

Profile

Jennifer Coburn

Writing at night after work, Planned Parenthood executive carves impressive niche as author of four 'chick lit' novels

By Arthur Lighbourn

Jennifer Coburn leads a double life.

By day, she's director of communications and marketing for Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties.

But, as soon as night falls, you'll find her at her home computer writing 'Chick Lit' novels at a prolific rate of almost a novel a year.

Now for anyone not familiar with the term 'Chick Lit,' it's a fast-growing genre within women's fiction, written for women by women, often in a lighthearted and humorous manner, dealing with issues faced by today's women.

Or, as Coburn describes the genre, "It's frothy, light and contemporary."

Two of the most well-known examples of the genre are the best-selling 1996 novel, *Bridget Jones's Diary*, by British writer Helen Fielding that spawned two movies; and *Sex in the City*, a 1997 anthologized collection of columns written by New York columnist Candace Bushnell that inspired the popular TV series and movies starring Sarah Jessica Parker.

Some say classics' author Jane Austen was actu-

ally the first chick lit writer, whose works were published anonymously back in 19th century England.

So far, since 2004, Coburn has written and published four chick lit novels and a novella, with another novel in the hopper, and may soon see her first novel, *The Wife of Reilly*, made into a movie.

"They are now casting with an eye to begin shooting hopefully this summer in England," she revealed.

The comedy plot revolves around a New York woman who secretly launches a vigorous search, complete with singles ads and interviews, to find a new, suitable wife for her husband, Reilly, to replace herself so she can, in good conscience, marry her long-lost but recently united college sweetheart.

Coburn's second chick novel, *Reinventing Mona*, came out in 2005 and her latest novel, *The Queen Gene*, a sequel to her 2006 *Tales from the Crib*, was published in 2007.

And that list doesn't include her novella, *The Second Wife of Reilly*, published in the *This Christmas* (2005) three-novella anthology shared with best-selling chick lit author Jane Green

and Liz Ireland; and an earlier nonfiction handbook for women on how to deal with sexual harassment in the working place.

She averages 15,000 sales per book. "It doesn't put me at the top of *The New York Times*' best seller list, where, of course, I'd like to be, but it's fine and good enough to keep me in the game," she said.

Not bad, in fact, for someone who sort of backed into writing after witnessing her father's long struggle for financial stability in the arts that left him sick with terminal lung cancer and penniless, convincing her she could never depend on writing to provide a steady, reliable living, but, what the heck, living or no living, she simply couldn't deny what she was all about.

She had to write.

Undoubtedly, it's in her genes.

"When I talk at high schools now I say just go ahead and follow your dream because that's what you're going to end up doing anyway," she said.

Her dad, Shelly Coburn, had been a song lyricist in New York whose credits included the 1964 song "Only a Fool Breaks His Own Heart," co-written with musician Norman Bergen. It was recorded by several top artists in the 1970s and won a Gold Record in Holland. Her mom was an avid theatergoer, who worked for 40 years as an administrative assistant in the Theater Department of *The New York Times*.

We interviewed the 43-year-old author and working mom in her bungalow which she shares with her attorney husband of 16 years, William O'Neill, and their 12-year-old daughter, Katie.

The walls of her home office attest to her passions.

Displayed are 15 writing award plaques from the San Diego Press Club and the Society of Professional Journalists, ("I probably should take some of them down.") framed mementoes of her books replete with well-wisher signatures, plus innumerable family photos.

Coburn is a petite, 5-foot-3, with long blonde hair and hazel-green eyes.



Jennifer Coburn

Photo/Jon Clark

But make no mistake. Like her fictional protagonists, she's no shrinking violet.

She and her husband met at an improvisational comedy class which he was taking to overcome his shyness (his sister enrolled him) and

she sued and received a legal settlement from the company.

Wanting something good to come out of the experience, she said: "I took that money to take a year and interview hundreds of women" who had been sexu-

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Coburn was attending "because I was not" [shy that is].

Born and raised in New York of a Jewish father and Italian mother and having earned a B.A. in communications from the University of Michigan in 1988, she moved to San Diego and worked in sales for awhile until she was sexually harassed by her boss.

ally harassed in the work place.

The resultant nonfiction book, *Take Back Your Power: A Working Woman's Response to Sexual Harassment*, advises women who find themselves in similar situations to become "unequivocally assertive."

Forget about being "nice and diplomatic." React, she suggests, with the delicacy of

a hammer.

She subsequently went to work for Planned Parenthood because "I just decided I wanted to find a job that I could be passionate about and that I could wake up every morning excited to go into work and feel driven by a mission...and I also wanted to do more writing."

She recently rejoined Planned Parenthood in her current position of communications and marketing director, after a "12-year extended maternity leave."

During her 12-year hiatus, she developed the habit of writing in the evenings after she put her daughter to bed. Her nightly writing goal was, and is, 2,000 words in four hours. She works from a skeletal outline and then lets her characters do their living and growing as she writes.

"I had one character who showed up for lunch and stayed through the entire book," she recalled. She provides what the characters need to develop or grow "and the action takes care of itself." She generally completes a book in six to nine months.

As for her chosen genre, chick lit, she said: "A lot of people dismiss it as fluff. I think it has its place. It's entertaining, a nice escape, and often there are terrific insights and observations.

"I have no problem with being called a chick lit author. Here's why I like what I do. I don't pretend that you're going to read my book and it's going to change your life, but, I got a note from an emergency room nurse once that said she sees the most horrible tragedies every single day and I love your books because they make me laugh and they take me away..."

"And that's where I get my gratification, knowing people got something out of this, that they walk away feeling a little lighter."

She is currently finishing up her fifth novel titled *Field of Schemes*, "about the highly dysfunctional world of kids' sports."

For more about Coburn and her books, visit: www.jennifercoburn.com

Quick Facts

Name: Jennifer Coburn

Distinction: Director of communications and marketing for Planned Parenthood of San Diego and Riverside Counties, Jennifer Coburn is also the author of four "chick lit" novels and a novella. One of her books, *The Wife of Reilly*, is currently being cast for a feature film.

Born: New York City, 43 years ago

Education: B.A. in communications from the University of Michigan, 1988

Family: She and her attorney husband, William O'Neill, have been married 16 years. Their daughter, Katie, is 12.

Interests: Reading, travel, theater, karaoke, comedy, watching her daughter play soccer and dinner parties with friends who love to laugh.

Recent Reading: *The Help*, a first novel by Kathryn Stockett

Favorite Films: "Crash," "Hoop Dreams" and "It's Complicated"

Philosophy of Life: "Live life as if you are terminal."