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Bonkbuster Book Club: Reading then, reading now

Abstract:

The "bonkbuster" – lengthy books by women centring on sex, relationships and scandal – was an explosively popular genre in the 1970s–1990s. Like its close relative, romance fiction, it was extremely popular with female readers, many of whom read these books while quite young and took important life lessons away. In 2022–23, we conducted focus groups with bonkbuster readers, which revealed that these books were also often read communally: rather than being bought by each individual reader, they were passed within groups – friends, mothers' groups, babysitting groups – sometimes overtly, sometimes covertly. To mirror this experience, we held a "bonkbuster book club", inviting participants from our focus groups to read and share their thoughts on Shirley Conran's *Lace* (1982) with us, using the book club app Bookship. This article will explore the findings from our book club: what participants remembered from their original experiences of *Lace*, versus their reading of it now. We will explore what it means to read a book communally, as well as the lessons many of our participants took from reading *Lace* and similar books as young people (lessons about sex, feminism, and, in the case of some, writing craft) and how they reflect on it now as adults.

Biographical note:

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Dr Burge and Dr McAlister's co-authored monograph *The Bonkbuster: Women's Popular Reading in the Long 1980s* will be published by Bloomsbury in January 2026.

Keywords:

Bonkbuster, reading groups, women's fiction, Shirley Conran, genre

Introduction

At the beginning of *Lace* (1982) by Shirley Conran, four high-powered women in their late forties gather in a fancy hotel in New York City: Maxine, an aristocratic French designer; Judy, the head of a publishing empire; Pagan, a wealthy heiress; and Kate, a successful magazine editor. They have all known each other for decades – they were at boarding school in Switzerland together, many years ago – but this is not the reason they have gathered. Rather, they have all been summoned by mysterious and iconic actress Lili, who, once they are all there, looks all of them in the eye and delivers the line that made this book famous: "which one of you bitches is my mother?" (p. 26).

And famous *Lace* was. We might think of it as a kind of *Fifty Shades* of its day: its fame hinged on the sex and scandal it contained; it sold enormous amounts of copies (over three million); and it was adapted for the screen, here in the form of a five-hour 1984 television miniseries that was "easily the most popular" of its genre (Humphries, 2023, p. 7). *Lace* was deeply impactful for many of the people who read it – as author India Knight notes on the back of a 2012 edition, "There was life before *Lace* and life after *Lace*, and nothing was ever the same again" (Conran, 1982/2012). It is a very obvious milestone book in the history of popular women's fiction, but its impact has never really been appreciated: Amy Burge noted with astonishment that as of December 2023, *Lace* did not even have a Wikipedia page (2024, p. 3) [1]. The same is true at the time of writing in October 2024, despite *Lace* resurfacing to some extent in cultural memory in several obituaries upon Conran's death a few months earlier in May.

This immense popularity followed by a recession from view is not a phenomenon isolated just to *Lace*, although it is, perhaps, the clearest example. It is common to many books in the genre to which it belongs: the bonkbuster. This sexy, scandalous form – which was at its zenith in the 1980s and 1990s and is typified by authors like Conran, Jackie Collins, Jilly Cooper and Judith Krantz – has three key characteristics: the books are "(1) full of sex [the bonking], (2) designed to be popular [the -buster], and (3) bonkers" (Burge et al., 2023, p. 152). Unlike romance fiction, which typically focuses on a central couple finding their way to a romantic happy ending, bonkbusters usually have expansive casts and plentiful, often melodramatic subplots, much like a soap opera, in a way that embodies the excessiveness frequently associated with the 1980s. Bonkbusters are deeply interested in romance and relationships; however, they are far more fascinated with the ways that these can go wrong than the romance novel is. We have written at length about the difference between the bonkbuster and other forms of women's fiction (including romance fiction) elsewhere, but in brief, "[w]here romance presents a fantasy of intimate success, the bonkbuster revels in the failure of that fantasy" (Burge et al., 2023, p. 152). The bonkbuster invites ironic readings in a way that romance novels typically do not – although whether readers take it up on this invitation is another matter (Burge et al. 2023, pp. 152–153).

Of the four major bonkbuster authors, Cooper – the only one still alive – has experienced somewhat of a renaissance in the 2020s: her most recent novel, *Tackle!,* was released in 2023; she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the 2024 New Years Honours list; and a star-studded adaptation of her 1988 novel *Rivals* premiered on Disney+ in October 2024, which has since been renewed for a second season. Collins has also remained

somewhat in the zeitgeist due to a large-scale reissue project of her books by her British publisher, Simon & Schuster UK. Krantz and Conran, though, despite their popularity in their heyday, have largely been left behind in the 20th century. In our work on bonkbusters, one of the biggest difficulties we have found has been obtaining copies of the works of these two authors, most of which are long out of print and have not been made available as e-books, despite the millions of copies they sold in the 1980s and 1990s.

A key part of our project is to mitigate this cultural forgetting and resituate the bonkbuster in histories of women's popular reading: as Burge notes, the bonkbuster is a "key, and overlooked, chain in the historical development of women's romantic fiction" (2024, p. 3). This is not something we can do by simply reading bonkbuster texts, especially not from our vantage point in 2024, many decades after their heyday. Instead, in designing the method for our project, we follow Kim Wilkins, Beth Driscoll and Lisa Fletcher in their argument that "[g]enre fiction books are not merely texts; they are also nodes of social and industrial activity" (2022, p. 1). We thus conceive of the bonkbuster as a "genre world", with "three domains of genre activity – industrial, social, and textual" (p. 3).

In this article, we focus on the social domain of genre activity: in particular, the readers. In her tribute to Conran upon her death in 2024, Rachel Cooke writes:

> Ask any woman of a certain age and sensibility to tell you their favourite books about friendship – I've done this a lot lately, because I've been editing an anthology on the subject – and nine times out of 10, they will say *Jane Eyre* and *Lace,* putting no paper between the two. The obituary writers can joke all they like about that scene with the sheikh and the goldfish, but the unavoidable truth is that she's [Conran] as much of a touchstone for some of us as Charlotte Brontë. (2024)

This speaks not just to the issues of the impact and subsequent disappearance from broader cultural consciousness of *Lace* discussed above, but also to a methodological issue we faced in designing this project: while we may be women of a certain sensibility, we were not yet born when *Lace* was published, meaning that we are not women "of a certain age". An autoethnographic approach, where we focused on our own role as readers of the texts, would not appropriately allow us to capture the impact of bonkbusters like *Lace*: we simply were not there when it happened. Instead, we had to go and talk to people who were.

The book club method

This article, which focuses specifically on *Lace*, arose from our broader project on bonkbusters. Its specific method is a small section of and builds on the method of that broader project. For said broader project, we conducted semi-structured focus groups with people who were reading bonkbusters at the height of their popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. We conducted two focus groups in Australia in late 2022 and a further three in the United Kingdom in mid-2023 (locations chosen because of researcher location and also the potential for comparison between the two territories, although the differences ended up being fairly negligible and are not a focus of this paper). One focus group in each country was conducted in person, with the remaining three on Zoom, to account for the problems of dispersed participant locations. We chose to

conduct focus groups rather than interview readers individually because reading is often a social experience, in what Danielle Fuller and DeNel Rehberg Sedo call "*shared reading*", exemplified in phenomena like book clubs and friends recommending books to each other (2013, p. 2, emphasis in original). Our aim was to create an environment where readers could talk to each other as well as us, giving us a sense of this sociality. This element of the focus groups proved quite successful: while we were present in all the groups and occasionally provided guiding questions, participants were so energised by the discussions in many instances that we did not need to provide much steering at all.

In our second focus group with Australian bonkbuster readers, participants spontaneously invented the idea of a bonkbuster book club. Most had never met before; however, discussions were so lively and enthusiastic that about a quarter of the way through the focus group, participant Christine said, "I feel like I want to get together with all of you and have a drink and chat more about this" (Australia focus group, 5 December 2022). In the Zoom chat, participant Sharon immediately commented "Book Club"; Nicole followed up with "100%"; and Christine added, "Book club!" The idea recurred near the end of the focus group, when Maggie said, "It would be really cool to have a bonkbuster book club … we should all be reading them again and talking about them again". More participants expressed enthusiasm for the idea: "What's the first book in Bonkbuster Book Club, so I can start to read it?!" Sharon asked, and Nicole added, "I too am in Bonkbuster Book Club". When Heather asked, "Wait, hold on! Is this actually a thing? Is there a Bonkbuster Book Club?", Nicole replied, "Yeah, I think we just invented it." Spontaneously, participants agreed on what the first book should be: "It's gotta be *Lace*," Maggie said.

We, too, were enthused by the idea of being able to move from having big-picture discussions about bonkbuster readership to interrogating a single text with participants. In particular, we were excited by the prospect of what we could learn through a group of people sharing an encounter with *Lace,* given "readers' engagement in particular 'text-worlds' is, in various ways, embedded in the here and now of their particular reading context" (Peplow et al., 2015, p. 1). Conducting a book club opened up an opportunity for exploring how readers both experienced *Lace* during their initial reading of it as younger readers and how they experienced it now, several decades on – a way to practically explore what Driscoll argues when she notes, "Reading is a process. It is dynamic, changing from moment to moment, shifting over a person's lifetime and affected by their context" (2024, p. 13). It also mirrored neatly some of our overarching approach to the bonkbuster as a genre world. A genre world encompasses "a sector of the publishing industry, a social formation and a body of texts" (Fletcher et al., 2018, p. 997) – and given shared reading experiences like book clubs are, as Rehberg Sedo notes, "both a social process and a social formation" (2011, p. 2), this gave us an even better opportunity to explore the second part of that tripartite structure. Finally, it allowed us to dig deeper into the cultural contexts around the bonkbuster than the focus groups had made possible, given that "[i]n book clubs, there is often an imperative to springboard from the book to discuss broader social issues. The group context allows for and encourages interpersonal moderation and testing of moral judgments" (Driscoll, 2024, p. 128).

After getting approval for modifications to our respective institutional ethics clearances, we launched the next phase of our research: Bonkbuster Book Club. We have now run two

different book clubs – the second, in October 2024, focused on Jilly Cooper's *Rivals*, tying into the release of the new adaptation – but this article will deal solely with our first book club, which was, as our focus group participants had suggested, centred on *Lace*. We recruited participants for Bonkbuster Book Club from our existing pool of focus group participants and people who had expressed interest in attending but had not been able to do so. Not all were re-reading *Lace* – some were reading it for the first time – but all were bonkbuster readers and thus had what Fletcher, Driscoll and Wilkins call "genre competence": "a member of the genre world's ability to comprehend a text in relation to storytelling conventions that have been learned through reading" (2018, p. 1007). Pseudonyms have been used to refer to our participants in this article and other publications arising from our research.

We ran two separate book clubs – one for Australian readers, one for British readers – for time zone and other logistical reasons, but the method for both was the same. Each book club ran for approximately six weeks in the first half of 2024. This period was book-ended by a kick-off and a wrap-up Zoom meeting. The bulk of discussion, though, took place in an invite-only private space on the book club app Bookship, selected because of its capacity to hold private book clubs, its accessibility in both countries, and strong permissions settings around participant data. Each week focused on two parts of the book (*Lace*, conveniently, is divided into twelve sections). We provided some guiding questions, but readers were encouraged to – and frequently did – pose their own questions or raise things that they found particularly interesting. Participants were free to engage as much or as little as they liked, both in the Zoom meetings and in our discussions on the Bookship app.

Bonkbuster Book Club: Findings

If we were to unpack all our findings from our *Lace* book club, we would require considerably more space than we have available here – the politics of *Lace* and readers' responses to them, for instance, are fascinating, but mostly out of scope for this particular article. Therefore, we have focused on a few key insights that highlight the ways in which our participants experienced the book at the time of their original reading versus reading it in 2024. As noted above, some participants had not read this particular bonkbuster before, but as they had read other similar bonkbuster texts, they could interpret it through a generic lens. Their perspective also provided an interesting counterpoint to those readers who had read it previously; while they had nostalgia for the genre, they did not have experience with this specific text, and saw it, in some cases, a little differently.

Given the way it has disappeared from cultural memory, you would be forgiven for forgetting what *Lace* is about (if you ever knew in the first place). To this end, before we explore the findings from our book club, below is a brief summary of the book itself.

As noted in the introduction, *Lace* opens (after a confronting prologue, discussed further below) with four women – Maxine, Judy, Pagan and Kate – being gathered at a New York hotel by a fifth, younger woman, Lili, who demands to know which one of them is her mother. This is a frame narrative for the majority of the book; we promptly go back in time to when the four older women were schoolgirls in Switzerland. The novel follows them over several decades through their introductions to sex, the establishment and breakdown of relationships and marriages, and the evolution of their careers. We learn that one fell pregnant as a teenager, but

not who. The novel also follows Lili's life, from a happy early childhood after her adoption to a terrifying escape from war-torn Hungary to an adolescence in Europe characterised by extreme exploitation (sexual, financial and otherwise), before she eventually becomes one of the most famous actresses in the world. The novel concludes with the revelation of which one of the four women is Lili's mother – along with the arguably more scandalous revelation of who her father is, although that latter piece of information is (probably thankfully) not revealed to Lili herself.

In unpacking our findings, we found that readers demonstrated sophisticated understandings of the bonkbuster genre and that their reading of *Lace* was filtered through this knowledge. Many of our readers first read *Lace* as teenagers and recalled lessons learned from the text – both positive and negative. Yet these were not shared lessons – readers did not talk to others about *Lace* in the 1980s and 1990s – which is perhaps why they relished the opportunity to do so in Bonkbuster Book Club. Finally, we draw some conclusions about the act of re-reading *Lace* in 2024.

"[T]his … is going to be very cynical": Bonkbuster genre competence

Unsurprisingly, given their existing bonkbuster genre competence, our participants showed a clear understanding of the genre's conventions and underlying attitudes, whether or not they had read *Lace* before. Some placed emphasis on the more fantastical and romantic elements of the bonkbuster:

> I guess that's the whole purpose of the bonkbuster ... It's like the fantasy of the female who wins, earns money, has a great sex life, does all of that. And yeah, always gets treated really badly along the way … but survives. (Charlotte, Australia Kick-Off, 7 February 2024)

Others emphasised more anti-romantic elements, such as Rebecca, who called *Lace* "loveless". When asked to elaborate, she explained:

> Loveless in the sense that there was no kind of great sweeping romance to it. It wasn't your classic kind of, you know, will they get together at the end, and will things kind of pull them apart … It was … very much driven by their narrative of what they were doing with their own lives. … But in most cases, it frankly wasn't very romantic at all. You know, one's somebody's bit on the side. One's married a guy who's got a castle, but is always, you know, shagging about with someone else. (UK Wrap-Up, 20 May 2024)

These two perspectives may seem contradictory on the surface, but this tension exists at the heart of the bonkbuster, a genre which revels in "acknowledg[ing] … [romantic] fantasy while simultaneously demonstrating its folly" (Burge et al., 2023, p. 152). This generic characteristic is arguably at its apotheosis in *Lace*; as Lisbeth Larsson notes, *Lace* is a book which "sets great score by the romantic ideal" (1994, p. 286) while simultaneously recognising "the breakdown of the romantic dream" (p. 278).

This is nowhere more clear than in its depiction of sex, which we will discuss further below, but is also expressed in many different ways. The prologue of *Lace*, for instance, is a graphic depiction of then-thirteen-year-old Lili undergoing an illegal abortion. Katie neatly summed up how this scene sets the stage for the ways in which *Lace* interacts with and subverts romantic ideals:

> I think the book begins with an abortion to emphasise the point that this is not a romance novel. Not in the traditional sense anyway. Usually in a romance novel we end the story with the happy couple with a baby on the way or a couple of toddlers playing in a sunlit garden, but here we do not. Instead we have a child having her child aborted with no mention of the father being present at all other than a warning from the nurse to not sleep with him for a couple of months, so the whole idea of romance is immediately subverted in the first few pages. Romance means escapism, even the nurse sits and reads one after assisting an illegal abortion. This book is not going to pull any punches or play pretend, the seamy underbelly of the relationships between men and women is going to be laid out on the pages for us all to see. And in the midst of all this 'She Loves You' is happily playing in cafes, reflecting the romanticised vision of love we share, despite Lili's disparate experience of it that led her to that room in the first place. (UK Bookship comment, 17 April 2024)

Rebecca agreed, distilling this longer comment down into an assertion that the abortion scene "tells the reader this isn't a romance, but rather it is going to be very cynical" (UK Wrap-Up). She had not read *Lace* before and noted that she would have "dumped it for gratuitous nastiness" if she had not noticed that Conran had "dropped in some irony with the reference to the romance novel and a bit of humanity in the responses from the medical team" (UK Bookship comment, 23 April 2024). This is emblematic of the balance bonkbusters like *Lace* strike. Lili will have more awful and shocking experiences after this, but this is balanced out in the text to some extent; as Anne put it, "Current day Lili has made it, she [is] successful, [even though she] clearly has never forgotten this very traumatic experience" (UK Bookship comment, 17 April 2024).

A key promise of the bonkbuster is that it will be sensational, in a variety of ways: "[t]hey are literally full of sensation, positive and negative … and they are sensational because they are full of scandalous moments" (Burge et al., 2023, p. 152). Our participants recognised this – highlighting the abortion scene specifically as one of these sensational, scandalous moments – but noted that the impact was somewhat mitigated when read in 2024. Anne remarked:

> I think as a reader in 1982 when the novel was first published, I was probably more shocked by that opening chapter than now, where society has to a certain extent become desensitised because we are all more worldly and aware of what can happen. (UK Bookship comment, 17 April 2024)

Joanne, a first-time reader of *Lace*, agreed, noting that the scene was "clearly there for shock value", but then going on to comment on it at a craft level: "not having read much of the rest of the book … [it] doesn't provide much information and then is weirdly jarring when you go to the next chapter" (Australia Bookship comment, 12 February 2024). There were several

writers and other publishing professionals among our participants, and consequently a lot of commentary (some positive, some negative) on how *Lace* – with its multiple perspectives, frequent expository passages, and regular temporal jumps – was different structurally and editorially from something that would be published now. However, comments like these two from Anne and Joanne are arguably the most revealing when it comes to identifying why the bonkbuster receded from its position at the top of the bestseller charts. The genre relies on the scandalous, the sensational, the shocking, and, reading now, our participants could still clearly identify what *Lace* was attempting with its prologue. However, if we can no longer *really* be scandalised by a scene as graphic as teenage Lili's illegal abortion – if one of our first thoughts is about how it does not flow naturally into the next chapter – what is there left to be scandalised by?

"I got it from this goddamn book": Lessons from *Lace*

Arguably *Lace*'s most scandalous scene – one inevitably invoked whenever the book does resurface in cultural consciousness – is usually referred to as "the goldfish scene". It does not feature any of the five central female characters, but instead centres on a Middle Eastern prince, Abdullah, and a nameless female character. It describes Abdullah's "sensuous pièce de resistance", in which he inserts a goldfish into a woman's vagina, holds her down until she starts finding it pleasurable, and then "languorously suck[s] [it] out" (1982/2012, pp. 345–46). This is certainly a scene that stayed with many of our participants who had read the book before; however, it was only discussed briefly by both book clubs, and, like the prologue, did not impact our readers the same way it might have in the 1980s: it was "not as sexy/taboo as I thought it was when I read this as a teen," Christine remarked (Australia Bookship comment, 24 February 2024), later adding, "reading in today's context, it's so tame. It's so tame" (Australia Wrap-Up, 20 March 2024).

What was ultimately more impactful for many participants, especially those who initially read it as young people, were particular lessons or attitudes inherent in the book that readers absorbed either consciously or unconsciously. Before re-reading *Lace*, Abigail commented, "I'll be really interested to know what I've spent my life believing as a result of reading *Lace*" (UK Kick-Off, 15 April 2024). Our readers' remembered lessons sometimes related to sex, but also to aspects of existing in the world as a woman. Maxine, for instance, remembered the clothes:

> [I]t's almost a detailed how-to manual in terms of dressing, you know. Like, go to Dior. This is what you do when you visit a couturier. If you can't afford a couturier, then like, bring your own dressmaker, who can copy it for you. And there's this sort of litany of brands and colours …. I certainly didn't use that knowledge. But it has stuck with me. (UK Kick-Off)

Francesca remembered a particular detail around housekeeping:

> I think one of the things that's really stuck with me – 'cause I'm crap at housework and I always have been – and that's that line where it's like Pagan's house gets all filthy. And it's like *Pagan thought that a bath was for cleaning you, so she saw absolutely no*

> *reason for cleaning it*. And I just often, like, think about that. You know, like that thing, the Internet meme of, like, men think about the Roman Empire fifteen times a day? That's my Roman Empire. I'm like these, these objects are here for me, why should I clean them? (UK Kick-Off)

Christine realised through the process of re-reading that a particular behaviour she engaged in as a teen originated from *Lace*:

> I was very slim when I was, you know, fourteen, fifteen … but I thought I was enormous and fat and horrible. So I every night had the rolling pin out and would roll my thighs a hundred times, because I was convinced that it was going to make my thighs thinner. And I think back on that sometimes and I would always wonder where the fuck I got it from – and I got it from this goddamn book. (Australia Kick-Off)

Given the amount of practical (if, as in the case of Christine, somewhat horrifying) lessons our participants took from *Lace,* it is worth noting Conran's own history here. She had a long career writing for magazines and newspapers (she pioneered the Femail section of the *Daily Mail* and was the women's editor for *The Observer*) and had written four self-help books in her *Superwoman* series – in which she famously quipped, "life is too short to stuff a mushroom" (p. 93) – before the publication of *Lace* in 1982. Her tendency for sneaking in pithy pieces of advice was noted by contemporaneous reviewers of *Lace*: for example, Lyn Frost noted, "[t]he reporter, Shirl the girl with the handy hints, keeps surfacing … There's a lot of common sense tucked in with the satin sheets" (1983).

Our readers picked up on this – Abigail remarked, "In a funny way it feels like Conran is trying to look after her readers – advise and encourage them to do the 'right' things and reject others. There's quite a lot of 'you don't have to put up with x'" (UK Bookship comment, 6 May 2024). Readers were particularly aware of the "pointers to women's pleasure" (Samantha, Australia Kick-Off) in *Lace*. If Conran herself is to be believed, *Lace*'s representation of sex was always intended to be somewhat didactic. She claimed that she had not initially intended to write a novel, but rather a sex education manual for schoolgirls, provoked by the fact that she thought their "ignorance was so abysmal" (Cooke, 2024). However, after eighteen months, she "got so bored I thought I might as well have a go at writing a novel. So *Lace* is really intensely researched sexual information dressed up as a novel" (Cooke, 2024).

Our participants clearly noted Conran's educational agenda when it came to sex – for example, Maxine said:

> [T]here's lots of information in there about, you know, basically don't worry if you don't come from penetrative sex, there's this thing called cunnilingus, you know. … So in some ways I think it's like a how-to manual in some ways, in terms of negotiating your own sexuality. (UK Kick-Off)

Because the protagonists have to learn to have good sex, the first descriptions of pleasurable sex do not come until later in the book, which was surprising for some of our participants who had not read it before. Joanne, for instance, commented:

> [T]here's actually less sex in it than you would expect. … I was surprised that with the Maxine stuff [Maxine's first sexual encounter with her eventual husband Charles] you got to like – until then, you got to like 230 pages into the book, and there hadn't been really any sex that was kind of … nice. Like, sexy. It was all kind of a bit like, oh [concerned], this is just awful, really, or awkward, or weird, or unpleasant, or whatever. (Australia Wrap-Up)

Lace is generally quite pointed about where the blame for this awful/awkward/weird/unpleasant sex lies: men. For instance, after Kate's disappointing virginity loss experience, she thinks (or rather, does not think), "It did not occur to her that François [her partner] was at fault" (1982/2012, pp. 76–77). Similarly, while Abdullah is a highly skilled lover – he is apparently called the "Nijinksy of cunnilingus" (p. 344) – the book is clear about the reasons he applies these skills: "Abdullah was calculating and deliberate in his attitude toward Western women. He used them. He learned from them. His lovemaking was to prove his power over them and their menfolk" (p. 105). Avis Lewallen argues, "[i]f the text of *Lace* often reads like a sex manual for women, it also contains a critique of male sexuality" (1988, p. 93). However, some of our participants had not remembered this aspect particularly strongly, and so it stood out for them in sharp relief reading the book in 2024. Christine, for instance, noted, "I didn't remember that the men … that so many of them were so horrendous … I think that that's really stood out to me, is how awful the men are" (Australia Kick-Off). The generic conventions of the bonkbuster may have worked against Conran's agenda here; while our participants certainly took some lessons away from *Lace* as younger readers in the 1980s*,* the sensationalism of the sex may have prevented them from fully internalising her critique of the role men play when it is bad.

Our participants reflected extensively on *Lace*'s lessons from a 2024 standpoint, both positively and negatively. Some noted that they had not really been in a position to properly understand the book's messaging when they read it initially, which might have been somewhat detrimental. Samantha commented:

> [A]s young teenage girls, it was outside our ken. We really didn't understand a lot of what we were reading, although we could get the plot and the characters and we could do all of that, but we had no vocabulary of our own to make it real. (Australia Kick-Off)

Abigail said something similar, noting that "you're so impressionable at that age when you read it, and it's so glamorous and so wonderful that you do sort of gobble it up and you think, 'oh, you know, this is what I must do'" (UK Kick-Off). However, with the benefit of adulthood and increased understanding, participants both approached *Lace* from a different position and had a different perspective on some of the messages it contained. This includes the two participants we have quoted here. Abigail noted that while "a lot of it's dated now", the book was "[m]ore complex and more feminist than I had remembered it being" (UK Wrap-Up).

Samantha, while she commented on some aspects of the book that "I didn't think that did us any favours, as girls, to read that" (Australia Kick-Off), said that "my mother made sure I was a feminist but these words would have persuaded me more" (Australia Bookship comment, 10 March 2024). Samantha quoted the following section from the book:

> Then, more thoughtfully, they drifted into a grown-up version of the way they used to talk in the moonlight, after lights-out at school, as they discussed what they wished they'd been taught.
> "To earn my own living," Pagan said firmly.
> "To handle my own financial affairs," Kate said, thinking of how her father's estate had been mismanaged.
> "To realise that we were going to run into trouble," Maxine said thoughtfully. "You cannot expect to skip through life with a princess-and-the-pea attitude, hoping to find no lump under the bedclothes. The bed is always lumpy."
> Judy said, "I wish we hadn't picked up the idea that you were a failure if you didn't have a man because then you would be without status and protection."
> "We picked up that idea from our mothers as well as our fathers," Kate pointed out. "It was our mothers who brought us up to be dependent and lazy where it matters most—in the head." (1982/2012, pp. 547–548)

Broadly speaking, our participants recognised elements of *Lace* that were dated – its treatment of queer people was particularly negatively commented on from a 2024 perspective – and might have led them to internalise problematic messages around how to be a woman in the world. Katie commented, "This book appears more like a warning than a celebration now I am older!" (UK Bookship comment, 10 May 2024). However, readers were also clear that other elements of *Lace* had more liberatory potential, especially for a product of the 1980s, which was, as Wendy put it, "a simpler, more black and white world" (Australia Kick-Off). They noted that *Lace* highlighted in places how little progress had been made for women. As Abigail commented:

> I'm sure Conran meant the message at the time to be hugely empowering and encouraging. She wasn't to know that, 40+ years later, women would be exhausted by the myth of doing/being/having it all – especially when equality with men still hasn't been achieved. (UK Bookship comment, 17 April 2024)

Similarly, Christine lamented that in 2024 "there's so much focus on male pleasure still – still! – there's very little focus on female pleasure", wondering aloud, "have we actually progressed?" since the women of *Lace* were attending boarding school "75 years ago" (Australia Kick-Off). Maxine neatly summed up the dominant attitude across both our book clubs: "*Lace* absolutely has its problems, but I think it does have a feminist agenda, albeit like very much a sort of white middle-class feminist agenda, particularly in its representation of sex" (UK Kick-Off).

"I wasn't telling my girlfriends I was reading, like, proper sex books": Covert reading cultures

One thing that was notable across both our book club cohorts – and, indeed, came up repeatedly in the five focus groups we had already conducted – was how little our participants had talked about reading bonkbusters when they first read them as young people. Diane C. Parry and Tracy Penny Light point to the boom in popularity of the *Fifty Shades* trilogy as a cultural flashpoint where many groups of women "could openly claim – some without shame – that they read erotic material and enjoyed it", going on to note that "[i]n large part, this cultural moment was fuelled by various technologies that enabled women to read the books privately on e-readers, but quickly moved from the private realm to the public as women openly read hard copies" (2014, p. 39). Our participants, however, were reading bonkbusters well before this technology-abetted flashpoint. They were restricted to print copies, so if they were seen reading bonkbusters, it would be obvious what they were. Some, who were seen with it, suffered negative consequences. Even where participants accessed books through licit channels, there was a strong sense that they should not be discussed. *Lace* and bonkbusters like it, in the 1980s and 1990s, was an intensely private pleasure for our readers.

Christine was one of the readers who had received permission to read the book: "[M]y mum was like, 'here!' and threw it to me. I was, like, twelve, maybe thirteen. She was like, 'here, I just finished reading this'" (Australia Kick-Off). This was part of a pattern of shared reading: her mother also introduced her to *The Thorn Birds* (1977), among other bonkbuster and bonkbuster-adjacent texts. However, the books were not something she ever discussed, either with her mother or with anyone else:

> I did not talk to my Mormon mother about that [reading *Lace*]. I don't think I talked to anybody about that, which is kind of sad because I … yeah, I just didn't have that kind of friendship group. I was a good little Mormon girl. I was kind of … it was taboo and maybe that's why it was so exciting and I – and again I was reading quite a few of these, and my mum wouldn't even talk to me about them. She just kind of put them on my bed. I'd get home from school, there'd be a book on my bed. (Christine, Australia Kick-Off)

Christine went on to note, "my mum and I have never talked about this kind of stuff, which is kind of sad" (Australia Kick-Off). Samantha remarked that this was "reflective of the time" (Australia kick-off), and this seemed to be largely true for most of our participants. In her study of British women who came of age in the post-World War II era, Lynn Abrams noted that parents did not talk to their daughters about sex, pointing out, "sexual activity was still, for the most part, concealed, not even talked about amongst friends" (2023, p. 112, 114). The same was true in Australia; as Frank Bongiorno writes, by the time the Royal Commission on Human Relationships was held in the mid-1970s, "[s]ex was still something naughty or even dirty, a cause of red faces and awkward glances at the family dinner table" (2012, p. 224). It appears that this silence was passed down generationally (probably one of the many reasons Conran set out to write her sex education manual in the first place). Therefore, many participants accessed the book – with permission or, more commonly, without – from their mothers or mothers' friends, but none actively discussed it with them. Charlotte, whose sister Joanne was also part of our book club, pithily remarked, "there was no way we were going to admit to our mother that we were reading bonkbuster books" (Australia Kick-Off). Broadly, this appeared to be for two reasons, usually occurring simultaneously: the content and the book's (and the genre's)

reputation. Charlotte noted, for example, that their mother was an English teacher, and Joanne agreed, stating that their mother "would just say, 'That's all trash'" (Australia Wrap-Up).

Many of the participants were inspired to pick up *Lace* because they had encountered it first through the 1984 miniseries, which starred Phoebe Cates as Lili. As it aired on primetime television, the book's sexual content was significantly toned down – the goldfish scene, for example, is merely suggested through the prominent positioning of a bowl of goldfish in a shot of Abdullah (played by Anthony Higgins in brownface) – and so it was more readily accessible for many of our then-teenage participants, who went on to seek out the book [2]. One of the participants, Maxine, did this after being "entranced" by an episode she saw of the mini-series when she was twelve. She found *Lace* at

> a friend's house, and it was her mother's book. So I ended up – I don't know if I asked permission, but I did borrow it and take it away, and then I think I was reading it in school and got in a lot of trouble with one of my teachers, who said it was pornographic and otherwise was very encouraging of my reading 'cause I was a real bookworm, but she said it was incredibly unsuitable, and wrote a letter home to my mother. (UK Kick-Off)

Fellow participant Abigail had a similar experience: "The same thing happened to me with [the sequel book] *Lace 2*. My headmistress wrote home to my parents and said she shouldn't be reading this" (UK Kick-Off).

What is explicit in stories like Maxine and Abigail's was implicit in the stories told by many of our participants – there was a strong sense that reading *Lace* was something that they should not be doing. This is an idea that has circulated widely both about *Lace* and the broader bonkbuster genre; one obituary of Conran described *Lace* as "certain to be forbidden and therefore eagerly read behind the bike shed" (Horwell, 2024). However, across our focus groups and book clubs, that sense of the forbidden was a lot more evident than the eager collective reading. Some participants accessed *Lace* via circulation through friend groups, but with the exception of only a few – such as Francesca, who "told a load of friends at the time … 'have you read this[?]'" (UK Kick-Off), and Samantha, who did not remember talking with friends specifically about *Lace* but did talk with them about other bonkbusters (Australia Kick-Off) – they did not really talk about *Lace* and books like it with their peers. Christine noted that while she and her friends would talk about the teen romance *Sweet Dreams* series, she kept her bonkbuster readership to herself: "I wasn't telling my girlfriends I was reading, like, proper sex books" (Australia Kick-Off). Wendy agreed, saying that the thought of discussing bonkbusters with her school friends would have been "too embarrassing" (Australia Kick-Off). She was not part of any circulation networks: she had a stack of the books in her cupboard, but they were "just mine" (Australia Kick-Off). For her, the reading experience of them "just felt very covert" (Australia Kick-Off).

This exists in interesting tension with the idea of the scandalous, which is attached firmly to both bonkbusters broadly and *Lace* specifically: the 2012 Canongate edition includes the tagline, "The scandalous classic that defined an era". *Lace*, with its vivid and boundary-pushing depictions of sex (among other things), is clearly a scandalous text. However, as Paul

Apostolidis and Juliet A. Williams put it, "[e]very scandal … involves a double boundary crossing: the violation of the norm involved in the scandalous act itself, and that act's exceptional manifestation before the public" (2004, p. 4); or, as Jodi McAlister and Rebecca Trelease say, "[s]candal involves both a scandalous *action* and the *talk* about the action … Without the talk, there is no scandal" (2023, p. 6, emphasis in the original). While talk about *Lace* was clearly happening *somewhere*, perpetuating its reputation as a scandalous text, our readers, for the most part, were not participating in it.

Perhaps this was due to their age, as many of them were very young when they read it. We could hypothesise that the adult women whose bookshelves they were accessing were discussing it more openly: as Maxine sensibly notes, "[w]hy would they talk to me about it? I was eleven" (UK Kick-Off). However, this relative silence about their consumption of sexy content also mirrors some of Sharon Thompson's findings about the ways girls talked about sex in the 1980s. She asserts that, although "[t]alking romance is a female adolescent tradition; talking sex is not", girls had started to talk more about sex – especially virginity loss – by the 1980s (1995, pp. 7–8). However, she also notes that they did not really have the tools to tell stories about sex: when asked to describe their own virginity loss experiences, "many girls blink and freeze, dropping predicates and leaving passive sentences dangling as if under a posthypnotic suggestion to suppress. 'It was something that just happened,' they say finally. They don't know how it happened" (Thompson, 1990, p. 343; see also McAlister, 2020, p. 95). The heroines of *Lace* do not exactly model talkative behaviour either. While they discuss sex avidly before they have ever had it, once they do, they do not talk about it – even if they know their friends are having it. Pagan, for instance, comes to Maxine's boyfriend's ski team's chalet to sneak her back into their boarding school on the night Maxine loses her virginity. They get caught, which results in Pagan being raped by the school chauffeur. Notably, Pagan not only refuses to talk but actively lies about it to her friends: when asked "what happened?", she replies, "We went to a bar and I drank too much; now *will* you kindly *piss off*?" (1982/2012, p. 97, emphasis in original). This gap between action and talk about it persisted not just through our *Lace* book club but our focus groups on bonkbusters as well: these books were very sexy and very scandalous, but other people were the ones talking about them.

Conclusion

So where does this leave *Lace* in 2024? One conclusion we can draw is that, as Maxine observed, there "is actually more conversation and more things happening around *Lace* [now] than previously" (UK Kick-Off). Arguably, one of the key reasons we had such strong uptake for our focus groups and book clubs was that it presented participants with a chance to finally talk about *Lace* and bonkbusters like it. This was not something we had anticipated, but proved to be a methodological advantage; while talking to our participants so long after their initial reading of bonkbusters carried risks of "rose-coloured glasses", even if we had somehow managed to access them when they were reading bonkbusters as young people, they probably would not have been prepared to discuss *Lace* with us anyway.

It is also clear that the relationship of these readers to *Lace* has changed. The experience of reading a text is not static, and revisiting a previously-read text can unearth new perspectives, or new affinities, that are sometimes unexpected. Recalling their earlier readings, our participants were more likely to identify one of the four girls – Pagan, Kate, Judy and Maxine

– as their favourite character. However, on re-reading, participants in both groups gravitated to Maxine's "fucking brilliant" (Christine, Australia Kick-Off) Aunt Hortense, who serves as a kind of protector and advisor to the four girls: "A great role model" (Christine, Bookship comment, 21 February 2024). On the surface, this is unsurprising; our readers are now, like Aunt Hortense, older women – Christine remarks, "We're Aunt Hortense's age now" (Australia Kick-Off). What they valued in Aunt Hortense, however, is also indicative of what they have come to value now in their re-reading of *Lace*. Aunt Hortense is a "shrewd realist" (1982/2012, p. 36) who gives the girls blunt, often un-romantic advice: "It's a pity that brides are never warned that they will undoubtedly fall in love again with someone else, and so will their husbands" she tells Maxine, when Maxine's husband Charles is having an affair (p. 302). Christine articulated why Aunt Hortense was now so appealing:

> It's like … they say that you're stuck in your ways [when you age], but you actually really do just kind of come into your own and you're not going to put up with anyone's bullshit anymore. … So, it's very interesting reading it as a teen and then coming back to it … in my mid-fifties. I think it's fascinating. It's great. I'm like, my favourite character is Aunt Hortense now. (Australia Kick-Off)

While the protagonists are rarely frank, Aunt Hortense always is, and her no-nonsense attitude clearly struck a chord with our participants. Like Conran herself, Aunt Hortense is always willing to discuss difficult and sometimes taboo issues with the girls – the problem is usually that they are not in a position to listen or understand. Reading *Lace* in 2024 was, for many participants, an eye-opening experience. Many had internalised some lessons from *Lace* already, but it was not until they read the book now that they felt they actually understood its messages. Although they clearly identified parts of it as highly dated, many also viewed it as something of "a feminist classic", albeit "not at the radical end of the spectrum" (Maxine, Bookship comment, 26 April 2024).

Finally, the act of re-reading – of returning to a text or genre with which readers are familiar – plays a role in readers' enjoyment of a text like *Lace* in 2024. For most readers, the bonkbuster does not fit with 2024 sensibilities, values or politics. Talking about Cooper's 2023 bonkbuster *Tackle!*, Charlotte remarked, "this is really a bit sexist still," and

> maybe it's not entirely appropriate anymore. … [Earlier works] you can forgive it, because it was written back in the eighties and it was a different world, whereas now it's like, come on, you've got to kind of get with the times a little bit. (Australia Kick-Off)

Readers were more forgiving of *Lace*'s representational politics partly because of its age – it is of its time – and partly because of their perception of its strong feminist messaging. Yet they still commented on changes that would need to be made were Conran still writing today; Christine said, "If the … story [of *Lace*] was brought forward and rewritten now, then there might be some more nuance" (Australia Wrap-Up).

Moreover, readers were also more forgiving of *Lace* because of the process of re-reading – Joanne said, "there's something also about the pleasure of revisiting something that you've enjoyed so much over a long time that makes you, lets you look past some of the dodgy sexual politics we get at times" (Australia Wrap-Up) – but it also generated tension for many, forcing them to balance the pleasure of nostalgia with their 2024 vantage point: Charlotte and Wendy labelled *Lace* "a weird book" that is "kind of … progressive … trying to change things of the time. But at the same time, it's – because it was written so long ago, it's … yeah, it's just a bit weird, I think" (Australia Kick-Off). Their discussion is filled with hesitation, lethologica and vagueness – an indication of the complexities of re-reading a text like *Lace* years after its initial publication. It is apparent that readers simultaneously hold their memories of original readings and their 2024 re-reading, acknowledging the multiple – and often uncomfortable – pleasures and discomforts of reading *Lace* in 2024.

Notes

[1] The 1984 *Lace* television adaptation does have a Wikipedia page. This speaks to its cultural impact – and, as noted in this article, many of our participants were familiar with or came to the book because of the miniseries. This does not mean, however, that the miniseries supplanted the book in cultural consciousness, or that the book was popular solely because of the miniseries. The bonkbuster genre more broadly remains primarily understood as a textual one, and our readers' focus (now and then) was on the text, rather than the miniseries.

[2] A discussion of the racial politics of *Lace* is beyond the scope of this article, but it is something we explore in more detail in our monograph, *The Bonkbuster: Women's Popular Reading in the Long 1980s* (2026).

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