

## Jennifer Crusie's Literary Lingerie

Laura Vivanco

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**Abstract:** Lingerie plays a significant role in many of Jennifer Crusie's romances from *Sizzle*, "the first book I wrote even though it was published as my third," through to *Bet Me*, which she has described as her "last classic romance." Its function and symbolism varies depending on differences in context, colour, fabric and design: in *Bet Me* sexy underwear is advocated as a way to catch a husband but in *Anyone But You* a padded bra forms a barrier to intimacy; lingerie deceives and is discarded in *Tell Me Lies* but speaks eloquently about its wearers' sexual desires in *Crazy for You*. Crusie's literary lingerie reflects the complexity of women's relationships with their bodies, their desires, their sexual partners and their friends.

**About the Author:** Dr. Laura Vivanco is the author of *For Love and Money: The Literary Art of the Harlequin Mills & Boon Romance* (Tirril, Penrith: Humanities Ebooks, 2011). She is an independent scholar and a regular contributor to Teach Me Tonight, an academic blog about popular romance fiction.

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Jennifer Crusie has stated that "the details of the way people present themselves are heavy with meaning" ("Romancing" 86) and this is certainly true of the lingerie she depicts in her own novels. Lingerie plays a significant role in many of her romances from *Sizzle*, "the first book I wrote even though it was published as my third" (Crusie "Sizzle"), through to *Bet Me*, which she has described as her "last classic romance" (Jorgenson). Its functions and symbolism vary: in *Bet Me* sexy underwear is advocated as a way to catch a husband but in *Anyone But You* a padded bra forms a barrier to intimacy; lingerie deceives and is

discarded in *Tell Me Lies* but speaks eloquently about its wearers' sexual desires in *Crazy for You*.

If, as Alison Lurie has argued, "clothing is a language" (3) then the words uttered by underwear are surely among the most intimate for although "such garments have had a utilitarian function the fact that they may have also served an erotic purpose is frankly recognized as a social phenomenon" (Willett & Cunnington 11).<sup>[1]</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries

[m]arried women began to assume the role of sexual partner; reproduction and sexuality were no longer so closely connected because of altered moral attitudes and the availability of contraception. A number of women underlined their more liberal morality by, among other things, wearing decorative and seductive underwear. (Thesander 105)

Lurie has observed that "Often [...] it is not until we see this private costume that we have a real clue as to its wearer's erotic identity" (246). By describing the lingerie choices of her heroines Crusie can therefore convey important information about their sexuality which might not be apparent from their outerwear.

The cut, fabric and colour of a particular item of lingerie all play a part in shaping its meaning. *Tell Me Lies* opens as "Maddie Faraday reached under the front seat of her husband's Cadillac and pulled out a pair of black lace underpants. They weren't hers" (1). The design of this particular set of underpants, intended as "a plant, something so shocking Maddie would have to confront Brent" (332), emphasises the purpose it serves: "black lace crotchless" (23) underpants are supremely functional only in the context of a sexual relationship. The statement they make about Brent's adultery is given additional force by their fabric and colour.

C. Willett and Phillis Cunnington, commenting on the introduction and widespread adoption of coloured underwear, observe that "For centuries 'white' had been recognized as a symbol of the chaste 'pure mind'; it has no emotional tone. It represents the antithesis of erotic colours" (236). In Crusie's *Crazy for You* Bill, the anti-hero, associates "Plain white cotton" with a muted sex life and he would prefer to think of Quinn, the heroine of the novel, as "clean, white, plain, good" (218) with underwear to match. He rakes through her lingerie drawer, hating all the items which are neither "plain" nor "white," until at last he finds a pair of underpants which although not "plain white cotton, they were lacy and brief, bikini pants—not the kind that really covered her up, [...] were white" (218). White cotton underwear has similarly chaste connotations for Maddie, the heroine of *Tell Me Lies*: she "stripped off her white cotton underpants and dropped them on the floor. Nobody committed adultery in white cotton underpants" (99). Lace is clearly more daring than cotton, which is why, when asked if she has "anything sexy or fun in your whole wardrobe" (23), Emily, the heroine of *Sizzle*, claims to own "some white lace. Sort of" (23). Her friend Jane's response, "You may already be too old to wear pink lace. Mentally you're already in gray flannel long johns" (23), suggests that the wearing of "gray flannel long johns" would symbolise a total renunciation of sexual activity. It also indicates that white lace is not as "sexy or fun" as pink lace.<sup>[2]</sup> The sexiness of pink lace does, however, depend on its shade: Lurie observes that "As more and more white (purity, innocence) is added, the sensual content diminishes and finally disappears" (196).

Later in the novella Emily buys some pink underwear and its “sensual content” is evident from its lack of pallor: it is not a light, innocent, girlish pink, but a “hot-pink” (18), a “wicked pink lace” (73) which she wears when she wants to try something a little “kinky” (73). It seems to assert a strong, sexual femininity with a symbolism more akin to that of red. Red brings to mind danger, heat and red light districts: “bright scarlet and crimson garments have traditionally been associated both with aggression and with desire” (Lurie 195). In *Sizzle* ruby-red, in combination with black, is used in the packaging of a perfume which indicates that the wearer has “a little bit of devil” (89) in her. Black is less aggressive than red, but neither childlike nor pure: “white suggests innocence, black suggests sophistication” (Lurie 188). In *Sizzle* when “Emily thought about Richard. Sex with Richard” (33) she almost immediately decides “I need some black lace underwear” (33). On top of the black lingerie she wears “her best short black dress” (34) and then “congratulat[es] herself on how sophisticated and adult she looked” (34-35).

Here Emily’s outwear transmits roughly the same message as her underwear but this is not always the case, for as Martin Scott has observed,

[i]f our clothes, our outer image, mediate between us and the world, then our underwear mediates between us and our clothes; we define our relationship to our outer image by what we wear under it, the interior fashion only we and a chosen few know about. This would be the case with the corporate lawyer who wears red satin bra and panties under the painfully gray dress suit [...]. Underwear reminds us that there is a level the outer world does not fathom, and does not even dare admit exists.

In certain circumstances a woman’s lingerie can therefore serve as an undercover protest or a reminder of aspects of her personality which cannot be expressed openly. In *Crazy for You* Quinn’s underwear contrasts with the image presented by her work clothes. Bill, her ex-boyfriend who has broken into her house, knows that it expresses a sexuality that he “does not even dare admit exists”:

Quinn’s underwear. *My secret life*, she’d called it. Absurd colors, screaming pinks and metallic golds and acid greens and—

He plunged his hands into the drawer, into the lace and the satin and the silk—“I have to dress like a dockworker to teach art,” she’d said once, “but I can be all dressed up underneath”—all the stuff he didn’t really like, not really, all those weird, bright colors, that wasn’t how he wanted Quinn, bright and hot; his Quinn was clean, white, plain, good—he clenched his fists around the vile stuff [...].

He threw the underwear back in the drawer as if it were unclean, contaminated, it contaminated her, he wanted to rip it up, shred it, burn it so it never touched her again. (218)

Bill is evidently threatened and disgusted by Quinn’s lingerie: it asserts her longing for an exuberant, varied sex life.

In *Manhunting* the heroine's outerwear also presents a contrast to her lingerie: "She put on some of the new lacy underwear Jessie had picked out for her, and then covered it sensibly with beige shorts and a white sleeveless blouse" (47). Looking at her "dressed in those blah colors" (54) Jake concludes that "There was no heat in her" (54). He changes his mind, however, when a somewhat tipsy Kate shows him what lies beneath the "white sleeveless blouse":

It was really hot in the sun, but could she go topless? Noooo. And why? Because she was female. Life was sexist. And really, really unfair. She looked over at Jake, cool and comfortable and shirtless, and decided to strike a blow for women everywhere. *This is for all the hot women*, she thought, and took off her blouse. She was wearing a peach satin and white lace bra [...]. It covered, she reasoned, a lot more of her than a bikini top. She felt much better. [...]

So much for sexless. Jake shook his head as he watched her [...] there must have been something about Kate he'd missed, because he hadn't pegged her as a satin-and-lace type. Plain white cotton would have been his guess. (56-57)

Kate's inadvertent verbal *double entendre*, "hot women," parallels the unintended message her lingerie sends to Jake. He is correct in his reading of Kate's bra; by the end of the novel he will have received abundant proof that she is not sexless. Nonetheless, her intentions here were feminist rather than flirtatious and the scene therefore demonstrates that, as Lurie warns, "If a complete grammar of clothing is ever written it will have to deal not only with [...] dishonesty, but with [...] ambiguity, error, self-deception, misinterpretation, irony and framing" (25).

The feminist bra-burning of the 1960s provides a particularly noteworthy example of the reframing or deliberate misinterpretation of underwear. The feminists whose actions led to the coining of the term "bra-burners" did not, in fact, set fire to any bras, but they did include them in a group of objects which were chosen for disposal during the protests against the Miss America beauty contest:

Bras were only one of many items that were tossed into a "freedom trash can" on the boardwalk in Atlantic City on September 7, 1968: also included were girdles, high heels, cosmetics, eyelash curlers, wigs, issues of *Cosmopolitan*, *Playboy*, and *Ladies Home Journal*. (Dow 130-31)

It was the bras, however, which caught the imagination of the media and this was no doubt due in large measure to the sexual connotations of underwear.<sup>[3]</sup> As with Kate's display of her lingerie, the feminists' disposal of their bras was not interpreted by viewers in the way the women had intended: "Bra-burning, it was implied, was the desperate bid for attention by neurotic, unattractive women who could not garner it through more acceptable routes" (Dow 129).

Emily, the heroine of *Sizzle*, is never considered attention-seeking or unattractive but her underwear also becomes a site of conflict between feminism and patriarchy. The

novella opens as she is being informed by her boss, George, that henceforth her budget will be controlled by Richard Parker; she observes that “I’m working for narrow-minded patriarchal creeps” (7). George, who is “short, fat and balding” (5) and leans “back in the chair while I stand at attention” (5), is literally and metaphorically the unattractive face of patriarchy whereas Richard is its most seductive one:

The door at the other end of the conference room opened, and Richard Parker came in, tall, dark and serious. And indisputably the best-looking man Emily had ever seen. Distinguished. Beautifully dressed. Powerful. And sexy. [...] For everyone there, Richard Parker radiated power and authority. (12-13)

Richard is, in appearance, a stock romance hero, one of the “‘dark, tall and gravely handsome’ men, all mysterious strangers or powerful bosses” (Snitow 248).<sup>[4]</sup> He escapes being a cliché, however, due to his awareness of the image he presents:

Without realizing it, she’d let her eyes narrow as she looked at him, so that when he gazed idly around [...] he saw her look of undiluted antagonism. His eyes widened slightly, and then he grinned at her as if he was seeing her for the first time, a real smile that accepted her challenge and recognized her as an equal, sharing the absurdity of the moment and of his own new-kid-on-the-block power play. (15)

It takes some time, and considerable effort on Emily’s part, to ensure that he fully recognises her as an equal and listens to her in both their personal and professional lives; the developments in their relationship are accompanied by descriptions of Emily’s underwear.

After one meeting Emily feels only slightly more antagonistic towards her panty hose than she does towards Richard:

“How did it go?” Jane asked, following her into the office.  
“Not well, but not badly, either.” Emily kicked off her shoes. “I really hate panty hose. They itch.” (22)

Emily actively resists oppression but the struggle wearies her and she finds relief in throwing away her hated panty hose:

Emily kicked off her shoes and sat in the gloom of her office. I’m so tired, she thought. And my panty hose are driving me nuts. I hate panty hose. They’re an invention of the devil. I’m never wearing them again. She took them off as a gesture of independence and threw them away. There was a run in one leg, anyway.  
Instantly she felt better, cooler. She leaned back in her chair and spread her legs apart to cool them, reveling in the relief from the scratchy heat of the hose. (56)

This throwing off of an oppressive garment soon gives rise to sexual thoughts: "It reminded her of other ways of feeling good. It reminded her that she was still so [sexually] frustrated from the night before she wanted to kill" (56). Emily's freedom from panty hose also pleases Richard sexually, though this was not her intention, and in a scene which may be the most memorable in the novella,<sup>[5]</sup> Emily is dominated professionally by George (via the telephone) and sexually by Richard, who is under her desk:

"Stop it." Emily tried to shove him back with her free hand.  
"Now, Emily," George said. "Relax. I'm not interfering with your project."  
"Relax." Richard put his mouth against the softness of her inner thigh.  
Emily moved her hand to his head and tried to push him away. Great day I picked to stop wearing panty hose and start wearing stockings, she thought wildly. Oh, God, what is he doing? We're in my *office*, for heaven's sake.  
"Emily?" George said. "Emily, don't be difficult about this."  
She twined her fingers in Richard's hair and jerked his head up. He winced and pulled her hand away. "The garters are a good idea," he said. "Don't ever wear anything else." And then he lowered his head again, clamping her hand at her side. (62-63)

Emily's "gesture of independence" is thus subverted: having chosen to wear stockings, she is now commanded not to "wear anything else." The desk scene also serves to remind the reader of the similarities between George and Richard, the two figures of authority and patriarchal oppression. The two men echo each other, each telling Emily to "Relax," and over-riding her objections. Although they both appreciate her talents, neither is willing to treat her with the respect they would accord an equal: Richard is clearly delighted with Emily's body and underwear and, in the first scene of the novella, George admits that Emily is "smart, and you have a sixth sense about marketing that I'd kill to have" (6), but both ignore her objections. Although Emily enjoys sex with Richard she is aware that she is being metaphorically as well as literally manipulated and, as she makes clear to Jane, she is disturbed by the implications of this:

"Richard is always the one in control. If I make a decision, he approves of it or says no. If he makes a decision, he just informs me of it. If I say something he disagrees with or feels isn't important, he ignores me. Today is a perfect example. I was on the phone, and he just came around the desk and put his hand up my skirt." She closed her eyes for a moment at the memory.  
"And you loved it."  
"That's not the point. The point is that he always decides everything, and he never listens to me. I want a little power here, too." (67)

Emily and Jane at last devise a plan to make Richard listen to Emily by showing him how it feels to be dominated and to have one's opinions remain unheard. Emily's underwear is essential to the plan's success.

Having agreed to “do exactly what I say” (77) in the bedroom, Richard “looked bored and a little chilly” (78). Then Emily’s underwear piques his interest:

She drew her fingertips up her leg, pulling her skirt back over her thigh to reveal her garters, never taking her eyes off Richard. The garters were pink. Richard began to look more interested. (79)

A little later she is

wondering if any of this was exciting Richard in the slightest. [...] When she opened her eyes, Richard was still looking at her. She unsnapped her garters with one hand. Richard was definitely interested. (79)

If all Emily had planned was a striptease, it would merely prove that her body and her underwear could attract male sexual attention, which is something she, and the reader, already knows it would. What follows is the use of a stocking in a way which transforms it into part of another “gesture of independence” (56):

[S]he wrapped the stocking around his wrists and pulled them back. “What are you doing?” He tried to jerk his hands away, but she’d already tied the ends of the stocking to the brass bed frame. [...] “This isn’t funny, Emily.” He yanked at his bonds. “Let me go.” “What?” Emily asked, smiling at him gently. “I didn’t hear.” (81)

Richard does indeed learn his lesson and on the last page of the novella, with his hand “cupping her lace-covered breast” (92), he states that he’s listening. In an earlier scene Richard had ignored Emily’s advice about how to undo the bra:

[H]e slid his hands beneath her back to find her bra clasp. “It’s in front,” she whispered, but he still ran his fingers along her back. “Richard, the hook is in front.” “What?” he murmured into her ear, not listening. She closed her eyes in irritation [...]. She unhooked her bra herself. (52)

This time “‘The hook is in the front,’ Emily said, and he unfastened it” (92); with this unfastening, new prospects open up for their personal relationship.

Clearly a little light bondage is not going to topple patriarchy. It is, however, indicative of a change in Emily. As she observes early on in the novella:

Change him, Emily thought. No, better yet, change me. I’m in this position because I’m modest, cooperative and polite. Because I’m modest, cooperative and polite, I’m working for a vain, obstructive rude man like George. And as if George wasn’t enough, now I have Richard Parker, the Budget Hun. (24)

In using her lingerie to tie Richard up, Emily demonstrates that she is no longer “cooperative and polite.” The final exchange between Richard and Henry Evadne, the owner of the company Emily, George and Richard work for, vindicates Emily’s new assertiveness:

“[...] if Emily feels strongly about the product placement, we will, of course, go with it.” He smiled tightly at Richard. “We don’t know how she does it, but we’ve learned that when it comes to marketing, the best thing we can do is listen to Emily and do exactly what she wants.”

“Yes.” Richard smiled. “I’ve learned that, too.”

“Good.” Henry leaned back, satisfied. “You make a good team. [...]”. (91)

In the scenes described above, lingerie is a site of conflict and Emily eventually uses it to assert her power and gain equality. In the professional sphere, however, she is still subordinate to Henry, whom she pleases by devising strategies to sell other women products which may promise more than they can deliver.

Emily admits that “We’re selling emotions here, the sizzle not the steak” (21). The advertising for many products creates “sizzle” by implying that they have semi-magical properties:

In civilized society today belief in the supernatural powers of clothing [...] remains widespread, though we denigrate it with the name “superstition.” Advertisements announce that improbable and romantic events will follow the application of a particular sort of grease to our faces, hair or bodies; they claim that members of the opposite (or our own) sex will be drawn to us by the smell of a particular soap. Nobody believes those ads, you may say. Maybe not, but we behave as though we did: look in your bathroom cabinet. (Lurie 29-30)

Emily claims that the perfume, Sizzle, has special powers: “It makes strong men putty in my hands” (*Sizzle* 92). This is not a literal assertion that it is a magic potion but Emily’s earlier use of Sizzle in the bondage scene (in conjunction with carefully chosen “wicked pink lace” (73) lingerie, candles and food) does take on the appearance of a magical ritual when read in the context of her words about how Sizzle will be marketed:

“You’ll note that the bottle [for Sizzle] is the same as Paradise [another perfume], but it’s black, instead of white, with a ruby-glass stopper, instead of a diamond-glass stopper.” [...]

“We’re confident that the consumer will make not only the connection with Paradise, but will also subconsciously pick up the dualism here. She’ll wear Paradise when she wants to feel sexy, but sophisticated and in control, Sizzle when she wants to feel sexy and wanton. [...]

“And since there’s a little bit of angel and a little bit of devil in every woman, every woman will need both these perfumes,” Emily said. (88-89)



The white bottles of Paradise match the name with a colour associated with spirituality and purity: "In the Christian church, white is the color of heavenly joy and purity [...]. In secular life white has always stood for purity and innocence" (Lurie 185). In contrast, black has long been associated with the more malevolent supernatural powers: "The Furies, the three avenging goddesses of Greek drama, always dress in black, and so do witches, warlocks and other practitioners of the Black Arts" (Lurie 188).

Emily incorporates the perfume which expresses the "bit of devil in every woman" into the ritual which Jane has promised "will work. I guarantee you, this time, he'll listen" (73). Although the references to hell, "What the hell are you going to do?" (77) and evil, "wicked pink lace" (73), as well as Richard's cry of "Oh, God" (81) and his unease with Emily's actions, "Don't ever do that again [...] You damn near killed me" (84), can all be read (and, it appears, are uttered by the characters) as mere figures of speech, the allusions to the spiritual realm reinforce the magical subtext of the scene. Threatened with "the spiked heel" (78) of Emily's black shoe, naked and tied up, Richard takes on the aspect of a sacrificial victim in a satanic rite. Emily's choice of "black spike heels with open toes" (78) and a "little black slip" (80) reinforce the impression that something occult is taking place. The transition back towards goodness is marked by Emily untying Richard and letting him inside her body, "he felt *so good* inside her. The feel of his body hot and strong and hard against her, inside her, pushed her out of the *limbo* of lust she'd been drifting through" (84, my emphasis) and the next morning she prepares food which makes the kitchen smell "like heaven" (85) and perhaps both literally and metaphorically removes any bad taste left by the black magic.

On this occasion Sizzle and the "wicked pink lace" (73) lingerie fulfill the promises made by their colouring but in general the magic of lingerie, if it has one, is dependent on the power the wearer and the viewer give it and for this reason scenes of seduction do not always succeed. Prior to her first dinner-date with Richard, Emily asked Jane to go out and buy her some underwear:

The evening started well. Emily brushed her hair in a cloud around her shoulders and wore her new black lace underwear, one of two sets Jane had splurged on with her money.

"Always have a backup set," Jane had told her. "You never know, he may rip this stuff off you with his teeth in the throes of passion."

Emily visualized it. "Sounds good." (34)[\[6\]](#)

Unfortunately for Emily it is her hair, not her lingerie, which seems most likely to be ripped off that evening: "She pulled away from him, holding on to his arm so he wouldn't jerk her hair out. A lock of her hair was wound around his sleeve button" (39). As a result Emily develops a bad headache and declines to participate in any further sexual activity. In *Crazy for You*, Darla has made even more of an effort in preparation for sex:

Darla stared in her bathroom mirror, appalled. Forget that the thing she had on was called a merry widow, not the best omen under the circumstances. Forget that it was black lace and scratchy, forget that it was so tight her

breasts stood out like they were propped on a shelf [...]. Concentrate on the fact that she looked like a rogue dominatrix. [...]

She let her hands drop and tried to look less angry. It was the anger that was doing it, she decided. The anger that she was having to try this hard to seduce her husband, to wear this stupid lace thing that Quinn assured her was sexy. (128-29)

Max initially responds by holding and kissing Darla but he then breaks off to discuss her actions and they have a row. After this Darla “peeled the merry widow off [...] yanked on her long flannel nightgown” (130) and concludes that she is “[j]ust not a sexy woman” (130).<sup>[7]</sup>

Although lingerie lacks any intrinsic magical powers, it can have a significant physical effect on the women who wear it. When wearing the black lace “merry widow,” for example, Darla’s waist is “cinched tighter than usual, smaller, so that his hands on her waist made her feel sexy” (130). Most modern lingerie cannot create sensual effects as intense as those produced by a corset:

Tight-lacing [...] heightens sexuality by quickening the action of the lungs. [...] Many women experience inhibition of breathing, on a swing or by other means, as erotic, ‘breathtaking’. [...] Elimination of abdominal in favour of pectoral breathing creates, moreover, movement about the breasts, which may be imagined constantly palpitating with desire. [...]

The spasms to which the body is subject during orgasm involve, of course, an often violent quickening of breathing, sensations of breathlessness, heaving of the chest, and contraction of the belly, all of which may be erotically enhanced by manual pressure at the waist, and artificially induced by means of a corset. (Kunzle 18)

Nor can lingerie produce the physical effect of the fictional perfume in *Sizzle*:

“[...] Suppose we put something in this stuff to make it *really* sizzle? [...] Tingle. Only with heat. A woman wears perfume on the warmest parts of her body—the pulse points. Suppose when she touched the perfume to those places she felt a subtle heat and tingle. It would make her feel excited. Exciting. It would feel like. . .”

“Foreplay.” (29)

Lingerie can, however, be used in foreplay and have a sensual effect on the wearer: as Emily seduces and dominates Richard she “stroked the inside of her thigh with her fingertips, feeling them glide across the smoothness of the nylon, closing her eyes, trying to concentrate on the sensation [...]. Surprisingly enough, it was beginning to excite *her*” (79). Later she leans forwards, “her breasts almost spilling out of the lace. She stopped for a moment, savoring the feel of their weight against the brief bra” (82). Lingerie, then, can in itself give a woman physical pleasure.

This positive aspect of lingerie may, however, be offset by the negative effect of lingerie advertising which encourages the viewer to feel that her body is imperfect. As Rosalind Coward observes

The ideal promoted by our culture is pretty scarce in nature [...]. Only the mass of advertising images, glamour photographs and so on makes us believe that just about all women have this figure. [...]

Somewhere along the line, most women know that the image is impossible, and corresponds to the wishes of our culture rather than being actually attainable. We remain trapped by the image, though. (45)

Thus, although the images of women's bodies used in lingerie adverts can create anxiety and feelings of inadequacy, female viewers may nonetheless perceive the lingerie itself as a means to attain a look more closely approaching the ideal. In *Manhunting* Kate meets a woman who does have one of those few perfect bodies:

Miss Craft, young, blond, and built like a Barbie doll, had eyes of cornflower blue, a tilted-up nose, and a genuinely sweet smile on her lovely full lips. She looked about nineteen.

Great, Kate thought. *My competition. I bet nothing on her droops. I bet she doesn't even wear underwear.* (30)

Kate would seem to believe that only a woman "built like a Barbie doll" is free from the need to wear underwear. Nina, the heroine of Crusie's *Anyone But You*, demonstrates how concerns about having an imperfect body may convince a woman that she will be undesirable, and therefore unlovable, without the concealment and support provided by lingerie. Nina hides behind her "Red lace Incredibra" (100), a bra so padded it is "round and shapely without her. It practically had cleavage without her. [...] It sort of pushes everything together and then shoves it up" (100).<sup>[8]</sup> Although Nina eventually plucks up the courage to have sex with Alex, she steadfastly refuses to let him see her breasts; her friend Charity is astonished to discover that Nina "slept with this guy for two months, and [...] never took your bra off with the lights on" (212). Charity had previously told Nina that "The real problem is that you don't believe Alex could love you because your body is forty years old and your face has some wrinkles. [...] You don't believe in unconditional love" (144).

According to Coward

Self-image in this society is enmeshed with judgments about desirability. And because desirability has been elevated to being the crucial reason for sexual relations, it sometimes appears to women that the whole possibility of being loved and comforted hangs on how their appearance will be received. (78)

Max, a gynaecologist and Alex's brother, blames the media and the fashion industry for making women feel this way:

They look at magazines and see all those damn seventeen-year-old anorexics in push-up bras, or they go to the movies and see actresses with tummy tucks and enough silicone to start a new valley, and then they look at their own perfectly good bodies and decide their sex lives are over. [...] And if you tell them their bodies are normal and attractive, they think you're being nice [...] Sometimes, I swear to God, I'd like to set fire to the fashion industry. (158)

Germaine Greer, writing in 1970, said much the same thing:

Women are so brainwashed about the physical image that they should have that, despite popular fiction on the point, they rarely undress with *éclat*. They are often apologetic about their bodies, considered in relation to that plastic object of desire whose image is radiated throughout the media. [...] The woman who complains that her behind is droopy does not want to be told, 'I don't care, because I love you,' but 'Silly girl, it's a perfect shape, you can't see it like I can.' (261)

Crusie's *Anyone But You*, despite being a romance and therefore "popular fiction," gives us a heroine who does not "undress with *éclat*" and who, when she expresses concern about her droopy body, is told by her male partner that he doesn't care "if it's on the *floor*. I want you naked now" (185). It takes Nina time to realise that Alex does indeed love her and find her sexually attractive despite the fact that her body is not perfect according to the standards set by the media. Once she has accepted that this is the case, however, she discards the Incredibra, stating that "There was nothing wrong with her body. All right, it was softer than it had been, and her waist was thicker than it had been, and nothing about it could be called perky, but it was a good healthy body, and Alex loved it" (218). Only then can she stand "naked in front of him, with all the living-room lights on" (219).

Nina's rejection of the Incredibra marks her acceptance of both her body and Alex's love. Lingerie is also discarded at an emotional turning-point in *Tell Me Lies*. When Maddie decides to get "rid of the old Maddie completely" (322-23) she throws caution and her clothes to the wind:

[S]he took off her scarf and held it above her head and let the wind blow it away [...] she stripped her T-shirt over her head and let that go in the wind, too [...] and [...] pulled her bra off over her head and threw it in his lap where it immediately blew back over to her side and out of the car. (324)

The final paragraphs of this novel, which opened with Maddie's discovery of the shocking black lace crotchless underpants, show us Maddie once again holding a pair of woman's underpants. This time, however, they are her own underpants and instead of concealing them she puts them on display as an indication that there will be no more lies. They announce, to both her neighbours and her lover, C. L., that she is unashamed of being a sexually active unmarried woman:

She stripped off her baby blue bikini underpants and left them on the hall floor for him to find, and then reconsidered and went out on the front porch and hung them on the doorknob instead, waving to Mrs. Crosby, who was squinting at her from her own porch. Then she went back inside. She was sure finding the pants would have an electrifying effect on an already electrified C. L. (347)[9]

Here nakedness is not just about “electrifying” a lover; it also indicates Maddie’s desire for truth and can be read as a rejection of the culture of shame which has surrounded her.

Nakedness is also associated with truthfulness and a lack of shame in *Faking It* where, in an echo of the words in Genesis describing Adam and Eve who, prior to the Fall, were “both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2: 25), Tilda tells Davy her secrets and “*I love you*, she thought and kissed him back, naked and unashamed” (317). Tilda is revealing not just her body but also the truth about her family’s history of art forgery. The knowledge Nina tries to hide may seem more trivial: it is merely the truth that ageing has changed her body. To Nina, however, this is a shameful secret which she is desperate to conceal because age, as indicated by Jane’s comment about “gray flannel long johns” (*Sizzle* 23), is often assumed to bring with it a lack of both desire and desirability.[10]

Although Nina’s Incredibra is worn in an attempt to conceal the truth from masculine eyes, she acquired it as a result of emotional openness with another woman. Having asked her friend Charity to help “rev up my image” (99), Charity obliged by selecting a variety of garments for Nina, including “Red lace panties. Red lace Incredibra” (100). When Crusie’s female characters are friendly with each other they not infrequently discuss underwear. In *Manhunting* Kate arrives at her holiday destination thinking about “the fancy underwear that Jessie had talked her into buying as inspiration” (27) in Kate’s search to find a husband. Later we see the formation of a new female friendship: Kate “and Nancy talked on through the evening [...] comparing life stories and falling into the kind of friendship that women with the same outlook on life can form easily and permanently” (113). When Jake becomes aware of how much information they’ve shared, including details of his financial involvement with Nancy’s business “Jake winced. ‘Did she show you her underwear, too?’” (122). Jake does not mean this literally but there is clearly an association in his mind between female intimacy and lingerie. In *Crazy for You*, Quinn advises Darla to wear black lace to revitalise her marriage:

“[...] maybe you should go for something really in-your-face.”

“How about I grab him by the throat and say, ‘Fuck me or die?’” Darla said.

“I was thinking more about black lace,” Quinn said. “You know, something incredibly tacky. The kind of thing guys like and we laugh at.” (122)

In *Sizzle* Jane describes the activities she’s going to engage in while wearing the pink lingerie:

Emily sighed. “Sounds like fun.”

Jane pounced. “You buy some, too.” (19)

Nanette, the mother of *Bet Me's* heroine, discusses lingerie's role in catching and keeping a husband and informs her daughter that

"[...] [y]our prime years are past you, and you're wearing white cotton. [...] If you're wearing white cotton lingerie, you'll feel like white cotton, and you'll act like white cotton, and white cotton cannot get a man, nor can it keep one. Always wear lace."

"You'd make a nice pimp," Min said [...]. "But honestly, Mother, this conversation is getting old. I'm not even sure I want to get married, and you're critiquing my underwear because it's not good enough bait. [...]" (63)

There is a difference, however, between Nanette's approach to lingerie and that of Kate, Jessie, Nina, Charity, Darla and Quinn. It may seem a trivial one given that Kate is husband-hunting, Nina is dating, and Darla is trying to improve her marriage, but it is a difference which is important to Crusie who

graduated from high school in the sixties. [...] The madness that defined women's lives back then was based on four Big Lies:

1. A woman wasn't a real woman until she was married.
2. A woman had to distort herself and deny her own identity in order to catch a man to marry. (Remember girdles, spike heels, inane laughter, playing dumb, and flunking math?)
3. Any husband was better than no husband.
4. Staying in a bad marriage was better than divorce because God forbid a woman should be unmarried again once she'd finally achieved the goal.

[...] Writing and living are about *us*, about who we are and what we want, about satisfying our needs as individuals, about listening to our hearts. Please note, I am not saying give up publication (or marriage) entirely; I'm saying give it up *as a goal*. (*"A Writer"*)

For Nanette, a woman of Crusie's generation, lingerie is not a way for woman to express her personality or obtain pleasure; she only considers its function in terms of the "goal" of marriage.

Nanette is correct in assuming that coloured, lacy lingerie will attract a man's attention: when Cal "looked down the v-neck of her [Min's] loose red sweater and saw a lot of lush round flesh in tight red lace" (95) he felt "a little light-headed" (95). Min notices:

"You're looking down my sweater."

"You're leaning over. There's all that red lace right there."

"Lace is good, huh?" Min said.

"Oh, yeah."

"My mother wins again," Min said. (96)

Nanette has not, however, really won: Cal finds Min attractive regardless of what she wears and Cynthia, his ex-girlfriend, was the very thin and beautiful possessor of highly sensual lingerie.<sup>[11]</sup> In one of the final scenes of the book Min wears “a strapless black lace nightgown” (359) and Cal states that “I like this thing you’re not wearing. But I still want a chance to rip your sweats off you, too” (362). To Cal, Min looks “wonderful” (187) even in her “godawful sweats” (187). As in *Crazy for You*, it is made clear that sexy lingerie cannot hold together a troubled relationship and, as in *Anyone But You*, neither a lack of sexy underwear nor a less-than-perfect body will damage a sexual relationship based on true love.

Regardless of its reception, in Crusie’s fiction even the flimsiest piece of lingerie can be “heavy with meaning” (“Romancing” 86). This meaning is only partially encoded in the fabrics, styles and colours chosen: it is also dependent on the context in which a particular item is worn or discarded. In one situation, therefore, lingerie can function as an instrument of patriarchal oppression while in another it may serve as a weapon in the feminist struggle; it can be used to signal sexual interest and boost a woman’s confidence but may also reinforce her feelings of inadequacy about her body; it can cause her physical discomfort or give sensual pleasure; although it can indicate a lack of openness and truth, female intimacy is promoted as women discuss their lingerie and via such discussions give each other emotional support that complements the physical uplift of underwiring and padding. Crusie’s literary lingerie reflects the complexity of women’s relationships with their bodies, their desires, their sexual partners and their friends.

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[1] The Victoria’s Secret lingerie “catalog functions, [...] for many of its consumers, as a kind of sexually explicit representation of the female body not too far afield from *Playboy’s* images” (Juffer 27-28) and “Lingerie fetishism [...] is, like the voyeurism upon which it thrives, relatively uncontroversial, customarily acceptable and commercially profitable” (Kunzle 5).

[2] Lurie notes that “grayed, dull colors” “seem to deny sensuality” (231).

[3] Girdles are also items of underwear, but bras, and the rejection of the bra, seem to have had a particular cultural resonance in the 1960s:

At this time many women, whether in the [women’s] movement or not, got rid of their bras — some for a short period, others for ever; some because they sympathized with the struggle for the liberation of women, others simply because it became fashionable. As early as 1968 Yves Saint-Laurent had shown transparent blouses worn without a bra at his fashion show in Paris. (Thesander 185-7)

[4] This is probably due to the fact that *Sizzle* was, as Crusie has revealed, “my attempt to write to formula, an attempt that failed because there is no formula” (“Sizzle”).

[5] In the short description of the book that Crusie wrote for her website she noted that “occasionally people come up to me and say, ‘*Sizzle*. The desk scene. Ohmigod.’” (“Sizzle”).

[6] The suggestion that Richard “may rip this stuff off you with his teeth in the throes of passion” perhaps contains an allusion to the term “bodice-rippers,” considered derogatory by authors and readers of romance novels. In this context the fact that Emily’s underwear remains unripped is perhaps a subtle rejection of the term.

[7] Again, the wearing of flannel would appear to be associated with an existence devoid of sexual activity.

[8] Crusie has stated that at the time she was writing this novel “I went in and tried on a Wonderbra (they were just out then, articles in all the newspapers) and it was so ridiculous” (“Topic”).

[9] The “baby blue” colour of these underpants contrasts with the darkness of the “black lace crotchless underwear” (23) and perhaps symbolises openness and lack of deceit: Maddie is not ashamed of her relationship with C. L.

[10] Crusie vigorously challenges this stereotype in some of her later works through her older characters who have extremely active sex-lives. In *Anyone But You* not only is the heroine older than the hero (forty to his thirty), but her seventy-five-year-old upstairs neighbour, Norma Lynn, quite clearly has an active sex-life. Gwen, the heroine’s mother in *Faking It* is “only fifty-four” (270) and in the course of the novel has sex with two suitors. *Trust Me on This* includes a secondary romance between the hero’s aunt, sixty-two-year-old Victoria Prentice, and his boss, fifty-eight-year-old Harry Chase. At one point Victoria is described as standing in front of Harry, her body “curving and warm in black lace, and Harry told himself not to have a heart attack” (86). Victoria may be over sixty, but she’s not over sex or an appreciation of sexy lingerie.

[11] Cynthia’s lingerie includes a “red silk bra [which] matched the lining of the suit” (153) she was wearing and “a shiny pink bra that was so sheer it was probably illegal in several states” (263).



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