

Bridget Jones Deserved Better. We All Did.

Helen Fielding's ditzy heroine was all the rage when she was introduced to American audiences in 1998. Today, her nuttiness and self-loathing read like a relic from another time.

Helen Fielding's best-selling novel celebrated its 25th anniversary on U.S. shelves this month. The book follows a year in the life of a single, 30-something London woman navigating personal and professional turmoil while attempting to lose weight and quit smoking. Each entry begins with Bridget's meticulous tally of pounds shed or gained, alcohol units drunk, calories consumed, cigarettes smoked and lottery tickets purchased.

She was the toast of book clubs, the subject of editorials, a lightning rod for morning-show debate and material for late-night comedy. Some readers were charmed by Bridget Jones; others were disgusted.

"Bridget is such a sorry spectacle, wallowing in her man-crazed helplessness, that her foolishness cannot be excused," Alex Kuczynski wrote in a Times column headlined "Dear Diary: Get Real." She disliked that the book made "humor out of the premise that being neurotic is cute."

Women who embraced Bridget were, more often than not, white, educated, privileged, independent, opinionated and empowered. They could hang with the guys. They could "have it all." Choice was their birthright.

The first thing you'll notice is Bridget's obsession with weight and fat, and the casual cruelty of her friends, family and colleagues about her romantic prospects. It might have been depressingly funny 25 years ago; now it's just depressing. Imagine what a millennial would say to a casual acquaintance who had the audacity to broach the subject of the "biological clock."

In happier news, the diary contains a boatload of fun anachronisms: answering machines, mix tapes, VCRs, "Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus." Fielding's voice is clever and witty.

But, heartwarming as her happily-ever-after turns out to be (oops, spoiler), Bridget's professional life makes for a chilling, upsetting read. It's hard to imagine being amused by her boss who fires off a message saying, "PS. I like your tits in that top." Or by a subsequent male employer whose "offer letter" consists of one line: "OK, my darling. You're on." No mention of salary, health insurance, vacation time or sick days.

Bridget deserved better. We all did.

Adapted from an article by Elisabeth Egan, New York Times, June 30, 2023

<https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/30/books/review/bridget-joness-diary-helen-fielding.html>