

BOOK REVIEW | THIS IS NOT CHICK LIT

Mixed-bag collection defies 'girlie' stereotypes

By Margaret Quamme

FOR THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

► *This Is Not Chick Lit* (Random House, \$13.95), edited by Elizabeth Merrick

Give the cover designer credit for this one: The words *This Is Not Chick Lit*, in fluorescent-pink block letters, blare out against a black background, almost filling the space of the paperback's cover.

How can one resist?

Original Stories by America's Best Women Writers claims the volume's subtitle, with a certain amount of exaggeration: These are stories by some pretty good writers and some who might grow into goodness.

On the positive side, the stories are all previously unpublished, so the reader doesn't keep bumping into the usual suspects.

Editor Elizabeth Merrick, who runs a writing school in New York, defines "chick lit" as follows: "White girl in the big city searches for Prince Charming, all the while shopping, alternately cheating on or adhering to her diet, dodging her boss and enjoying the occasional teary-eyed lunch with her token Sassy Gay Friend."

None of that in these 18 stories, which don't have much in common other than the absence of the plot described above.

Older name-brand writers contribute brief, unremarkable stories. Mary Gordon writes about an alienated older woman who spends her days at the New York Public Library. Francine Prose describes an incident on a New York bus. (To be fair, both of these writers work far better in the spacious form of the novel than the truncated one of the short story. But why is Merrick so addicted to stories about New York?)

The usually reliable Judy

Budnitz is represented by a tedious retelling of the story of Joan of Arc from the points of view of publicity agents, make-up artists, documentary filmmakers and other 21st-century types.

Younger writers fare better: Curtis Sittenfeld's chilling *Volunteers Are Shining Stars* enters the obsessive mind of a young volunteer at a women's shelter who finds fault in everyone older than 3. Cristina Henriquez's poignant *Gabriella, My Heart* concisely depicts the unusual, sentimental education of a young man.

Most delightfully surprising is *The Seventy-two-Ounce Steak Challenge* by Dika Lam, who has published only a few short stories in small magazines. Her touching and hilarious story follows two Chinese-Canadian sisters on a working vacation in Calgary, Alberta, where one of them starts down the path that will take her into becoming "the champion you know and love — winner of the International Matzo-Ball-Eating Contest, title-holder of the Conch Fritter Invitational, the girl who downed nine sticks of butter in five minutes."

Most of the stories are solidly realistic, although a few tiptoe into the territory of experimental fiction.

As a gimmick, collecting examples of women's writing that is "not chick lit" is a good one, but, fortunately, it's only a gimmick: One doesn't have to wander far from the pink-cloaked books in any library or bookstore to find zillions of books by women that don't fall under that heading.