

victimization is deliberately withheld until the very last lines reveal his skin colour (173).

Sandwiched among such male protagonists, a pivotal exploration of “Fatal Women” makes a strikingly positive case for the genre’s treatment of the *femme fatale*. Whereas the simplified morality imposed by censorship and the perceived public need for pat endings often makes *film noir* and its successors complicit in a simple virgin/villain split, the novels on which many of these films are based deliberately show how such stereotypes are imposed by the male protagonists’ own sorts of guilt and lust. Horsley’s own book cover—taken from Jim Thompson’s *Recoil*—shows a desperate male figure fleeing from the magnified siren’s face he himself seems to have projected.

In the book’s final part, Horsley identifies a new set of issues arising from the rampant consumerism of the last third of the twentieth century. The new protagonists are “Players”—like Elmore Leonard’s heroes as well as his villains—who see their lives as a more or less sick game; “Voyeurs” whose sexually voracious male gaze is confronted head-on by writers like Susanna Moore and Helen Zahavi; and “Consumers” of things and people, like Brett Easton Ellis’s *American Psycho*. A last section, on gothic and futuristic thrillers, shows present, future, and past looping nightmarishly in works by William Gibson, J. G. Ballard, and Peter Ackroyd.

In constructing her constantly original argument, Lee Horsley rams unstoppably through many hundreds of books and a good range of films; astonishingly, either by their positioning in her well-conceived categories or through more detailed analysis, she implies a fresh, carefully nuanced reading of each. This study of the twentieth-century thriller in all of its darker manifestations is from now on indispensable.

Helen Fielding

Olivia Joules and the Overactive Imagination

New York: Viking Penguin, 2004. Pp. 306. \$24.95

Reviewed by Nora Foster Stovel

Helen Fielding launched a whole new subgenre with her novel *Bridget Jones’s Diary*, closely followed by *Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason*. Both have been made into films. What is the literary equivalent of “chick flick”? “Fem fic,” perhaps? Olivia Joules is Fielding’s latest hapless but charming heroine. A cross between a feminine version of Ian Fleming’s James Bond and Kingsley Amis’s Lucky Jim, Olivia Joules makes every mistake in the book and still ends up with the job and the guy. Born Rachel Pixley in Worksop, and orphaned when she

witnessed, at the age of fourteen, both her parents and her only sibling run down by a lorry on a zebra crosswalk while she lagged behind buying sweets, she has remade herself in true Renaissance self-creating fashion. Now a journalist commissioned to cover a celebrity launch for a new face cream in Miami, Olivia is on the lookout for a real news story. She believes she has found one in the glamorous figure of Pierre Ferramo, a film producer, surrounded by models/actresses, whom she suspects of being an al-Qaeda terrorist bent on blowing up a critical target—largely because his air of languid power reminds her of Osama bin Laden. Or is it just a figment of her overactive imagination? Pursuing Ferramo takes Olivia on a picaresque adventure.

Olivia never travels without her survival tin and her “Rules for Living.” The latter range from “Be honest and kind” to “Only buy clothes that make you feel like doing a small dance” (79). The survival tin is unique: “The lid was mirrored underneath, for signaling. The tin had a handle to transform it into a miniature pan. Inside was an edible candle, a condom for water carrying ... a button compass and a miniature flare. She hadn’t used any of these items except the condom.... But she was certain that one day the tin would save her by helping her to collect water in the desert, strangle a hijacker, or signal from a palm-fringed atoll to a passing plane. Until then it was a talisman—like a teddy or a handbag” (7).

A new-millennium *picara*, Olivia takes us on a quest that provides a colorful travelogue, ranging from Miami and Los Angeles to London and the Sudan. Each set is entertaining, but Fielding is at her best back in Britain, where Olivia’s brush with M16 leads her to an acquaintance with Professor Absalom Widgett, specialist in Arabic and Islamic studies, and enigmatic CIA agent Scott Rich. The survival tin pales beside the fashionable weaponry with which her fellow spooks outfit her: “The absolute essentials were in the bra—the dagger and tranquilizing syringe acting as underwiring. The flower in the center hid another tiny circular saw and in the booster pad she had concealed the digital micro-camera, the blusher-ball gas diffuser, a waterproof lighter and the lip salve, which was actually a flash” (256). Strangely enough, Ferramo is intrigued and attracted by Olivia and pursues her intensely, eventually kidnapping her and taking her to his Ecolodge in Honduras. Convinced that she is his *saqr* (Arabic for falcon), he demonstrates some peculiar personal predilections.

The novel climaxes in a pull-out-all-the-stops grand finale at the Academy Awards in Hollywood, where contender *Jack Tar Bush Land* vies with *Existential Despair* for Best Picture. Despite the froth, Fielding really does create suspense as well as amusement. This literary confection, of the genre normally classified as a “romp,” makes ideal holiday reading.