire conclusion after venturing into a nearby park in an attempt to give away free novels. The result?

Only one “sensitive male soul” took up his offer, while every woman he approached was “eager and grateful” to do the same.

Unscientific as McEwan’s experiment may be, its 23 is borne out by a number of surveys conducted in Britain, the United States and Canada, where men account for a paltry 20 percent of the market for fiction. Unlike the gods of the literary establishment who remain predominantly male – both as writers and critics – their humble readers are overwhelmingly female.

In recent years, various pundits have used this so-called “fiction gap” as an opportunity to trot out their pet theories on what makes men and women tick. The most recent is *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, author of *Bobos in Paradise*, who jumped at the chance to peddle his special brand of gender essentialism. His June 11 column arbitrarily divided all books into neat categories – “In the men’s sections of the bookstore, there are books describing masterly men conquering evil. In the women’s sections there are novels about ... well, I guess feelings and stuff.” His sweeping assertion 24 publishing industry research, which shows that if “chick-lit” were defined as what women read, the term would have to include most novels, including those considered macho territory.

Brooks’ real agenda, however, is not to deride women’s fiction, but to 25 the latest conservative talking point: blaming politically correct liberals for a “feminized” school curriculum that turns young boys “into high school and college dropouts who hate reading.” According to Brooks, we have burdened little boys with “new-wave” novels about “introspectively morose young women,” when they would be better served by suitably masculine writers like Ernest Hemingway. “It could be, in short, that biological factors influence reading tastes, even after accounting for culture,” Brooks claims. “The problem is that even after the recent flurry of attention about why boys are falling behind, there is still intense social pressure 26 biological differences between boys and girls (ask Larry Summers, who was denounced for bringing them up).”

It takes a bizarre leap of logic to connect current school curricula to the reading habits of adult men. Moreover, there is no indication that men “hate reading” – women just read more fiction. Men out-read women by at least ten percentage points when it comes to non-fiction books – surely good news for the bestselling author of *Bobos in Paradise*.

27, conservatives like Brooks are not the only talking-heads to resort to biological determinism in explaining the “fiction gap.” Psychologist Dorothy Rowe told *The Observer* that women like fiction because they have richer and more complex imaginations. “Women have always had to try to understand what 28 because women have always had to negotiate their way through the family,” she said. “They have always had to get their power by having a pretty good idea of what’s going on inside a person and using that knowledge to get him or her to do things.” Quite apart from the

unintended implication that feminism is likely to fulfill McEwan's worst fears – i.e., kill the novel – such arguments reproduce the worst kind of gender stereotypes: Women as sensitive, emotionally intelligent creatures; men as unreflective dolts.

Cognitive literary critic Lisa Zunshine, whose multidisciplinary field integrates the insights offered by cognitive science to better understand fiction, offers 29 hypothesis. Her book, *Why We Read Fiction*, argues that fiction as a literary form offers us pleasure because it engages our ability to mind-read, “a term used by cognitive psychologists, interchangeably with ‘Theory of Mind’, to describe our ability to explain people’s behavior in terms of their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, and desires.” Fiction, therefore, “lets us try on different mental states.”

Women are more likely than men to enjoy reading fiction, period (as opposed to just reading about “feelings and stuff”), because “they generally want more input for their Theory-of-Mind adaptations,” says Zunshine. “They want to experience other ‘minds in action’ – which is another way of defining ‘empathy’ – much more than men do.”

Zunshine underscores the fact that such cognitive research is based on “average statistical scores,” and offers no guidance as to what individual men or women may read. 30, the biological difference between male and female Theory-of-Mind is small, and likely only accounts for a “somewhat greater” predilection for fiction among women.

But in a culture infused with polarizing messages about gender, such small differences can be magnified into vast disparities. If reading novels today is considered more “girly” – because of female-dominated book clubs or a publishing industry increasingly geared toward its most loyal customers, i.e., women – then men are 31.

Desperate efforts to “macho” up the novel include Penguin’s “Good Booking” campaign, which sent out – who else? – beautiful models to award prizes of £1,000 each month to any British man under 25 caught in *flagrante* with one of its testosterone-friendly titles. The advertising tag line? “What women really want is a man with a Penguin.”

Apart from sex with beautiful models, men are also socialized to seek out activities that 32 – which, these days, sadly doesn’t include reading novels. According to novelist Walter Kirn, “If novelists have become culturally invisible – at least to today’s men – it’s partly because the life of a novelist offers few rewards to the traditional male ego. It’s not about power, glory and money,” unlike the adulation our culture reserves for rap stars, athletes and movie actors.

Don’t look now, but we may be headed back to the 19th century, when the novel was considered a low-status, frivolous, pastime of ladies of leisure, unfit for real men.

It’s a good thing, then, that the great male novelists can still rely on us girls to finance their literary careers.

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Suicide always leaves the question of "Why?" in its wake, and this is especially true when the person who commits the act seemingly has so much to live for. Such is the case of Ernest Hemingway. As his friend, A. E. Hotchner wondered, why would someone whom many critics call the greatest writer of his century, a man who had a zest for life and adventure as big as his genius, a winner of the Nobel Prize and the Pulitzer Prize, a soldier of fortune with a home in Idaho's Sawtooth Mountains, where he hunted in the winter, an apartment in New York, a specially rigged yacht to fish the Gulf Stream