Contextualizing Bridget Jones

Kelly A. Marsh

When *Bridget Jones's Diary* was published in 1996, Helen Fielding was praised by masses of readers and reviewers for the authenticity of the narrative voice. However, not everyone was willing to accept the hapless comic heroine as the typical thirty-something single woman of the 1990s, and more demanding critics noted the ways in which Bridget’s character and her story are problematic, particularly from a feminist point of view. Bridget sets goals—to get to work on time, to stop smoking, to lose weight, to read *The Famished Road*—and proves incapable of accomplishing any of them. Her diary revels hilariously in her insecurities, her mistakes, and her failures even as it qualifies her successes; as a result, critics suggest that the humor of the novel is not consciously created by Bridget but rather is generated at her expense. She is criticized for the characteristics that ostensibly render her the object of the novel’s humor, especially her failure to remake herself and control her life. However, these criticisms are based upon two
questionable premises: that the self can be remade in such a way that one is in control, and that control is ultimately achievable by anyone.

Bridget Jones's Diary and Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason (2000) interrogate these assumptions and characterize as a particularly American myth the ideal of self-perfection. The novels recall in contrast the world of Jane Austen's fiction, in which self-perfection is treated ironically. Bridget records with humor the many factors that influence her to change—not only her mother and her rivals, but also self-help books, diets, and other imports from American popular culture. Ultimately she rejects the American dream of a perfected self in favor of the Blair-era British communitarianism that facilitates both her personal success and the success of her narrative. Bridget opts for what Joel Krieger calls Blair's emphasis on community, which "captures the salutary blend of individuality balanced by mutuality and interdependence that he [Blair] considers the core of socialism" (1999, 143). Bridget's voice is authentic because it reveals what we all know but rarely face, and perhaps never face with such high spirits: control is a myth, and the experience of being out of control and of being forced into mutually dependent relationships is authentic. Helen Fielding's preoccupation with these issues is echoed in the work of other contemporary British novelists, especially A. S. Byatt and Anita Brookner. This comparison allows us to contextualize Fielding's work in such a way as to account for her immense popularity but also to identify her real contribution to contemporary literature.

The Critics on Bridget Jones

By way of illustrating the problems with Fielding's novels, a number of American reviewers have established Bridget Jones as a counterpart to the popular American television character Ally McBeal. Ginia Bellafante argues in an article on the status of feminism that "The problem with Bridget and Ally is that they are presented as archetypes of single womanhood even though they are little more than composites of frivolous neuroses" (1998, 58). In another comparison of Bridget to Ally McBeal, Michiko Kakutani imagines Ally complaining to Bridget that both are "targets of the same critics, all these mean, awful, nasty naysayers who complain that we're some kind of pre-feminist throwbacks" (1998, E8). For these critics, both characters are obsessed with trivialities and fixated on their personal lives at the expense of more broadly meaningful concerns; therefore, they present an image of contemporary women that contradicts all that feminists have worked to achieve. In contrast, Norah Vincent (who also compares Bridget to Ally McBeal) argues that Bridget is indeed a product of feminism, and as such is "one of the most stinging indictments of feminism to come along in a while" (1998, 49). She argues, "Embarrassing as it might be to most feminists, Bridget Jones
is living out exactly the farce for which her precursors set the stage. After all, is it any wonder Bridget is a spoiled princess when she grew up on the feminist belief that women should and must have it all?” (50). None of these critics, even the one who sees the novels as a “stinging indictment of feminism,” accords to Fielding credit for having constructed a satire of feminism; rather, all three assume a basic anti-feminism in the novels. Thus Bridget Jones is contextualized in American popular culture.

Alison Case’s cogent analysis of the narrative structure supports these observations while placing Bridget in a literary context, that of fictional women’s diaries. Current scholarship on women’s diaries refutes earlier claims that the form itself simply reinscribes traditional women’s roles. Shari Benstock (for whom autobiographical writing includes diaries and journals) suggests that autobiography illustrates Jacques Lacan’s contention that language “is a defense against unconscious knowledge,” but also that language “is not an altogether successful defense network, punctuated as it is by messages from the unconscious, messages that attempt to defeat this ‘fencing-off’ mechanism” (1988, 16). Benstock’s observation suggests that a work of autobiography may seem a capitulation to social pressures, a reenactment in writing of the behavior expected of the writer in her life, but that analysis of the work itself may reveal subversive elements not immediately obvious and not in keeping with the work’s conscious agenda. For example, James Holt McGavran, Jr., draws on Benstock’s theory to argue that

Dorothy [Wordsworth]’s repressed perceptions and knowledge of herself, her literary ability, and her great sacrifice do appear, most often indirectly, in her early journals. In the very act of ‘putting herself down’—which for Dorothy involved both self-deprecation and self-transcendence as methods of self-avoidance—she cannot help also putting down on paper traces of the beautiful, relinquished psyche she never fully recognized. (McGavran 1988, 232-33)

McGavran’s intriguing description of Dorothy Wordsworth’s journals seems potentially relevant to a consideration of Bridget’s diaries, but Alison Case argues persuasively that fictional diaries are a very different matter. In her Plotting Women: Gender and Narration in the Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century British Novel, Case traces a long history of self-deprecating female or “feminine” narrators whose self-deprecation, unlike the same quality in male or “masculine” narrators, is linked to “the restriction of the female narrator to the role of narrative witness; that is . . . her exclusion from the active shaping of narrative form and meaning” (1999, 4). In “feminine narration,” “narrative confidence, competence, and control” are “explicitly disclaimed” (4). Whereas women’s autobiography may subvert a reader’s expectations of it and reveal something of the truth about the autobiographer, fictional women narrators
tend to be more solidly conventional, and the convention calls for their relegation to the role of witness and their exclusion from the role of conscious plotter.

In a recent article, Case identifies Bridget Jones as one of this long line of feminine narrators going back to the novels of Richardson and Smollett. The appeal of such narrators, Case demonstrates, is that they allow readers "to feel superior to them, to feel that we understand their lives and characters in ways that they cannot." Case argues that Bridget Jones's diary presents her as an "unmediated, unprocessing 'witness' to the events of her life," as fictional diaries with feminine narrators have traditionally done (2001, 180). She cites instances in which Bridget appears to lack control over her narrative and its ironies. For example, at some points in the novels the verisimilitude of the diary form gives way to a minute-by-minute account of Bridget's actions, which Case identifies as "a kind of direct feed from Bridget's consciousness, rather than a self-consciously produced written record" (180). Such passages suggest that Bridget does not even actively select what to include in the diary. Another example is that Bridget appears unable to read the trajectory of her own life: she is surprised to discover that Mark Darcy is the man she has been looking for, although the reader has predicted this, and although Bridget herself identifies him early on with Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy. Case's analysis yields this conclusion: "the plot appears routinely to punish Bridget for attempts to manage her life, while rewarding her for being out of control—the genuineness that apparently wins Darcy's heart, after all, is the product of Bridget's persistent failure to carry through her plans to remake herself in another image" (181). For Case, Bridget's lack of narrative control is reflected in her lack of control over her own life, and she contextualizes Bridget Jones's Diary within a long tradition of novels that cater to readers' expectations of a feminine narrator.

For all of these critics, the popularity of Bridget Jones in spite of her manifest failures bodes ill for contemporary feminism. Further analysis reveals that the novels transcend the limitations imposed on them by this perspective, but, first, this perspective itself requires some scrutiny. Just what would it mean for Bridget to "manage her life" and "remake herself in another image"? What is it that she fails to do? The unrealistic minute-by-minute accounts, such as when Bridget conducts a "time-and-motion study" of her morning routine and discovers that "Three hours and thirty-five minutes between waking and leaving house is too long" (Fielding 1999, 79 and 81), demonstrate that Bridget fails to make efficient use of her time. Her record of food and alcohol consumed reveals that she fails to consume nutrients efficiently. These are two of the reigning realities of Bridget's life, and they are echoed tellingly in her shopping expeditions. After a day of shopping, she
reports: “I have come home with four things, all of them unsuitable and unflattering. One will be left behind the bedroom chair in an M&S bag for two years. The other three will be exchanged for credit notes from Boules, Warehouse, etc., which I will then lose” (105). Her diet problems and her time management problems are obviously related to her shopping problems. We can also connect more personal problems to these. She realizes after reading a magazine article that she should make better use of parties “to ‘network,’ . . . to make friends with someone specific; or simply ‘clinch’ a top deal.” She remarks, “Understand where have been going wrong by going to parties armed only with objective of not getting too pissed” (84). Bridget fails to use social occasions as opportunities to advance her career; similarly, she fails to use her sex life to guarantee her future security. Her cold behavior toward wealthy, successful Mark Darcy and her ill-considered affair with “Gorgeous, messy, sexy, exciting, hilarious Daniel” (260) certainly indicate that she has invested her time and her emotional energy in a relationship that has little long-term potential rather than setting about methodically to “catch” Mark Darcy. Indeed, Bridget takes a risk; as Austen’s Charlotte Lucas expresses it, “she may lose the opportunity of fixing him” (1956, 15). These apparently various shortcomings are really only one: Bridget fails to be a good consumer, fails to maximize value. She admits to confusion in the face of the bewildering array of consumer opportunities on offer. She fails to navigate the marketplace, and she is criticized for it. Would Bridget Jones be a more admirable woman, a more likeable character, a better role model, if she were a more efficient consumer? In effect, Bridget refuses to play her part in a consumer society and refuses the model of efficient consumer in her personal life. Joel Krieger suggests that for New Labour, community is an alternative to “the neoliberal reliance on homo economicus, a soulless profit-maximizing individual, inhabiting a society-less world,” and the novels reveal that Bridget chooses the former rather than the latter (1999, 144). American critics, including American feminists, have not recognized the potential subversiveness of her position.

Bridget Jones’s Narrative and the American Myth of Self-Perfection

Some elements of Bridget’s diary lend themselves to the conclusion that Bridget is not in control of her narrative, but other elements reveal that she is. For example, Bridget fails to predict that she and Mark will fall in love, but, even as she delineates the significant differences between her and Mark that could be real obstacles to a relationship between them, she carefully records his admiring looks, his appreciation of her sense of humor, and his disapproval of his other girlfriends. Indeed, throughout the two novels the
ostentatiously self-effacing Bridget ensures that we do not undervalue her by including plenty of detail about how others react to her.

Perhaps the best example is Bridget’s relationship with Rebecca. Bridget compares being with Rebecca to “swimming in sea with jellyfish: all will be going along perfectly pleasantly then suddenly you get painful lashing, destroying confidence at stroke” (Fielding 1999, 125). From first to last, Bridget presents herself as defenseless against Rebecca’s attacks, and as hopelessly awkward compared to Rebecca’s polished poise. Even in the final scene of the second novel, in which Mark enrages Rebecca by declaring his attachment to Bridget, Bridget is skulking behind a pillar in an unflattering bridesmaid’s gown with a hole cut into the front of it. Rather than crow in triumph over Rebecca, Bridget maintains the narrative focus on her own blunders, so we might overlook the considerable evidence that Rebecca is equally threatened by Bridget. Caught up in Bridget’s gloom when, her invitation having gone astray, she believes she has not been invited to Rebecca’s Christmas party, we may laughingly pass over the message Rebecca subsequently leaves on Bridget’s answering machine: “Bridget. This is Rebecca. I know you work in TV now. I know you have much more glamorous parties to go to every night, but I would have thought you could at least have the courtesy to reply to an invitation from a friend, even if you are too grand to deign to come to her party” (254). Rebecca is threatened by Bridget’s real success, just as she is by Bridget’s real attractiveness throughout *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. Seeing Bridget through Rebecca’s eyes reminds us of all that Bridget underplays about herself: she owns an apartment in central London, holds jobs in publishing and television, attracts desirable men, and maintains her family relationships and a wide circle of true friends.

Rather than idealizing these things, Bridget demonstrates that such an apparently desirable lifestyle is not the perfect product of strict self-regulation that it may seem but rather is subject to the same accidents and problems as any other. As critics have noted, she opens her diary with a list of objectives, and each entry begins with a record of Bridget’s progress toward those objectives, which usually amounts to a confession of her failure to progress. This appears an indication of her lack of control over her life, but, considered more closely, is an indication of her total control of her narrative. Jeanne Braham observes that “Some women’s personal narratives reveal what their authors believe they are supposed to feel” (1996, 56), and in Bridget’s progress reports we can recognize this impulse. Bridget’s diary reveals the external pressure she feels to be better than she is, pressure that exists without reference to her own qualities and qualifications—improvement for its own sake.
One such pressure is her mother, whose expectations for her play a fairly complex role in Bridget's thinking. Indeed, both novels begin with conversations between Bridget and her mother. Whereas Alison Case argues persuasively that in fiction a credible feminine diarist rarely has the capacity for retrospective or projective plotting (2001, 177), Bridget's initial entry on the morning of 1 January is an example of both. Rather than beginning with the events of New Year's Day, Bridget begins by recounting a conversation between herself and her mother that took place the preceding August. This story accounts for Bridget's actions and her feelings on the present occasion and demonstrates that Bridget accurately foresees how this day will end. It establishes that Bridget's mother planned to use Christmas to improve her daughter's image: "Why don't I get you a little suitcase with wheels attached. You know, like air hostesses have . . . you can't go around with that tatty green canvas thing. You look like some sort of Mary Poppins person who's fallen on hard times" (Fielding 1999, 8). This accomplished, she will use the New Year's Day Turkey Curry Buffet to improve her daughter's love life: "Do you remember Mark, darling? He's one of those top-notch barristers. Masses of money. Divorced" (9). Later, as Bridget is "once again starting the year in a single bed in [her] parents' house," wondering if she dares to "have a fag out of the window" (9), we are fully aware that looking like an air hostess, marrying a "strangely dressed opera freak with bushy hair burgeoning from a side-part" (9), not smoking, and, of course, driving out of London to attend the Turkey Curry Buffet at all, are not her intentions but her mother's intentions for her. Bridget is made to feel guilty by the expectations of her mother, and even Una Alconbury, in whom Bridget sees "the mummy I'd never really had" (246), "seemed to manage to kiss me, get my coat off, hang it over the banister, wipe her lipstick off my cheek and make me feel incredibility guilty all in one movement" (10). From this first day of the new year through the office Christmas party the following December ("Course is OK—everyone drunk at office Christmas parties" [256]), Bridget feels the need to defend herself against her mother's explicit and implicit accusations ("My mum has drunk nothing but a single cream sherry on a Sunday night since 1952, when she got slightly tipsy on a pint of cider at Mavis Enderby's twenty-first and has never let herself or anyone else forget it" [42]).

Bridget's mother makes her feel guilty by overwhelming Bridget with a sense of her own unexplored possibilities, opining "you've simply got too much choice" (Fielding 1999, 169). Mrs. Jones exemplifies the exercising of choice. She leaves her husband for a Portuguese tour guide, deciding that she deserves more sexual fulfillment. She takes a job as a talk-show host after "realizing, when your father retired, that I had spent thirty-five years without a break running his home and bringing up his children" (47). She admits
to a stunned Bridget that “having children isn’t all it’s built up to be. I mean, no offense, I don’t mean this personally but given my chance again I’m not sure I’d have . . .” (169). She expects Bridget to explore her choices similarly; as however, Mrs. Jones ends up quite happily back at home, finding that she likes her old self as well as or better than the other selves she has tried on, and Bridget does the same.

Bridget’s mother is not the only force encouraging Bridget to change. The myth of self-perfection, the idea that the self can be completely remade, saturates Bridget’s consciousness. The U.S. can have no exclusive claim to or responsibility for the idea of perfecting the self, but, partly for comic effect and partly based on her sense that, as she has said in an interview, “There’s a strong culture of self-improvement in America” (Fielding n. d.), Fielding explicitly associates this myth with American culture. In many ways, American culture is very present to Bridget. She considers herself “a child of Cosmopolitan culture” (1999, 52), and many of her role models are American women, particularly actresses, including Goldie Hawn, Susan Sarandon, and Michelle Pfeiffer. References to Hollywood’s royal family illustrate the pervasiveness of the American media; they may also reflect ironically on British royalty, among whom Bridget finds no role models: she refers to “Naked pictures of Princess Anne on the television” (152) and “Fergy’s insane overconfidence” (165). Most importantly, these references to American film stars are evidence of Bridget’s vision of the U.S. as one big movie set. When Bridget makes a “random” list of people whom the brilliant Tina Brown might encounter at a party, the Englishman is a novelist, the South African is a political leader, and the American is an actor (83). On a summer evening Bridget observes, “Someone is playing a saxophone in effort to pretend we are all in a film set in New York. . . . Hmm. Think would like to move to New York” (122). Without any particular effort to distinguish between the city and a movie set, Bridget imagines living there. Indeed, long before Daniel confesses in the American Bar at the Savoy that he plans to marry an American (161), he goes to New York on business, and Bridget obsesses, “He will clearly by now have got off with thin American cool person called Winona who puts out, carries a gun and is everything I am not” (35). Bridget is fascinated at this point in her life with “everything I am not,” the choices and selections she has made, the things she has ruled out. She tells Daniel, “I’ll never forget the moment when I looked at the notice board and saw a D next to French and knew I couldn’t go to Manchester” (143). For Bridget, the U.S. is a place where one choice or failing does not necessarily rule out other choices or opportunities for success, a place where the self can be constantly re-made, as in a film (especially an American one). Indeed, at the end of Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason, when Bridget contemplates moving to Los
Angeles, she writes, "Hurrah! Am going to America to start again, like the early pioneers. The land of the free" (2000, 296).

Bridget buys into what she sees as the American ideal of the perfected self when she makes resolutions that she never fulfills ("I will not . . . Get upset over men, but instead be poised and cool ice-queen" [Fielding 1999, 2]), and when she makes unrealistic predictions that never come true ("Expect to become known as brilliant cook and hostess" [72]). This is interpreted by some readers as a sign of Bridget's powerlessness over her own future, but it really signals those moments when Bridget forgets that power over one's future is always an illusion. Furthermore, she is not the only character who entertains hopes of achieving an ideal self: Tom's plastic surgery demonstrates his belief that the self can be perfected, and we learn that Tom shares Bridget's view of America as a place to "start again" when he eventually moves to San Francisco and suggests that Bridget join him there (2000, 232). This aspect of Bridget's character, then, does not prove that Fielding has created a powerless female narrator. Rather, it proves that Fielding eschews the myth that the self can be completely remade. The film version of *Bridget Jones's Diary* emphasizes this point in a pair of scenes in which first Mark and then Bridget admit to liking each other "just the way [they] are." Helen Fielding has said in an on-line interview that she is "v. pleased that Americans like Bridget even if she does not have the perfect job, the perfect body, the perfect marriage, the perfect house, and a bottom like two billiard balls" (1998). No doubt, Fielding is not surprised to learn that even Americans who like Bridget sometimes fail to recognize that Bridget likes herself.

She records what she is "supposed to feel" (Braham 1996, 56), but her narrative fights that imposition on every page. A closer look at the entries suggests that Bridget quantifies her "sins" not in repentance but in self-justification. Her confession is peppered with explanations and reasons for her behavior: "129 lbs. (but post-Christmas), alcohol units 14 (but effectively covers 2 days as 4 hours of party was on New Year's Day)" (Fielding 1999, 7). On her list of "Food consumed today" she notes "12 Milk Tray (best to get rid of all Christmas confectionery in one go and make fresh start tomorrow)" (7). She rarely castigates herself; when she falls short of her goals, she alludes to mysterious, unidentifiable forces in the universe as the cause: "130 lbs. (terrifying slide into obesity—why? why?)" (15). She frequently praises herself for behavior that falls somewhat short of her goals: she notes "alcohol units 6 (excellent)" (15), although later "alcohol units 6" constitutes a "(drink problem)" (212). The very same behavior is deplored at one time and praised at another: 23 cigarettes is "(v.g.)" in one entry and "(v.v. bad, esp. in two hours)" in another (15 and 70). The contradictions in these entries reveal that, although she frames it as such, Bridget's narrative is not an account of a serious self-improvement
program; her interest is less in improving herself than in justifying herself. Self-hatred is rarely the impetus behind the detailed self-examination of a diary; rather, the diary is a thorough explanation of the self and all its vagaries.

Bridget is made to feel that she is a sinner, but what makes her narrative comic is that it is the confession of a sinner who has no intention whatsoever of reforming. Her confession is not about striving toward perfection through repentance and atonement; it is about celebrating the self. In her “On Confession,” Rita Felski reminds us that “Autobiography . . . develops out of the genre of religious confession,” but that “Literary confession since the eighteenth century is primarily concerned not with the admission of guilt and the appeal to a higher authority, but rather with the affirmation and exploration of free subjectivity” (Felski 1998, 87). Bridget herself recalls the roots of confession in religious contexts: when she is pleased she calls herself a “perfect, saint-style person” (25). Still, she ends the second volume contemplating Christmas in these terms: “Celebration of good fun life, surely not perfection” (2000, 296). Felski goes beyond the concept of confession as self-affirmation, however, and her further comments, although she is not referring to fictional autobiographies, are instructive with regard to Bridget’s diary:

Yet this attempted emancipation of the self can expose a self-defeating dialectic in which the history of confession as Beichte, as subjection to external authority, returns in a new form. For the “authentic self” is itself very much a social product, and the attempt to assert its privileged autonomy can merely underline its profound dependence upon the cultural and ideological systems through which it is constituted. The more frantic the search for an inner self, for a kernel of meaning untouched by a society rejected as oppressive and alienating, the more clearly subjectivity is revealed to be permeated by and dependent upon those very symbolic constraints from which it seeks to liberate itself. (Felski 1998, 87-88)

When Bridget appears unable to extricate herself from “Cosmopolitan culture,” she is clearly not alone. When she returns again and again to the basic ideas that she must perfect herself, control her life, and secure a mate, Bridget is enacting an inevitable process. Felski argues that “This negative pattern in which attempted self-affirmation reverts back into anxiety and self-castigation is a recurring one in at least some examples of feminist confession” (1998, 88). She goes on to observe that “Feminism appears ironically to accentuate guilt rather than resolve it by providing an ideal of autonomy which the author is unable to emulate” (88). Feminism itself, then, along with her mother and the cultural imperative to improve the self, inspires Bridget’s guilt and her confession.

Still, Bridget Jones’s Diary is a comic novel, and, to the extent that it resolves the serious problem identified by Felski, its resolution is both prag-
matic and funny. Simply put, each time Bridget has the opportunity to compare herself to the perfect image she envisions, she likes herself better. When the “historic and joyous day” arrives, and Bridget weighs 119 pounds, she discovers that she appears “tired” and “drawn,” and that she “looked better before” (Fielding 1999, 90-92). Similarly, when Bridget attempts to use makeup to hide the imaginary signs of aging skin, Tom’s reaction is, “Good God . . . You look like Barbara Cartland” (127). These revelations come as a shock to her, as she is fully invested in this particular kind of self-improvement. Still, her more objective attitude about other kinds of self-improvement demonstrates that Bridget is, more or less, happy as she is. For example, she “Wish[es] to be like Tina Brown, though not, obviously, quite so hardworking” (83). She reflects on the uneasy feeling “which periodically makes you think that just because you live in central London you should be out at the RSC/Albert Hall/Tower of London/Royal Academy/Madame Tussauds, instead of hanging around in bars enjoying yourself” (128). Bridget is more than a match for this feeling; when, after much indecision, she attends the annual Edinburgh Festival, she disgraces herself by sleeping, watching television, and meeting friends for drinks rather than attending any of the shows. She has a chance to make it to one final event, but, again, she has her reasons for staying away: “we had a few Bloody Marys and remembered that Question and Answer sessions have a bad effect on us” (175). These details reveal that Bridget’s diary is less an attempt to gain control over her behavior and perfect herself than it is an attempt to justify herself as she is.

Ultimately, Bridget’s decisions about how to spend her time and energy favor what is least difficult and most fun, but she succeeds anyway because she quickly locates a wide audience that appreciates the same things. This is illustrated during her interview at Good Afternoon!, for which she has laboriously memorized the names and positions of high-level politicians, but at which her interviewers reveal that they prefer to discuss the sexual exploits of various celebrities. Once this is clear, Bridget is a real success, and is finally promoted for originating 68 percent of the “fun” items on the show (Fielding 2000, 288). Similarly, Bridget is under-prepared for her interview with Colin Firth and barrages him with trivial questions, but apparently as many people are unexpectedly interested in what she does ask him as are disgusted by what she does not, and Bridget is asked to do more such interviews. Bridget begins her diary resolved to change, but throughout the two novels she is consistently conflicted about her goals and put off by the incarnations of her goals in Suki, Natasha, and Rebecca. Indeed, at some level, all three of these characters represent that which Bridget has chosen not to be, and the conflict is simply Bridget’s ruminations about what she might be missing as a result of her choices.
Bridget Jones is not the first imperfect and unrepentant yet much loved heroine in British literature, and we can find one early example in Jane Austen’s *Emma*. The plot of *Pride and Prejudice* underlies Bridget Jones’s *Diary*, and *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason* incorporates the plot of *Persuasion*. These allusions, even appropriations, are overt and obvious to readers of Austen’s work; less obvious is Fielding’s important appropriation from *Emma*. For all that Bridget’s story resembles those of Elizabeth Bennet and Anne Elliot, her character most closely resembles that of Emma Woodhouse, and it is in *Emma*, not in Ally McBeal, that we find a true analogue to Bridget.

Like Bridget, Emma is prone to resolutions that she fails to act on. Mr. Knightley remembers,

> Emma has been meaning to read more ever since she was twelve years old. I have seen a great many lists of her drawing up at various times of books that she meant to read regularly through—and very good lists they were—very well chosen, and very neatly arranged—sometimes alphabetically, and sometimes by some other rule. The list she drew up when only fourteen—I remember thinking it did her judgment so much credit, that I preserved it some time; and I dare say she may have made out a very good list now. But I have done with expecting any course of steady reading from Emma. She will never submit to any thing requiring industry and patience, and a subjection of the fancy to the understanding. (Austen 1988, 65-66)

Emma, then, also keeps lists of her good intentions, and her reading lists may remind us of Bridget’s steady flirtation with *The Famished Road*, which Bridget finally throws away because she realizes that, despite her best intentions, she “will never read the bloody thing anyway” (Fielding 2000, 189). The narrator reports that Emma, in adulthood, is no more likely than ever to carry through her resolutions: “Her views of improving her little friend’s [Harriet’s] mind, by a great deal of useful reading and conversation, had never yet led to more than a few first chapters, and the intention of going on tomorrow” (Austen 1966, 95). However, we admire Emma for her other qualities, especially “That very dear part of Emma, her fancy” (224).

Emma’s reading is not the only rational pursuit forgone in the interest of her “fancy.” We are treated to a look at “the portfolio containing her various attempts at portraits, for not one of them had ever been finished” (Austen 1966, 72). The narrator continues,

> Her many beginnings were displayed. Miniatures, half-lengths, whole lengths, pencil, crayon, and water-colours had all been tried in turn. She had always wanted to do everything, and had made more progress both in drawing and music than many might have done with so little labour as she would ever submit to. She played and sang;—and drew in almost every
style; but steadiness had always been wanting; and in nothing had she approached the degree of excellence which she would have been glad to command, and ought not to have failed of. (Austen 1966, 72)

Emma's failures of resolution, like Bridget's, extend beyond her personal endeavors to matters of broader import. Having visited a poor family, Emma reflects, "How trifling they make everything else appear!—I feel now as if I could think of nothing but these poor creatures all the rest of the day; and yet, who can say how soon it may all vanish from my mind?" (111). Harriet concurs that "one can think of nothing else," and both persist for approximately a paragraph before Emma concludes, "If we feel for the wretched, enough to do all we can for them, the rest is empty sympathy, only distressing to ourselves" (111). Thus Emma acknowledges and justifies her lack of "stability in good thoughts" (111).

The activity in which Emma persists most tirelessly in the course of the novel is finding a husband for Harriet, yet, when she fails at first to marry Harriet to Mr. Elton, "She was quite concerned and ashamed, and resolved to do such things no more" (Austen 1966, 155). In the next paragraph, however, she has found another young man to consider in Harriet's interest, and "She stopp'd to blush and laugh at her own relapse" (156). She completes the same cycle with regard to Miss Bates. After the picnic at Box Hill, Emma is truly ashamed of her treatment of Miss Bates, and resolves,

If attention, in future, could do away the past, she might hope to be forgiven. She had been often remiss, her conscience told her so; remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact; scornful, ungracious. But it should be so no more. In the warmth of true contrition, she would call upon her the very next morning, and it should be the beginning, on her side, of a regular, equal, kindly intercourse." (Austen 1966, 370)

The observation that Emma is "remiss, perhaps, more in thought than fact," gives us a lens through which to consider Bridget's narrative, as well. We are likely to be seduced by the foregrounding of her thoughts into forgetting the facts. Emma does call upon Miss Bates, and we know her contrition to be real. Still, as Miss Bates cannot change, neither can Emma, and, although she will never again forget herself as she has at the picnic, she will no doubt continually feel, with regard to Miss Bates, that she is "always doing more than she wished, and less than she ought!" (180).

Like Bridget, Emma makes entirely unrealistic resolutions that she never keeps and that no one would wish her to keep. When she has admired Harriet in her "truly artless" grief (Austen 1966, 159), Emma is "really for the time convinced that Harriet was the superior creature of the two" (159), and she resolves to be more like her friend: "It was rather too late in the day to set about being simple-minded and ignorant; but she left her [Harriet] with
every previous resolution confirmed of being humble and discreet, and repressing imagination all the rest of her life” (160). Emma also responds to disappointments in love with resolutions like Bridget’s. Bridget determines, “I will not . . . Sulk about having no boyfriend, but develop inner poise and authority and sense of self as woman of substance, complete without boyfriend, as best way to obtain boyfriend” (Fielding 1999, 2). Similarly, though without the final clause, when Emma believes she has lost her chance to win Mr. Knightley’s affection, she envisions her own future self-improvement:

the only source whence any thing like consolation or composure could be drawn, was in the resolution of her own better conduct, and the hope that, however inferior in spirit and gaiety might be the following and every future winter of her life to the past, it would yet find her more rational, more acquainted with herself, and leave her less to regret when it were gone. (Austen 1966, 411)

Her vision of her future is, of course, exactly as prophetic as Bridget’s.

Just as Bridget rejects the polished image she sees in her rivals, Emma is put off by that embodiment of female perfection, Jane Fairfax. Emma has been used to disliking Jane, but, upon seeing her after a long interval, Emma notes all of Jane’s excellent qualities, summing them up in her sense that “Jane Fairfax was very elegant” (Austen 1966, 180). On the basis of her observations, Emma “was determining that she would dislike her no longer” (181). The narrator informs us, “These were charming feelings—but not lasting” (181), and that very soon Emma finds that “every thing was relapsing much into its usual state” (182). Emma is envious of Jane’s elegance, her superior musical performance, and the admiration she wins from Mr. Knightley. Even he admits, however, that “not even Jane Fairfax is perfect. She has a fault. She has not the open temper which a man would wish for in a wife” (289). We are told that “Emma could not but rejoice to hear that she had a fault” (289), and, indeed, Emma herself has long ago concluded that Jane “was disgustingly, was suspiciously reserved” (182). Emma continues to dislike Jane and envy her Knightley’s regard, but she learns, in the end, that Jane has been jealous of Emma, as well. Because of Frank Churchill’s attentions to Emma, “In Jane’s eyes she had been a rival” (394), though, much in the style of Bridget Jones, Emma has never suspected that she could be. Finally, Jane and Emma are friends—not because Emma changes, of course, but because Jane, with no more secrets to keep, demonstrates that she is capable of being more like Emma. Jane is sympathetic as well as accomplished, but we cannot like her until she loses her “suspicious reserve”; Emma, in contrast, could not be more loved if she had all of Jane’s accomplishments. In Austen’s world, as in Helen Fielding’s, self-improvement is no substitute for spirit and creativity, for openness and “fancy.”
Choosing Communitarianism

In spite of all of her resolutions Bridget does not succeed in remaking herself. However, like Emma, she does accomplish one of her many goals: finding a “nice boyfriend” (Fielding 1999, 271). As Daphne Merkin observes, “What’s really bothering people about ‘Bridget Jones’ is that it signals the return of what is referred to in English-lit classes as the Marriage Plot” (1998, 71). Bridget’s reliance on Mark Darcy in both novels to solve her problems is noted by her critics. In *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, Mark rescues Bridget’s mother from her disastrous relationship with the Portuguese bounder Julio, entrap Julio himself, and recovers the life savings and pension funds of the Jones’s Middle British social circle. In *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, Mark is instrumental in extricating Bridget from her entanglement with a drug smuggler who has duped her into attempting to carry his stash out of Thailand. The idea behind this criticism is that Bridget can and should remake herself in such a way as to be in control of her own life and not be in need of such aid, but the novels force us to consider the true limitations of control. Bridget is not much less in control of her life than those around her are of their own. Magda cannot control her wandering husband, and Bridget’s father cannot control his wandering wife, any more than Bridget can stop Daniel from betraying her with Suki. So if we are tempted to blame Bridget for throwing herself into the power of a man she identifies as wicked and dissolute (16), we should remember that the wicked do not always publicize their characters, nor is every partner who strays wicked. We should also remember that Daniel has hurt more trusting friends than Bridget, namely his Cambridge classmate, Mark Darcy, whose marriage Daniel destroys two weeks after the wedding. As Case points out, Bridget’s stated goal to “‘Form functional relationship with responsible adult’ . . . is not and could not be solely in Bridget’s own control to accomplish” (178), and this, by definition, is true for everyone.

Presumably, then, at least one’s self and one’s decisions are more fully in one’s control? The novels suggest that control is impossible at this level, as well, and not just in Bridget’s case. We can see the ridiculous in the fact that Bridget’s foundational garments threaten her relationship with Mark on the night of the Law Society dinner (Fielding 2000, 38-43), but also in the fact that Mark’s diamond-patterned sweater and bumble-bee socks do the same at the Turkey Curry Buffet (1999, 12-14). We laugh and feel superior to Bridget when she misses Elena Rossini’s emergence from the courthouse because she is buying cigarettes; she has jeopardized her career over a trifle (210). Yet Bridget’s friend Jude, Head of Futures at Brightlings, runs out of a board meeting in tears because her boyfriend, Vile Richard, has “chucked her for asking him if he wanted to come on holiday with her” (17). Both women
manage to maintain their careers in spite of such incidents, but Daniel is “promoted downstairs” and made “redundant”; he ends up on Bridget’s sofa sobbing because, “Nobody wants a man at my age without a career” (2000, 199). Richard Finch is increasingly despised by his entire staff and finally fired because of his addiction to cocaine. If Bridget’s life appears out of control, hers is not so different from the lives of her family, her friends, and her co-workers. No plan is comprehensive enough, no preparation detailed enough, no resolution solid enough to allow for every contingency.

As for relying on the help of Mark Darcy, Bridget (much like her counterpart in Pride and Prejudice) is not the only competent adult who accedes to Mark’s superior capabilities in nabbing Julio, not the only one who is awed by this “rocky smart” top human-rights barrister (Fielding 1999, 266). Furthermore, Bridget’s efforts on her own behalf are key to her survival in and her release from the Thai prison. From her inspiration to entertain her cell-mates with the words to Madonna hits to her manipulation of Charlie, the pokey but ambitious assistant to the consul, Bridget takes the necessary steps to avoid spending her “childbearing years” in a woman’s prison in Thailand. These facts do not constitute an argument for Bridget’s self-reliance; indeed, such an argument probably cannot and certainly should not be made. The material point is that problem-solving in Bridget’s world is a communal effort, not an opportunity to prove one’s worth as a human being.

At every stage of her relationship with Daniel, Bridget consults her friends, weighing their opinions, considering their perspectives, and then making a decision that frequently achieves the desired result. When Daniel has left her “hanging in air” for two weekends after sex (Fielding 1999, 60), Bridget deploys a masterful combination of tactics—Jude’s “be friendly and flirty” (60), Sharon’s “tell him what I think of him” (60), and Tom’s “Aloof, unavailable ice-queen” (64)—and manages to establish somewhat more equal terms in her relationship with Daniel. Bridget’s mother, who causes a number of Bridget’s problems, also lifts her spirits after Daniel’s desertion and helps her to get a new job at Good Afternoon! Tom saves her from an embarrassing evening with the Smug Marrieds by providing her with a sexy twenty-three-year-old date to impress them, and he gets her a free-lance writing assignment and an interview with Colin Firth. Bridget does her part, as well—helping her friends to choose among self-help philosophies, providing moral support for her father, and leading the search for Tom when he disappears. She becomes even more obviously helpful when she transforms from Elizabeth Bennet in the first novel into Anne Elliot in the second, taking Magda’s children off her hands for a day, counseling Giles Benwick through his divorce and attempted suicide, and standing at the ready with her cell-phone when Rebecca sprains her ankle because she is, in the style of Louisa
Muskrove, “resolute!” (2000, 183). Bridget and her friends do not labor under the illusion that self-reliance is a measure of self-worth. Rather, they recognize that, in Tom’s words, “we’re all psychotic, single and completely dysfunctional and it’s all done over the phone . . . but it’s a bit like a family, isn’t it?” (1999, 231). Bridget's narrative de-mythologizes self-reliance and justifies her choice of a community-based decision-making process.

Her choice is validated by her experience of the quantities of American self-help books that she and her friends consume. Women Who Love Too Much, Men Are From Mars and Women Are From Venus, The Road Less Traveled, and so on are as familiar to Bridget as the number of calories in any given item of food (more familiar, as Tom discovers, than “one’s alphabet or times tables” [Fielding 1999, 225]). Self-help books purport not only to enable the reader to eliminate the mental rubble created by contemporary everyday life and to access the essential self in all its Emersonian genius, but to do so without the help of others. Initially, Bridget appears to be completely seduced by the shining promise of this process, but ultimately she finds that it conflicts with, and compares badly to, her own communitarianism. Indeed, Bridget and her friends misuse the self-help books in precisely the same way that Bridget misuses particular diets. Bridget combines several different diets, relying at any given moment on the one that allows her to eat exactly what she wants. After listing her food consumption for the day, with reference to the Scarsdale Diet, the F-plan, the Hay Diet, and the Anti-Cellulite Raw-Food Diet, she notes, “I realize it has become too easy to find a diet to fit in with whatever you happen to feel like eating and that diets are not there to be picked and mixed but picked and stuck to, which is exactly what I shall begin to do once I’ve eaten this chocolate croissant” (65). Similarly, rather than finding the secret to self-reliance in a single book, as intended, these Singletons have read them all, have brought them, as it were, into conversation, and found all of the ways in which the books' philosophies conflict. The characters are drawn to the idea of a perfected self—e..n top-flight human-rights barrister Mark Darcy is discovered with a stack of these books—but, ultimately, rather than being changed, the characters simply read until they find justification for what they already are.

Fielding's satire of self-help books climaxes in Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason when Rebecca and Giles come together, not over poetry as their Austenian counterparts do, but over self-help books. In contrast, Fielding’s main characters ultimately come to reject things American. Most of Bridget’s own self-help library ends up in a dumpster. Both Daniel and Mark travel to and establish professional and romantic ties to America, but both return to England and, of course, to Bridget. In spite of the cinematic appeal of the U.S., Bridget “Really feel[s] part of something” on the day that Tony Blair is
elected (though she is not so much part of the voting as part of the celebration). Her delight in the "great rising up of we, the nation" (Fielding 2000, 147) reminds us that "There is no mistaking the importance of community for New Labour" (Krieger 1999, 143). The American ideal of self-reliance, and the perfected self implied by it, proves a mirage, and the values that Bridget embraces can be expressed in Tony Blair's own words, "the union between individual and community, the belief that we are not stranded in helpless isolation, but owe a duty to others and to ourselves and are, in a profound sense, dependent on each other to succeed" (qtd. in Krieger 1999, 144). Bridget's diary is not evidence that a fictional female narrator is only authentic when she is out of control. Bridget's voice is authentic because it reminds us that control is a myth and mutually dependent relationships are unavoidable. Ian Adams considers this idea central to the communitarianism that has influenced the Blair government: "People do not exist in a vacuum; in fact, they only exist in relation to others. The completely autonomous self of liberal theory is a myth" (1998, 148). Just as Blair has maintained a distinctively British communitarianism in the face of the American-style economic reforms introduced by the Thatcher government, Bridget's communitarianism enables her—and her self-image—to withstand the onslaught of American popular culture.

_Bridget Jones and the Contemporary British Novel_

Fielding's belief in the primacy of mutually dependent relationships and her interrogation of the ideal of the perfected and controlled self is echoed in the works of other contemporary British novelists. Another international best-seller, A. S. Byatt's neo-Victorian _Possession_ (1991), provides us with two female characters—the Victorian poet Christabel LaMotte and the contemporary scholar Maud Bailey—both of whom attempt to be entirely self-reliant, but find that the demands of others on them, and, finally, their demands on others, work against their own mythologized self-conceptions. Byatt, like Fielding, rejects the myth of the perfected self, and favors instead the expression of the self in all its imperfection. Among other fictional documents, _Possession_ contains excerpts from the diaries of two Victorian women, Ellen Ash and Sabine de Kercoz. Adrienne Shiffman has said of Ellen Ash that she writes her private journal with a public audience in mind, and that she therefore "writes herself as the ideal embodiment of Victorian femininity" (2001, 96). Ellen's journal exemplifies Jeanne Braham's observation of women's diaries that "their formulas acknowledge the conformist power of the dominant culture" (1996, 56). As Shiffman argues, Ellen recognizes this power, and one can identify glimmers of resistance in Ellen's journal; finally, however, she constructs the image expected of her. The incompleteness of
Ellen's experience of life and its pleasures, epitomized in her unconsummated marriage, reveals the danger of fetishizing control. In contrast, the other journal in Possession, the journal of Sabine de Kercoz, demonstrates, as Bridget's does, that the power of conformity, the urge to present oneself as fully in control, can be resisted even as it is acknowledged. Sabine begins, like Bridget, with her intention to change: "This is the book in which I shall make myself into a true writer." Given the intimidating exemplars before her—her father and Christabel LaMotte—Sabine is awed by the sense of how far she has to go. But Christabel advises Sabine not to try to remake herself, but rather to "Look . . . at your own rainy orchard, your own terrible coastline, with the eyes of a stranger" in order to find her voice as a writer (Byatt 1991, 364). Sabine initially believes she must and can perfect herself in order to "make [herself] into" a writer, but she discovers the importance of rendering what she does know—herself as she is—as evocatively as possible. Having learned this, she goes on to publish three novels.

The romance element of Possession has made it, too, vulnerable to criticism for its portrayal of women, but Anita Brookner's Fraud (1993) presents a disheartening alternative. Brookner's Anna Durrant is a generation older than Bridget, and Fraud is not a comic novel, but the resemblances between Fielding's books and Fraud are nevertheless strong. Like Bridget, Anna's mother has a late-in-life liaison with a smooth con-man, but there is no Mark Darcy to recover what the family loses to him. Like Bridget, Anna is unmarried and alone, and is constantly criticized for her state by her own cohort, especially by the Rebecca-like Vickie Halliday, and by her parents' cohort, especially Mrs. Marsh. Just as Bridget's mother, who has invited the Darcys to dinner in order to effect a reunion between Bridget and Mark, explains, "We are the elders of the tribe!" (Fielding 2000, 103), Mrs. Marsh wonders if "the settling of Anna" is "part of her responsibility as an elder of the tribe" (Brookner 1993, 66). Unlike Bridget, however, Anna has no circle of friends. She is generally considered "self-sufficient" by those who know her (261), and the image she projects is defined by the fact that "She had a horror of compassion, both her own and that of others. She was determined never to be perceived as a victim" (194). Her mother's example has taught her to equate all dependence with victimhood. Consequently, she is completely alone, with little possibility of ever being otherwise. The unhappy man who chooses Vickie Halliday over Anna confesses to himself in a moment of insight that, "He could have saved her [Anna], he knew, and then she in her turn could have saved him" (202). The characters in Fraud appear self-reliant, but the novel reveals their fear, their weakness, and their failure to connect.
Anna Durrant is not a diarist, but she corresponds regularly with a friend abroad. We do not read Anna's letters, but we learn that, in the letters as in life, Anna fails to express herself and fails to establish real ties of mutual dependence with another person. As she composes one of her letters she thinks, "This surely was the right note, the note they always seemed to strike: feminine, intimate, critical, high-spirited. They had both read their Jane Austen, and prided themselves on keeping a cool head" (Brookner 1993, 70-71). She comments on the correspondence, "The letters were elevated, amusing, giving no hint of loneliness or pain. They might have been written by two acquaintances who had met in the Pump Room in Bath, for it was Marie-France, whose English was perfect, and who was devoted to the works of Jane Austen, who best captured the tone" (156). This correspondence is, as the title implies, fraudulent; their reliance on a habitual and stringently controlled "tone" indicates that what they might really say about being unmarried women in their fifties is embarrassing and painful, that what they really feel must be hidden at all costs.

Brookner, Byatt, and Fielding do not recreate the nineteenth-century novel and all of its problematic values, as their critics would suggest. Rather, they look to Austen (and, in Byatt's case, Dickens) for some perspective on popular contemporary notions of what the self can and should be. First, both Austen and Dickens emphasize the human connection and interdependence that are so valued by these contemporary writers—Dickens by way of his hidden networks of relatedness, and Austen by focusing on just "3 or 4 Families in a Country Village" (qtd. in Shields 2001, 8). Second, what these contemporary novelists have observed in Jane Austen's novels is that the self cannot be completely remade. Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot, and Emma Woodhouse are certainly enlightened in the course of their stories, but they are not changed, nor would we want them to be. Austen also demonstrates that a self ashamed disguises itself—whether that self is a villain, like George Wickham, or a friend, like Charlotte Lucas—while a self unashamed expresses itself fully, whether for better, as in the case of Elizabeth Bennet, or for worse, as in the case of Mr. Collins. In her exuberant reliance on Austen, Helen Fielding does not validate traditional gender roles or even traditional narrative techniques; rather, she recalls a world free of the post-Austen myth of the perfected self.

Notes

A number of friends have given me helpful criticism and advice on this article; I would particularly like to thank Brian B. Anderson and Don-John Dugas.
Works Cited


