

To My Beloved, BB4N

The history of “woman’s writing”, or the epistolary novel

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Abstract

A series of memorandums on the epistolary novel as established in the 1700s and its development in the modern age with the inclusion of electronic communications. Grown from a tradition of males imitating females, epistolary novels in modern times subvert gender expectations and stratification. Rather than a male chasing a woman, these modern novels give women the opportunity to participate as equal participants in their relationship. Case study: Meg Cabot’s “Boy” series.

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: WHAT IS AN EPISTOLARY NOVEL?
DATE: 1700s
DOC NUMBER: 1 OF 11

The fictional epistolary novel is one in which the author conveys the story through documents. In the most traditional understanding, epistolary novels are series of letters. Some authors expand their novels to include newspaper clippings, diary entries, and articles. For the purposes of this memo and all others relating to this topic, we include novels which use documents other than letters, but borrow Janet Altman's clarification that the "letter's formal properties... create meaning' (4)" (qtd. in Keskinen 384). Altman also states that letters addressed to confidants of the writer are "the fundamental vehicles of epistolary narrative" (48). Letters that advance the story or plot must be included for the novel to be considered epistolary.

The epistolary novel has existed in various forms and understandings since the Roman poet Ovid first used epistles in his writings, but it truly began in its traditional form in the 1600s and hit peak popularity in the eighteenth century. Male critics of the genre believe that the epistolary genre is "particularly suited for the female voice" (Goldsmith vii), a belief informed by the historical context of its rise. Originally, males imitating the "female voice" produced epistolary writing (ibid.). In the eighteenth century, the epistolary form was "the favored mode of moral instruction for women" (Gilroy and Verhoeven 2). As women began to receive education, they were taught to write letters as a form of exercising their newfound knowledge. "Newly educated women could easily learn to write letters, and, as epistolary theory became more adapted to worldly culture, women's letters began to be considered the best models of the genre" (Goldsmith viii). When the epistolary novel began enjoying a market in the eighteenth century, even more male writers, including Rousseau and Richardson, began perfecting the technique of imitating female writing seen in previous publications (Goldsmith vii-viii). "Female letters traditionally focused

on domestic life or on love; they spoke in the private voice appropriate to women whose roles were increasingly circumscribed within the constraints of bourgeois ideology" (Gilroy and Verhoeven 2). We therefore see most epistolary fiction focus on these topics.

Perhaps because the males who wrote the original novels based their imitations upon real women's letters, there is a tradition of including non-fictional elements in epistolary novels, more so than most other fictional genres. According to Linda Kauffman, epistolary novelists commonly blur "the lines between fiction and reality by including morsels of information that seem to be about [their] 'real [lives]'" (205). They will use incidents from their real lives in their plots.

The epistolary form entails a type of fracturing of the story. The reader of the novel knows more than the letter writer and the letter reader, because "the reader of the epistolary novel is aware that within its boundaries there is another reader" (Campbell 336). The novel reader, however, cannot know more than the characters tell. Thus, she must imagine and understand the reader and writer both. The novel ends when the writer stops the letters. In this way, epistolary novels "refuse the kind of closure informing other narratives" (Campbell 333). There are always questions unanswered. Epistles share a similar trait to comics in that they require the reader to participate in some actions. The letters' authors do not describe actions in the same detail readers see in narrative fiction. McCloud argues that in comics "every act committed to paper by the comic's artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice. An equal partner in crime known as the reader" (68). He uses an example in which one frame in a comic book has an attacker and a presumed victim, and the next is of buildings and a scream. McCloud accuses the reader of committing the murder, in her imagination (ibid.). Similarly, in epistolary novels the letter writers may discuss the outcome of an event or action and it is up to the reader of the novel to imagine it, to "commit the crime."

With the advent of telecommunications the traditional epistolary novel has virtually disappeared along with traditional letter writing. To survive, epistolary novels in current times experiment with the traditional form, and authors use blogs, emails, instant messaging (IM), memos, and other electronic forms of communication to tell their stories. Current novels also include train or plane tickets, replicate signs or menus, and include drawings or images. Just as the printed novel included customs of the manuscript, and the manuscript reflected

oral traditions before that, new technology does not break suddenly with the past, but continues it in a different form. Ester Milne states, "the epistolary body of email is a figure for thinking through the relations between new and old media" (90). The new forms of epistles "borrow iconography, codes of composition and modes of social practice from its predecessor" (Milne 85). Email formats reflect previous modes of communication: for the most part, we still address them with "to" and "from." "CC" and "BCC" come from memo communication in offices before the Internet. "Attach file" icons are frequently made to look like paper clips, the non-electronic way to attach a file to a memo or other correspondence. We use envelope icons for "send," reminiscent of sending the handwritten letters upon which epistolary fiction first stemmed. Keskinen stated it best when she wrote "the technology of writing implements - whether quill or ball-point pens, typewriters, or computers - undoubtedly have some influence on the particulars of the epistolary genre but do not necessarily change its overall form" (386). In the following series of memos we will explore how these novels, based on electronic communication and written by females, share roots with the traditional form but also use emails and IMs to break from the constraints placed upon the genre by males.

INTRAOFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: PATCH BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: MEG CABOT
DATE: 2005
DOC NUMBER: 2 OF 11

Meg Cabot is one of the first authors to tackle new forms of the epistolary novel. In the early 2000s, she published a loosely connected series about people at the *New York Journal*, told completely through emails, IMs, office memos, and journal entries. Lest you think the journal entries slip out of the epistolary idea, or the electronic for that matter, one is written as a diary originally intended to be given as a gift to a couple about to marry while the other journal is notes written on a man's PDA. The three books are *The Boy Next Door*, *Boy Meets Girl*, and *Every Boy's Got One*. This series of memos will focus on *The Boy Next Door* and *Every Boy's Got One* as representatives of where the experimental form began and ended.

The Boy Next Door concentrates on Melissa (Mel) Fuller, a New York City gossip columnist, and her relationship with her neighbor's nephew, Max Friedlander, a famous photographer and notorious ladies' man. Despite his reputation, and a weird penchant for being called John, Mel enjoys spending time with him, begins dating him, and eventually falls in love. Everything changes, however, when it becomes clear that someone is trying to kill Max's aunt and the only reasonable suspect is Max himself. As the first book in the series, *The Boy Next Door* is more tentative in playing with form. Instead of various types of electronic communications, emails compose the majority of the messages. A few emails have attachments, but those are for the most part the only additional documents.

Every Boy's Got One is both more experimental *and* traditional. *Every Boy's Got One* follows Jane Harris, cartoonist, as she acts as maid of honor to her best friend who is eloping in Italy. Jane has a hate-at-first-sight relationship with the best man, Cal Langdon, an international journalist. Cal is anti-marriage and determined to convince the groom, Mark, to cancel the wedding. Jane believes that Mark and her friend, Holly, are perfect for each other and must convince Cal

that he is wrong. Cabot is more innovative with regards to form in *Every Boy's Got One* than *The Boy Next Door*. *Every Boy's Got One* contains more types of documents other than emails including: Cal's journal kept on his PDA, cartoons drawn by Jane (see Attachment 1A), menus from restaurants, replications of signs, receipts (see Attachment 2A), and even a passport reproduction. The main storytelling element of the novel, however, is Jane's "handwritten" journal. These diary-like entries are closer to the letters of traditional epistolary novels than the emails of *The Boy Next Door* because Jane addresses some absent "confidant." To fit with Altman's definition of epistolary, though, the plot is indeed advanced through the emails because these tend to be the main character interaction to which the reader of the novel is exposed.

We chose to use Cabot and her *Boy* series as the example of modern epistolary novels for two reasons. The first quite simply is that she is one of the first novelists to use electronic forms. In our research, we discovered only one book published before *The Boy Next Door* that included electronic communications. *The Metaphysical Touch* by Sylvia Brownrigg, however, included third person narrative as well as email exchanges. The *Boy* series, therefore, is closer in kind to the epistolary novels of the 1700s since it is told *only* through documents. Secondly, we believe that to accurately demonstrate how these new epistolary novels can reflect changes in communication norms, society, and the epistle form itself, we needed to compare a popular author. The traits discussed in this series of memos stem from when epistolary novels, written by then-famous authors, were popular. We wanted to find a similar situation. Cabot is most well known for her *Princess Diaries* series, which itself could be considered epistolary. Similar to the stories in the eighteenth century, all of her books focus on the day-to-day lives of women and how they find love. Cabot's popularity is clear: several of her books were made into movies or TV shows, and she is one of the few authors in today's economy that can live comfortably off of royalties from her books. Cabot is thus the epitome of a popular female author writing for female readers in modern times.

Just as Kauffman notes about epistolary novelists, the *Boy* series includes elements of Cabot's personal life. Cabot is known for setting her books in locations with which she is familiar. For the most part she lived at some point in the cities where her characters live (Cabot, "Who is She"). *The Boy Next Door*, for example, takes place in New York City where Cabot lived with her husband at the time of writing and for many years afterwards. Her other books draw on her

own personal experience. As she puts it herself, “All of my books are inspired by real things that either happened to me, or that I WISHED would happen to me” (Cabot, “Meet Meg”). *Every Boy’s Got One* is based on Cabot’s elopement, which took place in the Italian countryside (Cabot, *Every* “Afterword”). By emphasizing that her books are based on her real life experiences, Cabot makes the challenges and accomplishments of her characters more real. The *Boy* series are not stories of male understandings of female life, but a woman’s reflection on her own life and experiences. In the following memos we discuss how Cabot uses the traditional elements of epistolary novels in her own writings, but modifies them to fit the modern woman and, therefore, to question the male construction of *the* female genre.

Attachment 1A

uanna. Obviously he hasn't read
air travel is very dehydrating,
your body weight in water dur-
you want to avoid jet lag.)
on the plane and all, but is it
s Aquafina? Probably not. I saw
nel 4 where they sent the water
is filled with all these

*Every
Boys
Got
One
7*

water from the

no one

l.

d

u're

to

so ...



Attachment 2A

Meg
Cabot
180

GE. SP. AL. S.N.C	
Viale Europa 44	
Porto Recanati (MC)	
GROCERY	
	EURO
PelliCola Co	0,50
6 Minibiscot	2,50
Olive Bella	2,50
Kinder Sorpr	1,80
Birra Peroni, 24	12,76
Insalata Rom	0,66
Tomato Ketch	2,23
Uva Italia P	1,95
The Twinings	1,90
Insalata Tro	0,41
Puro Succo	1,33
Naionese Cal	1,22
Latte Fr.A.Q.	1,37
Insalata Gen	0,38
Latte Fr. Int	1,30
Oro Duepic'c	2,34
637 Pom.Ross	1,90
Banco Taglio	1,01
Oro Piu'caca	1,53
Olive verdi	0,78
Bisc. Conad G	0,89
Pane Dolci I	0,55
Pomodori Pel	0,55
Doricream	0,65
Mais Pop Cor	0,60
Banco Taglio	27,21
Caffe Classi	2,09
Caffe Classi	2,09
Arance Taroc	2,55
TOTALE	77,55
Contanti	100,00
Resto	22,45
N.Pezzi 50	
Oper: 10	
Cassa 1 1	
Regalo Bollini: 15	
Codice: Bollini	
Arrivederci e Grazie!	

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: WOMEN FIGHT BACK?
DATE: 1700s
DOC NUMBER: 3 OF 11

Epistolary novels are a contradiction. They are considered *the* female genre because they are for women and presented in the feminine style of writing. The epistolary novel as a genre arose because women began to receive an education, and though it was still not completely acceptable, the most acceptable form of writing for a female was that of letters. It should, therefore, be a genre in which females can question the domination of males and assert their own independence. Many literary experts, however, believe that the epistolary novel is better qualified as “a history of restrictions or failed interactions” (Goldsmith xii). Some view this female genre as an example of male suppression:

The one genre with which women have been persistently connected has specialized in rowing the range of possible inflections for female expression... female epistolary voices tend to describe confinement more than liberation (ibid.).

Even as women become more successful and freer, the cultural history of being voiceless and powerless remains always. Epistolary novels offer a form in which women can finally speak - but only as established by men.

Men formed the rules early. The practice of males imitating female writing constrained how women would be able to use the genre by setting precedents and deciding which attributes of writing were “feminine.” According to men in the 1600s, as women began letter writing, women possessed “superior emotional expressiveness” (Jensen 29). This one superior trait was not enough to be published or recognized by society as art. Instead, males used female writing as a starting point. Men believed that one could tell the author’s gender by its style. “The feminine is subjective, disordered, associative, illogical; the masculine is objective, orderly, controlled, logical” (Kauffman 228). By reflecting upon women’s writing and then imitating it, men “improve[d]” the “imperfect” feminine epistolary model (Jensen 30). Women were lacking in their style, so

men had to correct it. This practice was done with little regard for female writers. As the genre became increasingly popular and more women began reading, men started to include women's writing in publications. A few women published anonymously, but a majority of these female-authored letters actually appeared in novels written by men and were attributed to the male authors. In the eighteenth century, when epistolary novels were most popular, publishers would market writings by women, and often printed letters against the writer's wishes (Goldsmith 55).

Forced into the genre without input, female authors since followed the male established characteristics, which in traditional models reinforce male views of women. Most epistolary novels are love stories, emphasizing distance, confidentiality, and secrecy. These topics will be discussed in later memos. Some of them are characteristics of the letters themselves, but others are a direct result of male restriction.

Newer forms of the epistolary novel offer the chance for female authors to seize control of the genre for the first time in its history. With greater social freedom and the true ability to publish, women can write epistolary novels without (as much) male interference. Elizabeth Campbell argues that epistolary novels can be used to "subvert the language and values of the dominant culture" because they break away from traditional narrative form (333). Campbell twists "feminine" writing from its accepted definition to writing, which reflects females' marginalization. "Women today are doing consciously what women writers have always done... writing in the feminine--that is, writing themselves in a way which reflects their experience as the "other" in a culture in which they have been traditionally voiceless and thus powerless" (ibid.). Modern female authors are using epistolary novels to expose their history as the suppressed gender; they use the characteristics established by males and warp them so they become critics of male dominated society.

Electronic communication epistolary novels offer females even more freedom to deviate from the established traditions and break gender roles. Milne argues that email correspondence promises "the opportunity for 'souls' to 'escape' the biological constraints of gender" (81). Furthermore, Danet argues that "[i]n text-based, digital communication, conventional signals of gender, such as intonation and voice pitch, facial features, body image, nonverbal cues, dress, and

demeanour, are absent," creating the chance for gender-free communication (qtd. in Milne, 88). If gender becomes absent, women have the chance to transform their traditional writing styles and challenge those imposed upon them.

During the rise of epistolary novels, writing styles between men and women were noted and replicated. Simply because the visual and physical elements disappear does not mean that people are unable to assign specific writing to a gender. In fact, feminine and masculine speech and writing have traditional definitions. By supposing that electronic communication eliminates gender constraints, Milne argues that we have moved entirely past these associations, an assertion which is untrue. In modern novels, films, and shows men are still portrayed as the logical, rational gender while females are prone to emotional decision-making and fits. These connotations do not disappear simply because the in-person indications do.

INTRAOFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: GENDER NEUTRALITY
DATE: 2005
DOC NUMBER:4 OF 11

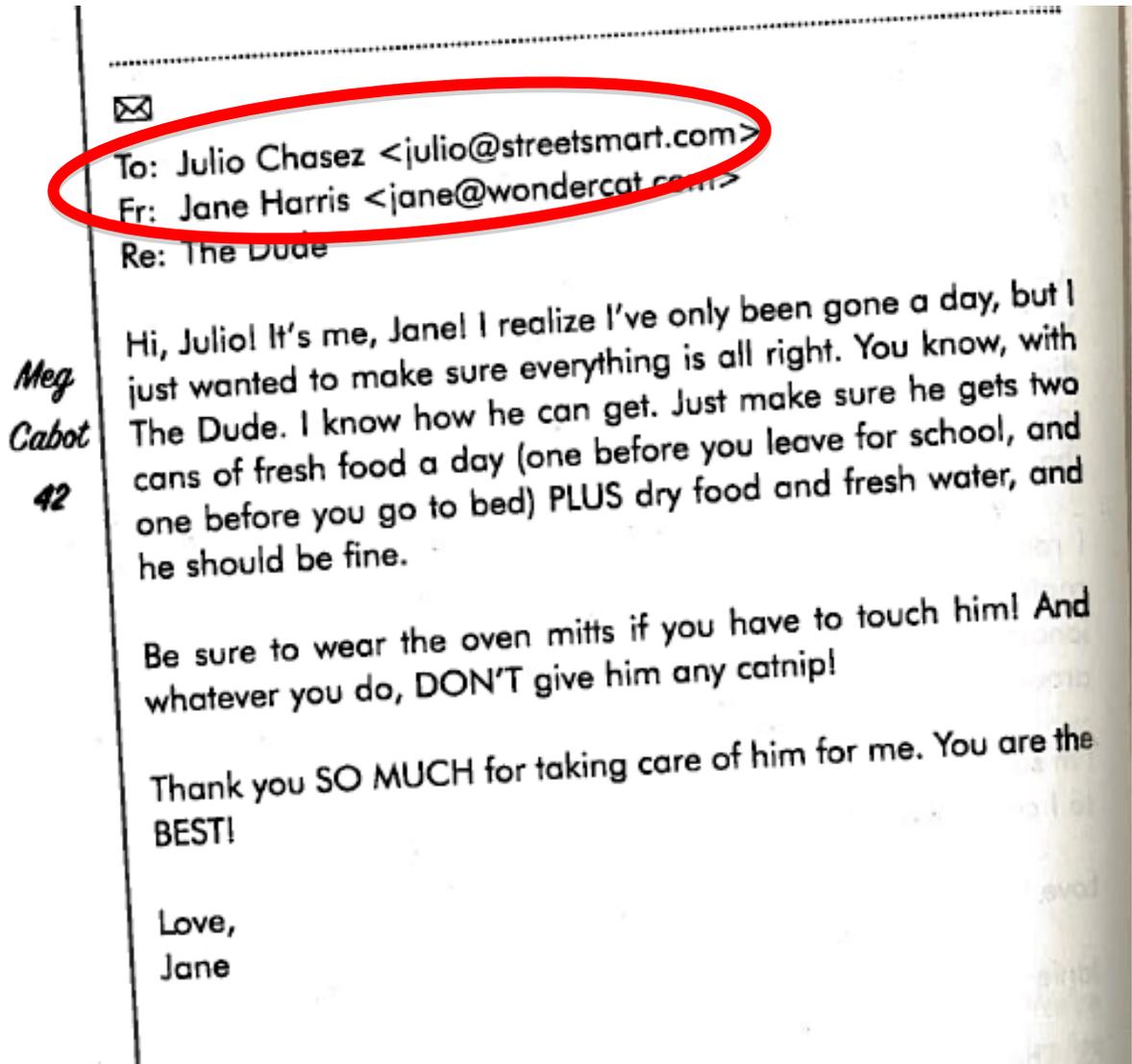
If the modern epistolary novel is a way for women to shrug off their suppression, then gender-neutral emails should further that attempt. Milne argues electronic communication has the capacity of removing gender and placing males and females on equal ground. Is electronic communication disembodied to the point where gender is never present? Or do word choices, use of emoticons, and message length give enough clues as to the writer's gender? Males in the 1700s recognized that women's writing had a fundamentally different style. By fundamental, we do not mean inherent in that it cannot be changed. Women may be taught a specific stylized writing or, more likely, their writing reflects the social lessons learned from birth. Women are taught to express emotions, whereas males learn to suppress them as "not masculine." Consequently, women's writing is more likely to demonstrate emotion. The absence of physical cues in electronic communication does not eliminate all characteristics of gender. Electronic communication allows individuals to more easily misrepresent their gender, but until males and females are trained to adopt the same stylistic choices, readers are likely to associate certain attributes to one gender or the other.

In Cabot's *Boy* series, the evidence of female versus male communication is clear, even if signatures were excluded. Her writing suggests that even in the absences of the letter writer, her gender and that of her characters cannot disappear. Firstly, to format the communications like authentic emails, Cabot must include the "to" and "from" email addresses. The characters may not include signatures, but their emails still indicate who is writing to whom (see Attachment 1B). The way Cabot portrays the reaction to the same event by a female character and a male character in *The Boy Next Door* also demonstrates that authors still see a difference between male and female writing (see Attachment 2B). The female-authored email is longer, traced with concern and personal details, whereas the email written by the male is short, abrupt, and contains only irritation, a commonly acceptable emotion for men to express. Admittedly, the female in this example is Mel's best friend and the male is her boss, but throughout the novel Mel and her boss have a friendly relationship. He is not abrupt because he is her boss or dislikes her; instead, Cabot conveys him through staccato writing to differentiate him from the female-authored correspondences. In *Every Boy's Got One* she uses a similar

technique when females email each other and males email between themselves. The emails Jane and Holly send one another are paragraph-length for the most part, unless one is surprised by a response and wants a quick explanation. The exchanges between Cal and Mark on the other hand are rarely longer than a sentence or two (Cabot, *Every* 43-56).

Emails may allow authors to explore the narrative element of letter exchanges, but they do not appear to permit total disregard for the traditional definitions of feminine and masculine writing.

Attachment 1B



Attachment 2B

To: Mel Fuller <melissa.fuller@theyjournal.com>
From: Nadine Wilcock <nadine.wilcock@theyjournal.com>
Subject: You are in trouble

Mel, where were you? I saw that Amy Jenkins from Human Resources skulking around your cubicle. I think you're in for another one of those tardy notices. What is this, your fiftieth?

You better have a good excuse this time, because George was saying a little while ago that gossip columnists are a dime a dozen, and that he could get Liz Smith over here in a second to replace you if he wanted to. I think he was joking. It was hard to tell because the Coke machine is broken, and he hadn't had his morning Mountain Dew yet.

By the way, did something happen last night between you and Aaron? He's been playing Wagner in his cubicle again. You know how this bugs George. Did you two have another fight?

Are we doing lunch later or what?

Nad :-)

To: Mel Fuller <melissa.fuller@theyjournal.com>
From: George Sanchez <george.sanchez@theyjournal.com>
Subject: Where the hell are you?

Where the hell are you? You appear to be under the mistaken impression that comp days don't have to be prearranged with your employer.

This is not exactly convincing me that you are columnist material. More like copyedit material, Fuller.

George

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: LETTERS AIDE LOVE
DATE: 1700S
DOC NUMBER:5 OF 11

As mentioned in pervious memos (“What is the epistolary novel”, “Women fight back”), epistolary fiction arose from the male understanding of the “female voice.” Authors established a link between femininity, epistolary, and emotion. It was a link hard to overcome and resulted in a specific narrative in epistolary novels. Men believed “if a woman writes through emotion, then the logical consequence is that she will also write about it, that is, about love” (Jensen 33). Traditional novels in the genre, therefore, are love stories, reflecting this belief. Furthermore, Altman argues “the letter form seems tailored for the love plot, with its emphasis on separation and reunion” (14). She contends that letters easily become “tool[s] for seduction” (ibid.).

In historical epistolary novels we see this emphasis on seduction. Traditionally, the novels feature a male pursuing a woman who does not reciprocate his sexual feelings, and the male employs letters as away to make her a conquest. Often, however, when reading or discussing these novels an important fact is overlooked: the letters are based on the writings of real women. “For love letters in particular, the female voice was perceived as the superior vehicle of expression, even when it was not from a female author” (Goldsmith, “Authority” 55). Examined through this lens, historical epistolary novels written by males become stories not of simple seduction, but “sexual victimization” (Jensen 34). Moreover, the epistolary novel as a romance makes both the seducer and the seduced more active in perpetuating the affair. Since letters demand action as a way to continue communication, it “forces the seduced as well as the seducer to play a more aggressive role” (Altman 20). The seduced must respond to a letter for the seducer to continue the relationship. The seduced must participate in her own seduction, transforming from a woman being chased into a willing participant. Women become “willing and writing victims, of unreciprocated desire” (Jensen 34). In this universe, “men are masters of amorous relations”

(ibid.). Altman's assertion that letters are useful tools of seduction means that they are used for males to force their sexual advantage upon resisting females.

Becoming active participants, on the other hand, allows women to fight against male domination. As the genre expanded and publishers began to market to the women whose letters men imitate, the stories became not just about the male triumphing over the female. By responding to the letters, the female can open the seducer to falling in love, not just conquering, because she offers part of herself and demands a response and reciprocation. In her research, Altman gives several examples in which the man, intent on forcing the woman into a relationship, instead falls in love himself (21). In this manner, the epistolary romance allows women authors to fight subtly against their gender's repression by making the male seducer succumb to his own plan.

In modern times, we see this shift develop further. Authors pen female characters that better represent the place women hold in the social structure. Emails and IMs allow women to speak unimpeded because they are not denied access to the platforms based on their gender. With a freer capacity to express their voice, women reveal more about themselves and males are less able to distance - both physically and emotionally - themselves from the objects of their affection.

INTRAOFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: THE NEW FEMINISM
DATE: 2000
DOC NUMBER:6 OF 11

Cabot's books are feminist in a subtle way that questions the male traits of traditional epistolary novels without rejecting femininity entirely. The *Boy* series may focus on women who gossip, love shoes, dream of love, and plan weddings, but they are also independent females striving to be independently successful. Cabot plays within the rules established by men in that her characters do concern themselves with love and other matters deemed "domestic," like caring for cats (both Mel and Jane are concerned with the welfare of pets appearing in their respective novels). Unlike traditional epistolary novels, however, the female is not the being chased in the beginning. These are not stories of the male seducer forcing himself on the weak woman. Rather, the lovers meet by chance and establish a mutual attraction. It is only in the end after the male makes a mistake that he pursues the female character. Once the chase starts, it is not a game of seduction, but repentance. The power of continuing the relationship resides with the women because they have the option of forgiving - or not.

In *The Boy Next Door*, John, pretending to be Max, watches the true Max's aunt's cats. John is simply an acquaintance of Max and doing him a favor. Max believes it is easier for John to pretend to be him than to tell Mel he does not have time to watch the cats. As Mel and John begin to date, Mel still does not know the truth. Eventually, someone who knows the real Max alerts Mel to the duplicity, and she understandably ends her relationship with John, despite both of them having fallen in love. John must then win Mel back by first explaining the situation and re-winning her trust. He succeeds in the latter by participating in Mel's wild scheme to entrap Max so the police can charge him with attempted murder (spoiler: Max tried to kill his aunt for her money). Mel and John's relationship is not one of him seducing her with no regards to her feelings. He feels guilty for lying to her and asks Max several times if he can tell Mel the truth. Once he does hurt her feelings, he makes amends. By placing John in the position of trying to

win back Mel, Cabot situates the male lover in a subordinate position. Mel has the power because she is given a choice to accept John's explanation, apologies, and penance.

Every Boy's Got One has a parallel relationship. Jane and Cal do not like each other in the beginning. In fact, Jane despises Cal upon their first interaction. In a traditional epistolary novel, Cal would immediately establish a plan to seduce Jane because she does not want him. Instead, he dismisses her because of her dislike for him. Towards the end of the novel, Cal makes a move on Jane, who instantly rejects him. When Cal writes in his blackberry and reflects on the moment, he Cal sounds like a womanizer (or modelizer as Jane deems him), stating that it was just a kiss and meant nothing. He could go down the path of the traditional seducer and begin to chase her, but instead Cabot spins it around and forces Cal to realize that he kissed Jane because he is already in love with her. The apparatus Cabot uses to cause Cal to recognize this fact is that he reads Jane's travel diary (see Attachment 1C). *Every Boy's Got One* uses elements of the seduction from traditional novels but makes it less about the man's influence on the woman and more about how women can sway men. Cal and Jane's love story include a woman's writing read without permission (letters published without the writers consent), kissing without mutual understanding (participation in unreciprocated desire), and the male falling in love after exposure to the female's writing (seducer falls for woman with whom he exchanges letters). These three items are present in traditional novels, but historically they are used as representation of women's lower status. Cabot twists them so that the male must accept his own feelings before truly winning the woman. Jane does not admit, even to herself, that she likes Cal until after he has already confessed his love. Furthermore, after one of Cal's bed partners arrives at the wedding and scares Jane away, Cal must find a way to explain to Jane that the other woman is no longer in the picture and prove his love. Once again, the female has the power to enter the relationship or not. The male offers himself and gives the woman the choice to reciprocate.

Attachment 1C

And I think I have every right in the world to see what's being said about me, as I imagine she's had some rather choice things to say on the subject. Perhaps there's even a libel suit in my future. Who knows?

And yet I can't help feeling that I'm overstepping some boundary here.

Hmmmm. Quite a moral dilemma.

.....

PDA of Cal Langdon

Anal retentive?

.....

PDA of Cal Langdon

Modelizer??

.....

PDA of Cal Langdon

I'm going to kill Mark for the appendage thing.

.....

PDA of Cal Langdon

Apparently I'm a sardonic bastard, as well.

.....

PDA of Cal Langdon

I...

I don't know what to say. Except...

Except I'm starting to think it wasn't just a kiss after all. In fact, seeing it all laid out there like that in her book, in black-and-white—all of my interactions with this woman, I mean, in more or less graphic detail—I'm starting to realize that it might be... it could **ONLY** be.

*Meg
Cabot
276*

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: LETTERS ACT AS MEDIATORS OF DISTANCE
DATE: 1700S
DOC NUMBER: 7 OF 11

One inherent trait of epistolary novels that was not imposed by male design is the physical distance between the characters exchanging letters. Letters are sent between two or more characters separated by location. The characters use letters to communicate across this distance. Letters both emphasize and bridge distance; they can reflect both the absence and the presence of the writer/receiver. "At one moment he may proclaim the power of the letter to make the distant addressee present... and at the next lament the absence of the loved one and the letter's powerlessness to replace the spoken word or physical presence" (Altman 14). Letters constantly points to the importance of the distances between writers. "The letter lies halfway between the possibility of total communication and the risk of no communication at all" (Altman 43), and as such the writers are "neither totally separated nor totally united" (ibid.).

Since she is not united physically with her lover, "the letter writer in epistolary fiction is usually isolated" (Campbell 338), just as women historically were isolated. Seclusion means that the heroine seeks someone else. "The letter writer must speak to someone about her difficulties... she must vent her feelings, and she conjures up the presence of the addressee as she writes/speaks" (Campbell 337). She can break free from her isolation by speaking, giving voice to her problems. As we discuss in a later memo, "Confidence and Confidentiality," this confidant often advises the letter writer, and the heroine adapts based on the response.

Additionally, part of the nature of sending letters is that the responder receives the letter and writes back, which creates a delay between letters. Traditional epistolary novels, thus, feature discontinuous narratives. Time passes between the information in each letter, thus the reader of the novel will miss events occurring within the characters' world.

Interestingly, distance changes most between traditional forms and the new modern novels, perhaps because it is connected to the actual form of the communications rather than an attribute assigned from male understandings of communications. Electronic media eliminates both the physical distance and the mandatory timing gaps. Some characters may remain separated by a physical distance, but they do not *have* to be. Many electronic exchanges take place while in the same office building, room, or even car. Email, IMs, and other new media are also practically instantaneous. There is no delay between sending and receiving, allowing characters to converse in real time. Keskinen argues that the accelerated rate of exchange possible with electronic communication can help eliminate the sense of distance, “heighten[ing] the illusion of presence, voice, and immediacy,” (384) because it becomes more like a conversation taking place in person rather than one conducted across space and time.

INTRAOFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: DISTANCE IN THE MODERN OFFICE
DATE: 2000
DOC NUMBER:8 OF 11

The nature of electronic communication changes how people send and receive correspondences. Handwritten letters emphasize the physical distance between characters. Characters can use emails, IMs, and other digital means to communicate both when they are separated by distance and when they are in the same area. Cabot employs both of these situations in her novels. The characters receive emails or other mediated messages from secondary characters who are further away, allowing the characters to write the narratives seen in traditional epistolary novels. The main characters, however, are nearly always within walking or speaking distance when they exchange emails. Unlike in traditional novels, the heroine is not isolated.

As mentioned in the preceding memo, electronic communication allows for exchanges to take place at real time speed. This change in speed brings the characters to the present more than in traditional novels. Whereas in letters, where the characters reflect on past events, emails allow characters to reflect on events as they happen. Both *The Boy Next Door* and *Every Boy's Got One* include moments in which the heroine is emailing a friend while events unfold around her. One of the more comical incidents occurs in *Every Boy's Got One* when Jane and Holly discuss Cal first taking off his shirt, then diving into the pool and swimming laps. At one point Jane exclaims, "He's ruining my afternoon of total relaxation. How can I relax when someone is exercising that hard in front of me?" (*Every* 189). Holly responds, "He'll stop soon. Oh, see. There you go" (190). The women are able to have a conversation in real time by using email. They are also able to keep the topic secret, a subject discussed in the next set of memos.

The immediacy of digital conversations fractures the story even more than the exchange of letters. As mentioned in "What is an epistolary novel?" the novel reader is only able to know what the character offers in the communications. In

traditional letters, the characters write in narratives to explain occurrences to a character separated by distance and therefore unable to experience the same events as the writer. In electronic exchanges, the writer and the recipient can be next to each other. The reader of the novel, thus, must imagine more of the actions. As McCloud argues, the reader must fill in the gutter, or in novels, the lack of narrative. Characters report on incidents and then expect the recipient to see the event for herself. In *The Boy Next Door*, this type of exchange occurs when one person wants to warn the other of the arrival or location of another person. For example, George writes to Mel's best friend to alert them both that John arrived downstairs. At this point Mel knows of John's deceit, but not the purpose of his deceit. She tries to avoid him, with the help of this alert from George. From George's email the reader knows that Mel is in the bathroom, and from the next two that she was unsuccessful in her goal and some type of altercation ensued. The reader must decide what the altercation entailed, how quickly it happened, and how it ended. An example from *Every Boy's Got One* occurs when Holly alerts Jane to the fact that the men are having trouble packing the car (see Attachment 1D). From this email, the reader knows that Holly is amused, but it is up to the reader to decide if the men are frustrated, constantly moving the suitcases, nearing tantrums, shoving the suitcase, or any other imaginable reaction to the problem. In this manner, epistolary novels that use electronic communications between characters who can watch the same event require more participation by the reader of the novel. She must, as McCloud says, "commit the crime" herself.

Some of the characters use email to the exclusion of or avoidance of having in-person conversations. Mel will respond to emails from her HR representative in *The Boy Next Door*, but avoids her when she comes in-person. Jane and Cal, in *Every Boy's Got One* first begin a conversation about Cal's dislike of marriage. He wants to discuss it in person, "Perhaps we should discuss this face-to-face. My persuasive powers are at a disadvantage on handheld portable devices" (113). When Jane avoids him, Cal must continue using email: "Since you seem so reticent to discuss this face-to-face, I see no alternative other than to continue our e-versation" (155). Talking to people who are in the same vicinity as you on electronic media may reflect changing norms of societal interaction, away from verbal and towards mediated forms of communication.

In both novels, however, it is only once the lovers talk in person that the female can forgive the male, suggesting that Cabot believes electronic communication cannot substitute for in-person conversations.

Attachment 1D

Meg
Cabot
86

J



To: Jane Harris <jane@wondercat.com>
Fr: Holly Caputo <holly.caputo@theyjournal.com>
Re: Where are you?

Outside. Hurry up and finish and get out here. You've got to see this. Mark and Cal are trying to cram all of our bags into the trunk, only they won't fit. So they're doing physics. All serious, like it's a puzzle or something. Something actually IMPORTANT. Get out here, or you'll miss it.

Holly

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: CONFIDENCE, CONFIDENTIALITY, AND SECRECY
DATE: 1700S
DOC NUMBER:9 OF 11

Isolated from others, the heroine of an epistolary novel must rely on her letters for communication. Altman argues that “the confidential role, letter, tone, and relationship are necessary components of epistolary narrative” (83). The heroine often seeks a confidant other than her lover. “The epistolary confidant... derives his importance from the friendship of the hero” (Altman 52). The heroine will confide in this other character because she is not the letter writer’s lover and appears loyal. Even when the confidant does not contribute much to the story, the very presence of her allows the main character to express feelings and thoughts otherwise hidden. “More often than not, letter writers restrain themselves with the lover (or mystify or deceive him) while revealing their real sentiments to the confidant” (Altman 70). Campbell agrees with Altman, arguing that “epistolary fiction is... very often confessional (49)”. The writer of letters can speak of subjects she never otherwise would. Historically, the trend in epistolary novels is that by sharing too much information, the letter writer causes the event the characters fear in the beginning of the novel but then for too little sharing to impede the character’s reconciliation. Altman argues that epistolary novels fit a pattern of “too much confidence is... the source of the lovers’ fall in the first half of the novel, [and] too little is... an impediment to their redemption in the second half” (49).

Altman divides confidants into two categories, passive and active. The passive confidant listens to confessions, stories, and past events. She is absent by definition, cannot witness events, and is more of a sounding board exercise for the writer. More commonly, the confidant is active and contributes information or influences the story. Confidants are more developed characters, with defined, discernible personalities. Active confidants are further split into *information contributor* and *independent agent*. *Information contributor* confidants offer new information unknown to the main character, give advice, ask questions, and fill

in parts of the narrative. When the main character acts on the confidant's advice or otherwise begins to influence the actions of the character or story, the confidant becomes an *independent agent* and can even become a protagonist or antagonist.

Since the heroine must explain the context around her feelings, she must also describe some of the events causing those feelings. Altman discusses that "the information that the confidant receives, as well as that which he supplies, is more likely to take a long narrative form in the narrative medium" (54). Kauffman agrees with Altman and further argues, "the epistolary gesture always entails the invention of a confidant who is absent at the moment of narrating, and it is therefore an act of dissimulation as well as of confidence" ("Writing the Female" 223). In novels with modern communication, however, there are subtle changes to this aspect. Instead of long narratives, electronic forms offer, for the most part, short messages. They are more conversational, although in order to not confuse the reader of the novel, some emails must be longer than they would realistically be in order to convey enough information for events to unfold.

The confidential nature of letters exchanged in the novels is a double-edged sword. It breeds secrecy because the heroine is expressing feelings or thoughts she does not want her lover or other secondary characters to know. This secrecy opens the correspondence to danger because there is something for others to discover. Altman argues, "correspondence, whether between friends or lovers, is often carried on secretly, thus making any letter a potential disclosure if it falls into the wrong hands" (59). It can be a disaster even if the topic "does not constitute a particularly secret revelation" (*ibid.*). Altman further argues that the "confessional letters and indeed all secret correspondence are... tinged with fatality" (61). Secret letters are always dangerous. From a historical perspective, it is interesting that the letters expressing the heroine's feelings are the ones most likely to be kept secret. Emotions are the aspects which men believe women are better at expressing, yet are also the ones that female characters are forced to hide.

INTRAOFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: OF CONFIDENCE AND SECRETS
DATE: 2000
DOC NUMBER:10 OF 11

Secrecy and the sharing of information between confidants become more problematic when using electronic communication. In addition to being almost instantaneous, the ownership of a communication is questionable. People can pretend to be different people (as we see in *The Boy Next Door*), news can travel unintentionally (as seen in most of the *Boy* series), and others can have access to it besides the intended receiver (*The Boy Next Door*, i.e., when HR accesses emails between Mel and her best friend). Cabot's characters write to each other from work in *The Boy Next Door*. Some emails are work related, but those that further the plot and contain the most confidential information are written during work hours. The heroines must hide these communications from their bosses and other co-workers. In *Every Boy's Got One*, which differs from the other two works in the series because it takes place entirely outside the office, secrecy comes from the fact that two characters are trying to keep their conversation from the other two, often while in the same vehicle (airplane or car).

Most of the confidants in the *Boy* series fall in Altman's *independent agent* category, as protagonists. There are some other characters that are antagonists, though the main character has little interaction with them. These antagonists, instead, write letters to other *independent agents*, who then influence the character (all of Max and John's exchanges for example). Through this relationship one sees that electronic communication offers more complicated relationships and plot mechanisms: characters can instantly communicate with other characters, who may influence the heroine. Distances may no longer separate the heroine from her lover or confidant, but that also holds true for those who wish harm.

The pattern of first confiding too much and then too little, which appears in traditional epistolary novels, is also present in the *Boy* series. *The Boy Next Door* is the best example of this pattern since at the novel's start, the main female

character assumes particulars based on the e-mails and notes exchanged. After learning that John lied to her, however, the main character fails to use the same medium (email) to discover the truth and almost destroys her happy ending as a result. It is only once she accepts her lover's written explanation that she can solve the mystery of her dying neighbor and her nephew.

INTRAOFFICE MEMORANDUM

TO: HISTORY OF THE BOOK
FROM: AURA BOOKS, INC.
SUBJECT: MEG CABOT
DATE: NOVEMBER 22, 2013
DOC NUMBER: 11 OF 11

Electronic communications in epistolary novels offer the chance for females to finally take control of the genre that for so long was considered theirs, and yet dominated by males. Cabot's *Boy* series is what some call "chick lit" today. While this term is derogatory because it implies that literature written for women about typically feminine topics are somehow less important in essence because it is about those topics, Cabot indisputably writes for females. She, therefore, may be the best person to begin the experiment with epistolary novels. Cabot acknowledges that it is okay for women to read books that are written with them in mind, but she does so in a way that creates strong female characters. There are some feminists who of course will argue that because the novels are basically love stories, they are not worthwhile, but just because these books are easy reads – like reading notes from your best friends – does not mean that they are unworthy of attention.

Cabot's books represent a new wave in feminism, one in which women recognize that to be independent and receive equality they do not necessarily have to give up all characteristics viewed as "feminine." Women can still dream of love and play with Barbies and learn how to take care of themselves without males dominating them. Jane admits that as a child she played out weddings with her dolls, but that does not mean she is in rush to marry; she may be an artist, but she supports herself and got there by herself, just as Cal did in his career. Mel may be soft-hearted for cats, slightly gullible, but she is not afraid to stick up for herself when she learns of John's deceit and Max's guilt. These are female characters that women of today can look up to, not the seduced women of epistolary past.

The *Boy* series employs digital methods of communicating to take elements of traditional epistolary novels and subvert them to fight against the male

dominance so prevalent even today. Including emails, IMs, memos, and other current forms of documents can make the epistolary novel relevant again. See Attachment 1E for sources used during this series of memos and for further reading.

Thank you,
Patch Books, Inc.

Attachment 1E

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