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This is the author's radio script of this article.

You’d have to wade through a lot of what is lamentably known as ‘chooklit’ to find a character as gullible, superficial and uninteresting as Claudia Taylor in Lisa Heidke’s latest novel, Claudia’s Big Break.

Claudia has been carrying on an affair with her boss Marcus, though she vaguely thinks it’s wrong to sleep with a married man. When Marcus suggests she take an all-expenses-paid two-week holiday in Santorini, and drop off a package to a business colleague while she’s in Greece, she suspects nothing untoward, thinking it’s a good opportunity to let things cool off between them, so she accepts, inviting her two friends Sophie and Tara to accompany her. ‘I can’t go without my besties’, shedeclares.

None of the three are particularly content with their lives. They are approaching forty, which seems to be a source of great anguish, especially for Claudia. Claudia breezily admits that she is something like $26,000 in debt, and loves spending money on shoes she can’t walk in (flat shoes are for librarians, apparently), even though she is plainly about to lose her job and has no home of her own. I had a hard time feeling any sympathy for Claudia. It’s possible she suffers from a mild case of body dysmorphic disorder, as she’s constantly worried about her appearance, but then again, it could be a result of her willing submission to celebrity culture and her unquestioning receptivity to high-end advertising.

The plot is improbable, and the narrative meanders between a string of pointless anticlimaxes. The sentiment is shallow and often slightly nauseating. She likes to read ‘Angel cards’ to ‘see what the Goddess Oracle has in store for us’. Marcella, the women’s hostess on Santorini, is held up as a model of the good life. ‘My life is simple but good,’ she boasts, presenting Claudia with a basket of fruit she happens to have handy. I couldn’t help noticing, however, that this woman’s simple life involves washing, ironing, cooking, cleaning and even mending for her guests.

The other two women (the ‘besties’) are hardly more interesting. Tara is a fashion journalist who wants to be a novelist, doesn’t care about what she wears, and sometimes says ‘fuck’, while Sophie is a rich, neurotic, neglected wife with a spoiled three-year-old who comes along for the ride. There are a few gestures towards complexity – Sophie has a little breakdown when her husband turns up unexpectedly, for example, but all will be well when she starts taking her medication. Clothes, of course, are a constant topic of conversation, along the lines of ‘I wish I could wear that garb … Boobs! I couldn’t get away with wearing clothes like that’.

But possibly the most disturbing aspect of Claudia’s Big Break is the model of relations between the sexes which is the limit of Claudia’s aspirations. Her love interest, Jack, behaves oddly from their first meeting: clearly there’s something she doesn’t know about him, but she’s much more impressed by his good looks than by the fact that he’s obviously following her. The most distinctive thing about him is that he was wearing an Akubra hat when she first saw him, otherwise he’s a cipher: a handsome Australian with no personality. When he leads her up a steep path on the way to a restaurant, ‘barely glancing behind’ while she struggles along in her unsuitable shoes, it isn’t seen as a failure of respect and consideration on his part: ‘I did my best to keep up, wheezing and puffing as I walked. Not the most attractive start to lunch with a handsome man.’

It’s true that Claudia pays lip-service to being independent, ‘looking forward to doing my best to fulfil [my] dreams and aspirations’, and starting a new life free of romantic entanglements, but we are not encouraged to believe her: the whole narrative drive is in the opposite direction. For anyone who is inclined to believe that feminism’s major battles have been fought and won, Claudia’s Big Break, like the many other books of its type, is a depressing slap in the face.