

# You've Got Lies: Chick Flicks and the World's Approach to Men and Marriage

by Beth Spraul

I have quite the extensive movie collection. Actually, my husband says I have an extensive "chick-flick" collection. I remember in college when my girlfriends and I would try to borrow each other's movies. It was often a useless exercise because we would discover we already had all the same titles. The women will know some of the ones I speak of . . . "Pride & Prejudice," "Sense & Sensibility," "You've Got Mail," "Ever After," "Sleepless in Seattle," . . . you can likely name your own list of must-have romantic classics.

But why does Hollywood know how to make a movie that most women will not only love, but want to *own* -- and then (this is the part that perplexes my husband) be willing to watch countless times, sighing or tearing each time at the same sappy endings? Could it be that these movies strike an emotional nerve -- a nerve that longs for the bliss of falling in love with the perfect man or the rush of romance that will replace our emptiness and loneliness?

Whether we realize it or not, as we munch our popcorn, films communicate underlying emotional messages to us. What are these messages teaching us about life, love, and romance? Better yet, what do these films teach us about the nature of true masculinity and femininity? Does watching such movies actually affect our understanding of romance or shape how we go about looking for this ideal husband?

I think the answer is yes.

We may think we are savvy enough to detect the subtle lies present in this genre of films. You might be reading this saying, "What's wrong with a little escapist entertainment every once in a while? It's just a Hollywood story, and I know it's just fantasy." If that's the case, then why is there still that sigh or even a tear(s) after the 20th viewing of your favorite romantic movie? Something in us is stirred.

In this article, I'd like to discuss briefly what I think are three powerful lies communicated to and believed by women through this genre of "chick-flicks" as well as "chick-lit" (literature).

Let me start with a somewhat provocative, but reasonable comparison. Among thoughtful Christians, one will hear significant concern for how the culture of pornography harmfully affects men by distorting their view of sex and women. Pornography is an extremely destructive industry that has perverted God's good design for sex within marriage and allowed men to view women as objects for their own selfish pleasure. It also grossly distorts a man's view of the way normal women approach sex and sexuality, turning women into idols who are always sexually ravenous and are perfectly happy engaging in physical sex acts that are completely divorced from any sense of commitment, love, security or relational intimacy. Counselors consistently report that when men indulge such a distorted view of women and their sexuality, they become dissatisfied with their own wives and sex lives, tend to evaluate potential spouses based chiefly on physical attractiveness, or bring impossible expectations for sex into marriage. All of the above lead to sin and heartbreak.

I'd like to suggest that culture attacks women similarly — it is just a bit more subtle. The lies told to women are introduced at the level of women's emotions (less harmful, right?), in how they dream about men, and in what they long for relationally. Like pornography, chick-flicks take a good gift from God (romance, relational intimacy) that women are created to desire, and distort it

by presenting as “normal” an unbiblical and unrealistic picture of men, love and marriage. And just like men who buy into the lies of pornography, women who believe that their husbands and marriages should always be like what they see on the screen will be sinfully dissatisfied with God’s good gift to them of a “normal” husband and marriage.

Obviously, the analogy is not perfect. *Unlike pornography*, it is possible to engage in watching “chick flicks” and have it be a sin-free activity. With pornography, the very act of viewing it is *always* harmful and *always* a sin. However, before you assume you are able to watch chick-flicks and read romance novels without harmful effects to your expectations for men and marriage, consider the following lies often propagated by these movies, and think about them in comparison to what Scripture teaches.

**Lie #1: Men think of romance and relational intimacy exactly like women do!**

No they don’t. Just like men and women are wired differently (by God’s good design!) when it comes to sex and sexuality, they are also wired differently when it comes to emotional and relational intimacy. Everyone is unique, but in general, men will tend to be less emotionally driven, more analytical, more compartmentalized in their thinking, and more into problem solving than verbal “processing.” Given these differences, men tend to need less relational intimacy, it tends to come less naturally to them, and—here’s the kicker—*they tend to think less about romance than women do!*

Though these differences are real, they are part of God’s wise design for complementarity between men and women. Women often bring relational strengths to the equation (gentleness, more nurturing, often communicative, etc.). These contrasting emotional tendencies actually help men be steady in leadership and decision making. However, men need to work at these areas of intimacy and romance in caring for their wives. They are not off the hook simply because it is less natural to them! C.J. Mahaney’s book, *Sex, Romance, and the Glory of God* is a popular resource for many Christian husbands as C.J. provides very practical “surefire ways to kindle romance” within marriage. If such knowledge was so intuitive to men (as Hollywood wants women to think), men wouldn’t have to seek proactively to learn how to love and serve their wives in these ways. As women/wives, we should realize that, on balance, most “typical” men are not like Mr. Darcy or (insert favorite romantic movie/novel character here) all the time (though they may have their moments!), and that’s actually part of God’s design. As we relate to our husbands or go about finding a husband-to-be, we need to remind ourselves of this truth.

**Lie #2: If I marry the right man, all will be right in my life.**

This is the lie in most of Jane Austen’s novels and their movie spin-offs. Dave Harvey wisely points this out in his book, *When Sinners Say I Do*, when he observes that each of Austen’s books conveniently ends at the wedding. The reader is left to assume that the happy couple lives on in complete marital bliss.

Also, the female main character always marries a wealthy and handsome husband usually after she’s rejected other eligible and worthy suitors. In Austen’s world, marriage and Mr. Right are the ultimate things that will truly satisfy. Marriage is also a trouble-free commitment that only yields joy. Austen wants you to forget that even Mr. Darcy is a sinner and that marriage will have its trials and disappointments.

It is good and right for women to desire marriage and a godly husband, but we must realize that all husbands will hurt us in some way eventually and that marriage is hard work as two sinners rely on Christ in the work of dying to their selfishness and growing their relationship.

Consider this last but most important point in contrast with this lie. Although marriage will certainly provide tremendous joy in your life, it will fall significantly short of making all things right. There are parts of this life in a fallen world that will remain difficult and broken, simply because of the presence of sin, regardless of when or whom you marry. Even the commitment, love and romance between a faithful husband and wife cannot answer all of this life's longings.

We need to remember that there is someone who will make all things right, but he isn't your husband or husband-to-be, but rather Jesus Christ, the One who was crushed for your transgressions (Isa. 53) and bridged the infinite gap between you and your Creator by his death on the cross (Col 2:13-14). Being united to him in his death and resurrection will ultimately make all things right not in this life, but in the life to come.

If we as women approach our husbands with expectations that he will be the primary source that takes away all our loneliness, insecurities, fears and longings for love, we hold him to a standard no human being is able to meet in this life. We set ourselves up for great disappointment through these unreasonable expectations. When our husband doesn't deliver such total sweeping happiness to our lives, we can be tempted to blame him when it is our own worldly and idolatrous expectations that are to blame! Such expectations can even lead us to be discontented wives who are unsatisfied with the day to day realities of life and responsibility in marriage. We can become unsatisfied with our husband's love and service and care because marrying him didn't cure our deepest emotional struggles.

### **Lie #3: I will know that a man is right for me by feelings I get when I'm with him.**

How many movies have been made or books written with the predictable plot line of two strangers meeting, spending two glorious weeks (or days or even hours) together and then ending up at the end as certain soul mates (after dodging a few obstacles like disapproving parents or social status differences along the way)? We see this in the tag line for "Sleepless in Seattle":

"What if someone you never met, someone you never saw, someone you never knew, was the only someone for you?"

There are countless examples I could quote of the entertainment industry's lie that emotional experience and the subjective experience of attraction or "chemistry" *trump all else in discerning if someone is right for you*. This lie insinuates that relational fulfillment hinges on the emotions of romantic experience like the "chemistry" or connection in conversation or perhaps "the way he looks at me." We see this with lines like, "With one touch of his hand, I just knew..." "You complete me," or "I wanted it to be you." (Ladies, can you name those movies?!)

The dangers of putting all of your stock in emotion are serious. First, you can easily convince yourself that you are experiencing "true love" while having little regard for a man's faith, character, service or ability to sacrifice himself for others. Second, for women considering a man who initiates a relationship with them, this over-emphasis on the emotional experience and level of attraction/chemistry can influence such women to dismiss possible suitors based on her "intuition." I've seen it happen—a woman doesn't immediately "feel" that a man is her "type" or the "ideal" that she's had in her mind for her husband—so the man is simply dismissed without ever having a chance to demonstrate his possible worthiness. I've been the woman in such danger, but I'll get to that.

The next time you think about saying "no" to an offer of courtship or even a coffee date, honestly

ask yourself if your answer would be any different if he were tall, extremely handsome, and said his favorite pastimes were taking long walks and writing poetry. None of these are qualities Scripture exhorts you to be looking for! Let me be clear that I am not advocating the other extreme, arguing that attraction and emotional connection have no place in such a decision. However, my concern is that such factors are often elevated above what the Lord values in Scripture. Have any of you ever dismissed a suitor simply because he wasn't what you had always imagined your husband would be? Have you ever turned down a godly brother whom you know is a fruitful, faithful Christian, able to serve others sacrificially and desiring to get to know you in an honorable way, but yet "doesn't seem like the right fit"? If so, are you not guilty of putting greater priority on what you "feel" rather than what you know God values in a man's character?

Ladies, beware of elevating worldly "preferences" and expectations above godly qualities when considering a man. Doing so makes you guilty of the same error that men in the church can make when they elevate physical appearance above biblical character qualities in us. Let us flee from holding on to Hollywood programmed ideals and instead look to God's word for our criteria. Let us stop asking the wrong questions when considering a man, such as: Is he a good dresser? Do others find him attractive? Did I get the "feeling" I always thought I would get when my future husband would ask me out? And, is he romantic? Instead, start asking the right questions: Can he lead me spiritually? Do I see examples of him serving others? Is he humble and teachable? And, do the elders and other godly men commend him?

As Christians, we must place ultimate importance on those biblical qualities the Lord identifies in Scripture. This may mean dying to some worldly desires and preferences that have been fed through our culture but have no eternal weight or importance. Ladies, if you can answer "yes" to all of the questions I suggested above about a man that has pursued you, then carefully consider what would keep you from being willing to get to know him in a courtship.

### **Getting Personal**

I have fought this battle within my own heart. I have been tempted to trust more in my own feelings, preferences, and worldly expectations than in godly wisdom and counsel at crucial times in my life. Here's a glaring example:

When my husband of now nearly six years asked me to begin a courtship with him back in the summer 2002, I was shocked and caught off guard. I was only living in DC for a summer to do my counseling internship, and I didn't feel like I knew him well enough to say "yes" when he asked. To top it off, my first instinct was to say a polite, "no thank you," because he was not at first glance what I "imagined" my future husband to be. For those of you who knew Greg back then (can I get a witness, Michael Lawrence?!), he had a very laid-back type of "California-surfer" style to him—one that I interpreted at the time to translate... "slacker." He had a bold, confident, and outspoken personality, which I interpreted to mean... "arrogant." I knew we had different interests and tastes. He was a crunchy, outdoorsy environmentalist, and I've never been camping in my life!

However, when he asked me to court him, he encouraged me to talk to three elders who knew him best—one who had disciplined him for several years. He told me to feel free to ask them any questions I wanted about his character. I was so impressed that he was willing to open himself up to such scrutiny, allowing these men to speak to me about his strengths and weaknesses so openly. I was interested to hear from these men, instead of having to go on my own limited knowledge. I hoped to base my answer on his character confirmed by others, not on my mere feelings or instinct at the time.

I spent the next several days prayerfully considering his offer. My instinct was to say “no.” He was simply not who I had “imagined” and it didn’t “feel” like a good fit. Yet, through the wise counsel of my dad and older brother, Scott, I met with all three elders separately. I was completely shocked by what they had to say about Greg’s character. They spoke of his humility, how teachable he was, his sacrificial service, his strong, natural leadership ability, his passion for God’s Word and his organized, disciplined work ethic—so much for the arrogant slacker idea! I soon realized that my brief, external evaluation of him was not at all accurate, and that I would actually be crazy to say “no” to the kind of godly man these elders were describing to me. They were describing by their words the kind of man I did want to marry, even if he did dress like he was from a California beach town! One elder said to me, “I’d let my daughter marry him.” Another said, “I’d let my younger sister marry him.” I had a decision to make.

Though he was not at first what I had imagined, and I didn’t feel any magical feeling of “he’s the one,” I realized that I was being pursued by a godly man with clear biblical character qualities. I chose to say yes based largely on the glowing recommendations of three elders who knew him well, not because of a “feeling” I did or didn’t have.

Shortly after starting the courtship, I began to *experience* Greg’s godly character myself. My attraction and affection for him grew quickly and easily, and I was so thankful I had said yes to him. As I started to experience his strong leadership in the pace and details of our relationship, I found it to be a joy to be led by him. Through his thoughtful, tender care for me, his wisdom and insight in our conversations, and his fun-loving, personable nature, the affection for him began to grow and seemed effortless. I praise God for placing wise counselors in my life at the time of our courtship who urged me to prioritize godly character in a man and not let my initial instinct and feelings trump everything else. Our affection for one another continued to grow, and I soon found that this was a much better fit than I could have ever possibly imagined for myself. Five months later, Greg asked me to marry him, and this time I said yes without any hesitation!

### **So, What About You?**

With hopes of fueling some thoughtful, self examination and fruitful discussions, I’d like to challenge you with a few application ideas:

- Be willing to expose this part of your inner life to other Christians. Invite older, wiser counselors into your life to help you discern if you are placing appropriate priority on biblical character qualities when considering relationships with men.
- Have some honest conversations with another wise Christian sister or married couple, and try to understand how you’ve been influenced by the lies mentioned in this article. Ask them to tell you in what ways they see how your thinking and ideals have been influenced.
- If you have let your feelings, preferences, or expectations possibly trump all else in the past—even if that’s meant you’ve said “no” to courtships with godly men that didn’t fit your ideal—be willing to confess this to another wise Christian sister or married couple. Ask them to help you grow in this area of valuing biblical character over your own preferences. Be willing to acknowledge your misplaced priorities in the past. Better still, ask them to hold you accountable to carefully respond differently in the future!
- Instruct your heart by choosing to read good biographies about godly women who

honored the Lord through their faithfulness and sacrifice in their marriages. Fill your mind with these real life stories of other saints living godly lives through decades of marriage and ministry, rather than getting lost in a Hollywood story of little substance.

I recently finished the biography of Elizabeth Prentiss. I was deeply moved by various sections describing the love that was sown between Elizabeth and her husband through their many trials as a couple on a life journey together. Reading the excerpts of their love-filled letters stirred me as I noticed the depth behind their affection for one another in contrast to the shallow love that Hollywood depicts!

Enjoy these closing lines from a letter from Elizabeth to George, written during a season of suffering in their lives. George suffered from chronic sickness and was away from Elizabeth trying to regain his strength on a doctor-recommended trip of forced rest. Elizabeth was left to care for several of their sick children, often battling sickness herself, while desperately hoping her husband's health would be restored. In spite of severe circumstances that could hinder affection and intimacy, Elizabeth wrote:

I found it hard to listen to the sermon with necessary attention this morning, for my thoughts kept wandering to you. I felt grateful to God for having granted me the rich experience of satisfied affection, and almost tremble when I look my felicity in the face. What would have become of me if I had never known the happiness I have found in looking up to, leaning on, admiring and loving you! We ought to bless God every day for our daily joy and solace in each other—and so we do, yet not half enough . . . . What a wonderful thing human love is! Think how by a breath, as it were, you can fill me with ecstasy!

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