

Bridget Jones – the Character: from Column to Book to Media Phenomenon

At the beginning of 1995, Helen Fielding, after a career in television production, was working as a journalist. She had published one well-received satirical novel, *Cause Celeb*, about what happens when the fantasy world inhabited by celebrities and the real world collide. A features editor at the *Independent* invited her to write a column about her own life but the thought of such nationwide exposure was too embarrassing. Instead she took a character from a sitcom she was trying to write and produced columns in her voice. Bridget Jones was born. The potential for embarrassment was still there, however, as Fielding admitted in an interview for the American bookseller Powell's. 'The *Independent* is sort of left-wing, everyone was writing about politics, and I was writing about why you can't find a pair of pantyhose in the morning and losing weight. I thought they'd ditch it after six weeks.' But Bridget immediately struck a chord. Letters started arriving at the offices of the *Independent* from people who recognized themselves or their friends in her. Bridget Jones soon became a phenomenon. The column was transformed into a novel in 1996. The novel became one of the bestselling books of the '90s. A sequel, *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*, was published. That was also a huge bestseller. A film version of the original novel was announced and the search was on for a screen Bridget. After much debate and many column inches devoted to the topic, it was revealed that Renée Zellweger would take the role. The film was duly made

and took tens of millions at the box office. A film of the sequel was made, also starring Renée Zellweger. That made tens of millions. When Helen Fielding began to write the column, she thought it might last for six weeks. By 2007, *Guardian* readers in an online poll placed *Bridget Jones's Diary* alongside *The Catcher in the Rye* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* among the ten novels which best defined the twentieth century. Academics today wrangle over what it might or might not tell us about the present state of feminism or post-feminism. Book-length critical works are published on it. Fan fiction based on the characters proliferates online. Bridget Jones has come a very long way since 1995.

