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What's Love Got To Do With It?: Family, Sex, and Domestic Violence in Contemporary Irish Women's Fiction

People have argued over the role and necessity of romance and relationships in contemporary women's fiction. Speaking in terms of typical chick lit, for instance, romance is one aspect of the genre that is almost always commented upon. Despite detractors of women's fiction arguing that an emphasis on romance and relationships suggests that all women want is to find a man, it presents an interesting way of examining how these novels discuss and depict family issues such as marriage, sex, motherhood, and domestic violence.

The family was long viewed as being at the heart of Irish life, and Irish women in particular were expected to have no ambitions other than to be a wife and mother. This attitude was taught to children from a young age; young Irish girls were taught 'to be chaste, obedient, respectable and docile' (Hayes 2001, 117)—in other words, they were taught to be the subservient ideal for wives and mothers. Though these attitudes were largely enforced by the Church, whose teachings were adopted by the entire nation, the law in Ireland also reflected these same attitudes. Women's lives were strictly confined to the private domain, and women's issues were largely silenced and
hidden from public knowledge. Additionally, both Church and state maintained that women should hold a certain morality, particularly relating to areas of sexuality and reproduction.

As feminists began to visibly change the lives of women around the world, Irish feminists also aimed to improve the situation of women in their country. For the first time, Irish women's issues, which had historically been hidden, were now open to public scrutiny. As chick lit has become known for being a genre which represents contemporary women's lives, this paper will discuss how issues of family, sex and the law have typically affected women in Ireland, and how these same issues are also represented in contemporary Irish women's fiction. An analysis of such serious issues proves interesting when we take into account the controversy and mixed opinions that chick lit has generated: 'on one hand chick lit attracts the unquestioning adoration of fans; on the other it attracts the unmitigated disdain of critics' (Ferriss 2006, 1). Additionally, chick lit has rarely been the subject of serious academic study, while any critical interest in it has tended to be from an entirely negative perspective. It has similarly been noted how much of the 'discourse surrounding the genre has been polarized between its outright dismissal as trivial fiction and unexamined embrace by fans who claim that it reflects the realities of life for contemporary single women' (Ferriss 2006, 2). Of course, it would be naïve to argue that every chick lit novel should be considered a literary masterpiece; as with any genre of fiction, there are novels which are more formulaic, trivial, and unoriginal, while others may be recognised as, relatively speaking, "better" than others. In this sense, I am not attempting to disprove all criticisms which have been written about chick lit, but, instead, aiming to examine how Irish chick lit is an example of how the framework of the genre may be used to circulate and address serious issues.

CHICK LIT

It has rightly been suggested that attempts to classify chick lit become decidedly more difficult as we 'face the daunting prospect of determining what recent fiction by women featuring a female protagonist or a cast of women characters is not chick lit' (Harzewska 2006, 31). For this reason, and for readers who are unfamiliar with the genre, I feel it would be beneficial to firstly outline the typical characteristics and conventions of the genre.

While the definition of chick lit is continually evolving, there are recognisable tropes and features that are commonly linked to the genre. Chicklitbooks.com, a website dedicated to the genre, describes chick lit as:

 [...] a genre comprised of books that are mainly written by women for women [...] There is usually a personal, light, and humorous tone to the books [...] The plots usually consist of women experiencing usual life issues, such as love, marriage, dating, relationships, friendships,

roommates, corporate environments, weight issues, addiction, and much more. ("What is Chick Lit?", par. 3)

As chick lit has become such a diverse genre, it seems fair to say that it becomes increasingly difficult to identify the core formula. That said, although there is no official consensus on what specifically constitutes a chick lit novel, there are, as mentioned in the above quote, certain characteristics that are typically located among books in this genre, and although many recent authors have tried to adapt the "traditional" formula by interpreting women in a different way, many of these basic elements are still evident in some shape or form.

Chick lit is also recognised for the sense of humour evident in the novels; although various novels may use humour to varying degrees, chick lit always has a funny tone and the characters don't take themselves too seriously, no matter how dire the circumstances. Unfortunately, the humour of chick lit is also one reason for its criticism; in much popular culture, the use of humour can often 'obscure the more bleak messages within' (Whelehan 2005, 109). The use of humour to discuss even the direst circumstances is a noticeable factor in the work of authors such as Marian Keyes; accompanied by her recognisable brand of humour, a more serious underlying theme is where Keyes' fiction really comes into its own, as her trend of mixing humour and sadness/seriousness has appeared in the majority of her novels. The issues she and others like her have tackled include drug addiction, death and grief, rape and domestic violence, alcoholism, single motherhood, and Hodgkin's Disease. Such authors' use of humour does not mean that they are dismissing the importance and gravity of such subjects, but rather it is a way of dealing with these topics.

Chick lit is also often recognised for its use of first person narration, a device which helps to 'craft the impression that the protagonist is speaking directly to readers' (Ferriss 2006, 4). While such techniques have been used because it was once thought that they appealed to female readers, it is important to note that they also 'link chick lit significantly with a large body of women's fiction from earlier generations' (Ferriss 2006, 4), while, at the same time, distinguishing the genre more specifically from the traditional romances that preceded chick lit. Chick lit's use of first person narration often incorporates conversational style, although it may be noted that these devices are now becoming somewhat clichéd. While some Irish chick lit novels adhere to the singular first person narration style, more recent novels have embraced the use of multiple narrators, which is often viewed as a somewhat more sophisticated literary device that helps to lessen the more limited perspective of using a single first-person narrator. Doing so allows authors to maintain the subjective and intimate, conversational style of story-telling, but, in using multiple narrators, rather than readers only reading the often delusional, biased narration of the
subjective perceptions of an individual' (Pérez-Serrano 2009, 137), they
instead receive all sides of the story. This has the page-turning effect of
keeping readers on their toes, so to speak, as, for example, suddenly
hearing from another perspective often changes preconceived notions,
thus maintaining readers' interest.

Of course, characteristics are continuously evolving within the
genre as many chick lit writers are finding ways of tackling the
traditional formula in unique, deeper, and more serious ways. As a
result, chick lit novels are no longer 'excessively light, airy and frilly'
("What is Chick Lit?", par. 7), and the typically fluorescent pink book
covers are often, in fact, 'truly masking meaningful, touching, hilarious
at times and wonderful chick lit stories' ("What is Chick Lit?", par. 9).

Nevertheless, much of the criticism surrounding chick lit has been
centred in some way on the apparently formulaic structure, storylines
and themes, which has rendered the genre open to criticism regarding
how a selection of tropes and clichés have become overused to the point
where they are no longer 'unoriginal—they're unreadable' (Mlynowski
2006, 73). This paper, then, will take a common chick lit trope—
relationships—and will show how the selection of authors is utilising
the basic chick lit framework to push the boundaries of the genre, by
expanding a typical theme to address a variety of (potentially more
serious) issues.

MARRIAGE AND MOTHERHOOD

One of the most common ways of distinguishing between the
modern genre of chick lit and the more traditional romances (such as
those of the Mills and Boon variety, for instance) is the varying degrees
to which they emphasize the heroine's desire to be married. In the case
of traditional romances, the heroine's ultimate goal is, more often than
not, to be married; indeed, a wedding or engagement is often
considered to be the satisfactory conclusion to such novels. In a study
of romance readers, and what they consider to be the characteristics of
ideal romances, Janice Radway says that the "good" romance
continues to maintain that a woman acknowledge and realize her
feelings only within traditional, monogamous marriage (Radway 1984,
596). Romance novels have been criticised for this emphasis on
marriage as the ultimate goal for a woman, and it has been suggested
that they should instead portray women as having career, rather than
marriage, aspirations, and as wanting to maintain their independence.

Novels in the chick lit genre, then, have typically moved away
from the 'ending-in-marriage' trope. Most chick lit novels do not end
with a wedding; 'much more common are mutual declarations of love
after a long and tumultuous period of misunderstandings, with future
marriage likely but not guaranteed' (Wells 2006, 50). In fact, a lot of
chick lit heroines do not express much of a desire to find a husband in
the near future. For many of the young women in these novels,
marriage is not a main priority at this particular point in their lives, and
even be akin to the 'kind of dream where you jerk awake in the
middle of the night, drenched in sweat, your heart pounding. A dream
in the worst nightmare kind of way' (Keyes 2006, 186). This is not to
say that chick lit heroines do not want to get married in the future.
Rather, while it is argued that 'marriage is not the ultimate goal, and
very often is not the ultimate result in much of chick lit [...] it does
occupy an idealized place in the minds of many chick protagonists' (Guerrero
2006, 88); after all, for many women, 'the supreme adventure is still falling in love' (Greer 2006, 211). In this way, chick lit
may be viewed as an updated version of the romance novel in that it is a
love story for the twenty-first century in which the heroines have
different views and aspirations for their lives. As chick lit novels 'do not
necessarily culminate in marriage, the books present a more realistic
portrait of contemporary single life and dating, exploring, in varying
degrees, the dissolution of romantic ideals or exposing those ideals as
unmet, sometimes unrealistic, expectations' (Harzewski 2006, 39).

Just as we can pinpoint the differences between traditional
romance novels and chick lit in terms of their emphasis—or lack of
one—on marriage, we can also differentiate between typical chick lit
and specifically Irish chick lit. In contrast to typical definitions of
standard chick lit, which often rejects, ignores, or relegates marriage to
a matter to be dealt with in the future, Irish chick lit does feature
marriage, through the inclusion of characters who are either already
married at the beginning of the novels, or who are engaged or married
by the time the novel reaches its conclusion.

This difference could simply be due to the influence of the Irish
society in which these writers grew up, and in which many of their
novels are set. The notion of marriage and motherhood as the only
option for women was rigidly believed in Ireland—and perhaps, to a
point, still is even today. In the 1940s and 1950s in Ireland, 'a series of
laws were passed which contributed to the isolation of women in the
home' (Barros del Río 2000, par. 1). In a nation which was heavily
governed by the Catholic Church, 'a devoted and pure Virgin Mary was
praised as the ideal model for females' (Barros del Río 2000, par. 1),
while the mother figure was 'depicted as the prototype of Irish woman'
(Barros del Río 2000, par. 3). The only way for an Irish woman to
achieve any status was to become a wife and mother; there simply were
no other options available. Irish chick lit heroines recognise the lack of
choices their mothers and grandmothers had available to them. In
Marian Keyes' The Other Side of the Story (2004), one of the
protagonists, Gemma, considers the options her mother had as a young
woman:

Hard to believe that Mam had once had a job—
she'd worked in a typing pool, which is where
she'd met Dad. But she gave up work when she got
pregnant with me; after the previous miscarriage
she wasn't taking any chances. Maybe she would
have given up her job anyway, after I'd been born,
because that was what Irish women did in those
days. (Keyes 2004, 61)
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This extract demonstrates de Beauvoir’s claim that ‘it is often astounding to see how readily a woman can give up music, study, her profession, once she has found a husband’ (de Beauvoir 1997, 391). Feminism did a lot to expand the options available to women. It allowed them to no longer be limited solely to the roles of wife and mother, and many people began to move away from traditional practices for the first time, although this was admittedly easier in Irish towns and cities, as many rural areas clung to the traditional beliefs and practices for the first time, although this was admittedly easier in Irish towns and cities, as many rural areas clung to the traditional beliefs and practices longer. As the end of the twentieth century neared, it has been noted that, in Ireland and other Western European countries, ‘there has been a dramatic decline in the rate of marriage and an increasing awareness of the extent to which the concept of “family” has been and can be used to exploit and/or nullify the needs of women and children’ (O’Connor 1998, 4). Our chick lit heroines are all too aware of this change in expectations for women. In Keyes’ Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married (1996), the title character explains it clearly when she says that the ‘days of the little woman staying at home and doing the housework in a little cottage with roses round the door, while the man went out and toiled from dawn to dusk, were long gone’ (Keyes 2003a, 302). Another of Keyes’ heroines refreshingly shows that she feels no pressure to get married, stating that it was not the end of the world if she did not get married; it was not her main goal in life:

Yes, once upon a time she’d wanted the ring and the dress and the babies—so shoot her. There were lots of things she had wanted once upon a time: to be a size 8; to be fluent in Italian; to hear that Brad had got back with Jennifer. None of those things had come to pass but she’d survived. (Keyes 2009, 96)

At one stage, those women who did reveal a desire to get married were often looked down upon. This was found out by Marnie, one of Keyes’ characters, who, at sixteen, told her mother that her goal was to be a “trophy wife”. Her scandalized mother’s response was, “Marnie Gildee, I brought you up to think differently” (Keyes 2008, 213). Yet another character recalls how her sister was thought to have “rebelled” by living a quiet, well-ordered life with a quiet, well-ordered man (Keyes 2006, 14). Extracts such as these represent how attitudes towards marriage in Ireland are gradually changing, and the emphasis on marriage often remains the ultimate goal of many new mother Claire, in Keyes’ Watermelon (1995), feels this confusion all too strongly. She reveals how being married and having a family is what she has always craved:

I always wanted to be boring and settled down with a man, but because that was considered to be the most insulting thing you can say about someone, that is that all she wants is to be settled down with a man, I’d done my level best to hide it. Few people knew my shameful secret. (Keyes 2003b, 298)

Claire’s “shameful secret” is something which she decides she has to bury, and her attitude about wanting and needing a man in her life is something that she resolves to change. Part of this resolution involves her decision to ensure that her daughter is aware that she does not need a man in her life:

I handed Kate over to Dad and he held her expertly. Immediately Kate stopped crying. She lay placidly in his arms, clenching and unclenching her little starfish hands.

Just like her mother, I thought sadly—putty in men’s hands.

I really would have to nip this in the bud with Kate. Get some self-respect, girl! You don’t need a man for your happiness! Every other mother would be reading their little girl stories about engines that could talk, and wolves that meet their comeuppance, I would read my child feminist diatribes instead, I decided.
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Out with The Little Mermaid and in with The Female Eunuch. (Keyes 2003b, 61-62)

And yet, despite Claire's best intentions and her guilt and shame at her underlying desire to be in a relationship, she cannot deny what she really wants. The following extract demonstrates how, even when a woman protests that she craves independence, 'she none the less makes a place in her life for man, for love. She is likely to fear that if she devotes herself completely to some undertaking, she will miss her was, of course, motherhood, and this status was endowed with saint­
here, or If not the reason then certainly the answer to a fulfilling life .

Loath as I am to admit it, I felt less of a human being without my husband and his fat salary.

I hated myself for being so insecure and so dependent. I should have been a strong, sassy, independent, nineties woman. The type of woman who has strong views and who goes to the pictures on her own and who cares about the environment and can change a fuse and goes for aromatherapy and has a herb garden and can speak fluent Italian and has a session in a flotation tank once a week and doesn't need a man to shore up her fragile sense of self-esteem.

But the fact is I wasn't. [...] I was perfectly happy to be a home-maker while husband went out to earn the loot. (Keyes 2003b, 200)

Similar confusion is felt regarding women's right to decide whether to have children, an issue which has been much-discussed in feminist theory. Contemporary feminism has posited that having children should be a choice and not an expectation: feminists have noted that for 'some people children are our whole reason for being here, or if not the reason then certainly the answer to a fulfilling life. For others, children are something to be avoided, the easiest way to ruin a nice and ordered existence' (Levenson 2009, 169). Yet, although both of these views are supposed to be acceptable nowadays, and although women have repeatedly heard that they are free to choose whether to become a mother or not, in Ireland and other countries around the world 'the major and expected consequence of marriage was, of course, motherhood, and this status was endowed with saint­like qualities' (Hill 2003, 22).

Irish chick lit suggests that motherhood is not something to which all women aspire, but instead highlights individuality and choice by portraying characters who have different opinions on the subject. Some novels portray women who love their role as mother, such as Clodagh in Keyes' Sushi For Beginners (2000):

It wasn't always easy being a mother, Clodagh admitted dreamily. But at times like this she wouldn't change her life for the anything. (Keyes 2007, 81)

At the same time, Irish chick lit also attempts to remove the stigma attached to single mothers, who have, for a long time, been ostracised and marginalised in society. Even in today's supposedly open-minded society, they are lumped into the 'deviant mothers' category, along with, for instance, teenage mothers and lesbian mothers (Joannou 2000, 52). They were considered as nothing more than a societal problem. Irish chick lit attempts to remove this negativity. It portrays women who become single mothers either by circumstance (in Watermelon, for instance, Claire Walsh's husband leaves her for another woman on the day she gives birth to their first child) or by choice. An example of the latter is evident in Keyes' Anybody Out There? (2006), when Anna's best friend, Jacqui, becomes pregnant as the result of a one night stand. Far from this being the tragedy it would have been up until relatively recently, Jacqui is admirably calm and rational about the situation:

'I know. I've been thinking,' Pause. 'Being pregnant isn't the horrible disaster it would have been five years ago, or even three years. Back then, I'd no security, I hadn't a bean and I'd definitely have had a termination. But now... I have an apartment, I have a well-paid job—it's not their fault that I can't live within my means—and I sort of like the idea of having a baby around the place.' (Keyes 2006, 470-471)

In the epilogue to Anybody Out There?, we learn that new-mother Jacqui is part of what the narrator calls a 'modern-day family unit' (Keyes 2006, 587) in which the baby's parents both enjoy time with their child but the parents do not become a couple merely for the child's sake, as society would once expect. The novel therefore demonstrates how the 'marginal position of the unmarried mother provides a good perspective from which to consider changing gender roles' (Joannou 2000, 42). Unmarried mothers were once 'identified as a threat to the status quo and a cause for unofficial concern' (Joannou 2000, 52). In a country like Ireland, 'which placed a high value on chastity and self-restraint, illegitimacy was socially unacceptable' (Hill 2003, 27). As a result, many unmarried couples, on learning that they were expecting a child, 'legitimated their expected child by marriage, either through preference or under pressure from family and Church, passing off the "early" birth as premature' (Hill 2003, 29). While we still tend to 'think of the family as a heterosexual unit, lone parenthood is an increasingly common family form' (O'Connor 1998, 109). Anybody Out There? presents a depiction of this form of "modern" family, where the parents are happily unmarried, and neither mother nor child are "punished" for this. By portraying lone parenthood in a positive sense, Irish chick lit is providing an implicit challenge to 'the
traditional "unthinkableness" of a family life which is not based on a residential conjugal unit' (O'Connor 1998, 122), thus helping to remove the stigma so commonly associated with unmarried mothers.

Irish chick lit also portrays women who feel shame at the thought of anyone knowing that they do not feel ready to become a mother—and perhaps never will. And so, despite what feminism has taught them, women know the reality is that society expects women to fall into the role of motherhood, and that a refusal of this role means a woman will not be "doing" her gender "properly":

I didn't want children. And of all the shameful things a woman could admit to—breast enhancement, sex with her boyfriend's father—this was the most taboo. (Keyes 2008, 141-142)

What is a woman to do? Feminism tells her that she has a choice (provided she makes the right one!), society implies that she does not have any real choice, and what she truly wants, in her heart, usually falls somewhere between the two. Perhaps the most important "rule" women should follow is to simply do what makes them happiest. By showing women as each having individual desires and goals, and not as all wanting the same things in life, chick lit is valuable to the complete genre of women's fiction. It depicts women's individuality, as well as their honest feelings on a variety of topics which women would often feel embarrassed to voice in public, including not craving motherhood, as shown in the above quote. In this way, chick lit is helping women understand that there is nothing wrong with them if they do not want the same things as other women, and that they are not alone in these feelings.

SEXUAL EXPERIENCE

A study of modern relationships would not be complete without sex entering the equation. Historically, women's sexual desire has been denied or ignored by a society 'that tells them they should leave the topic of sex for men to discuss' (Goodrich 2001, par. 3). For any woman to admit to sexual needs, or to 'suggest that sex is a desirable aspect of a woman's life, whether she is married or not, presents a significant challenge to traditional morality' (Joannou 2000, 58). Not only was the topic of sex left for men to discuss, but sex scenes in novels, even those by and about women, were described from a solely male viewpoint. Mary Lavelle, by Irish author Kate O'Brien, for instance, received criticism for this very occurrence:

[... the passage describing Mary and Juanito's lovemaking is not focalised through Mary, which is what a reading of the book as a rehearsal of feminine self-liberation might lead one to expect, but is narrated from Juanito's perspective; and the description dwells in an undeniably sadomasochistic way on images of Mary's specifically feminine vulnerability and pain as themselves erotic and constitutive of Juanito's pleasure. (Coughlan 1993, 69)]

Therefore, sexuality, as it tended to be constructed, was 'based on male experience, desires and definitions' (Corcoran 1989, 6). Similarly, 'female sexuality has been masked and deformed [...] Her sexuality is both denied and misrepresented by being identified as passivity' (Greer 2006, 17). This notion of 'passivity' has long been linked to the prototype of the ideal woman, and, from it, evolved the double standard which said that sex 'was edifying for a man, immoral for a woman' (Levy 2005, 59). Traditionally, women could only be categorized in two distinct ways—as angels or as monsters. The so-called "angelic" women were those who abided by this idea of passivity, and, without question, allowed themselves to be treated as objects by men. All others were "monsters" and, as such, had to be punished for refusing to conform to societal expectations. For Irish women, in particular, this confirmed 'the impossibility of escaping the Irish puritan morality that pervades everything' (Barros del Rio 2000, par. 19).

Irish society, its social standards and its legislations, has 'never embodied principles and behaviours that respect the sexual rights of women' (Corcoran 1989, 18). Irish writer Nuala O'Faolain has described Irish communities as being 'savagely punitive' and that, for many years, these communities were 'fully in the grip of an institutionalized fear of women; that is, of sexuality' (O'Faolain 2006, 294). How, then, would such a community react to the publication of material which contains content not deemed 'suitable'? Up until relatively recently, Ireland's answer was for the material to be banned by the Irish Censorship Board. Edna O'Brien was one such writer whose 'early work was banned by the Irish government and vilified by her local community' (Moloney 2003, 197). In particular, all three books in her Country Girls trilogy were banned; the third book, Girls in Their Married Bliss, was banned specifically because of an apparently explicit sex scene, which today's readers would probably find decidedly tame. Writers and feminist theorists at this time would undoubtedly have been 'largely pessimistic about the possibility of there being a sexual revolution that would benefit women equally' (Whitehan 1995, 158). Speaking specifically in Irish terms, women's sexuality is a subject which is not easily or readily discussed; it has been noted that, while 'the feminist literature of other countries has endless dissertations on sexuality, discussion of the subject among Irish feminists was never able to surface into the public domain' (Viney 1989, 64). As a result, until very recently, Irish women's sexuality was rarely, if ever, an area of historical enquiry:

The dominant Catholic ideology of the newly established Irish Free State in the 1920s and 1930s in a sense desexualised women to such an extent that even sex within marriage was considered too
risqué for public and often even for private discussion. One consequence of this taboo was that little historical attention was directed towards unearthing the sexual activities of Irish women. (Hayes 2004, 79)

One would wonder whether Ireland was ready for any amount of openness regarding sexuality. Irish chick lit, however, did not wait for Ireland to be ready. Chick lit burst onto the scene with its ‘girly gab about shoes, shagging, and shedding pounds’ (Rogers, in Freitas 2005, i) and, in doing so, worked wonders towards positively voicing issues of female sexuality and sexual desire. Instead of ‘presenting their protagonists as subordinate to male advances, chick-lit authors present women as sexual agents’ (Freitas 2006, 10). In this sense, the traditional depiction of women “anticipating pleasure” has largely been superseded by actively seeking and experiencing pleasure (Kiernan 2006, 208). Additionally, while ‘delayed sexual intimacy for women until marriage was thus to emerge as a most important social [norm] that was vigorously enforced’ (McLoughlin 1994, 85), another sign of positive development in terms of representations of female desire shows how ‘contemporary [and, in this case, Irish] chick lit often presents the heroine in sexual relationships with men other than the narratives’ intended hero, but without “punishing” her or questioning her actions’ (Mabry 2006, 201).

Irish chick lit is also successful in portraying how society is radically changing in terms of women’s new-found sexual freedom. Until very recently, ‘the rule was that you had to hold off sleeping with a man for as long as possible. But now the rule seemed to be that if you wanted to hold on to him you’d better deliver the goods asap’ (Keys 2007, 228). Indeed, waiting until the wedding night has become such a rarity that some women wonder if something is drastically wrong if a man tries to be a gentleman and does not expect them to sleep with him straight away. As Anna, in Anybody Out There? , recalls:

At this stage I’d seen Aidan about seven or eight times and not once had he tried to jump me. Every date we’d gone on, we’d had just one kiss. It had improved from quick and firm, to slower and more tender, but one kiss was as good as it got.

Had I wanted more? Yes. Was I curious about his restraint? Yes. But I kept it all under control and something had held me back from getting Jacqui in a headlock every time I came home from an unjumped-on night out and tearfully agonizing: What’s his problem? Doesn’t he fancy me? Is he gay? Christian? One of those True Love Waits gobshites? (Keys 2006, 108-109)

Unusually for popular fiction, Irish chick lit may be celebrated for its recognition of the risks, as well as the freedoms, brought about by the sexual revolution, most notably the HIV/AIDS epidemic. It brings our awareness to such a topic without preaching or using scare tactics, but also reminds us that the risks are very real; contrary to the once widespread misconception that the disease was solely a result of homosexuality, passage from Irish chick lit novels remind us that anyone can be affected if precautions are not taken. Colette Caddle’s Forever FM (2002) tackles the topic in the form of a guest speaker on the novel’s radio talk show. The speaker, a young woman, describes how she contracted HIV as a child when she pierced her skin on a needle belonging to her drug-addict mother. She discusses the potential implications of this accident that she now faces every day, such as rejections by her friends, and the need to always ensure proper precautions are used when sleeping with her boyfriend (see Caddle 2002, 282-292). Keyes’ Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married, alternatively, presents a kind of utopian vision for HIV-awareness, in the form of its being so embedded in people’s minds that proper care is automatically exercised by sexually-active adults, without the need for discussion:

We hadn’t mentioned birth control, but when the time came we were both responsible adults living in the HIV positive nineties. (Keys 2003a, 731)

While women may indeed have more sexual freedom nowadays, it is still not without its problems, and these problems are also discussed in the novels of Irish chick lit writers. One such difficulty is that, now that women have been allowed more sexual freedom than ever before, it is now taken for granted that everyone can be affected if precautions are not taken. Colette Caddle’s guest speaker on the novel’s radio talk show. The speaker, a young woman, describes how she contracted HIV as a child when she pierced her skin on a needle belonging to her drug-addict mother. She discusses the potential implications of this accident that she now faces every day, such as rejections by her friends, and the need to always ensure proper precautions are used when sleeping with her boyfriend (see Caddle 2002, 282-292). Keyes’ Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married, alternatively, presents a kind of utopian vision for HIV-awareness, in the form of its being so embedded in people’s minds that proper care is automatically exercised by sexually-active adults, without the need for discussion:

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While women may indeed have more sexual freedom nowadays, it is still not without its problems, and these problems are also discussed in the novels of Irish chick lit writers. One such difficulty is that, now that women have been allowed more sexual freedom than ever before, it is now taken for granted that everyone can be affected if precautions are not taken. Colette Caddle’s guest speaker on the novel’s radio talk show. The speaker, a young woman, describes how she contracted HIV as a child when she pierced her skin on a needle belonging to her drug-addict mother. She discusses the potential implications of this accident that she now faces every day, such as rejections by her friends, and the need to always ensure proper precautions are used when sleeping with her boyfriend (see Caddle 2002, 282-292). Keyes’ Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married, alternatively, presents a kind of utopian vision for HIV-awareness, in the form of its being so embedded in people’s minds that proper care is automatically exercised by sexually-active adults, without the need for discussion:

We hadn’t mentioned birth control, but when the time came we were both responsible adults living in the HIV positive nineties. (Keys 2003a, 731)

As Levy states that sexuality is a complicated, fundamental part of what it is to be human, she urges us to remember that ‘different things are attractive to different people and sexual tastes run wide and wild’ (Levy 2005, 44), rather than adhering to the myth that ‘sexiness needs to be something divorced from the everyday experience of being ourselves’

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(Levy 2005, 44). The problem, as Levy and other like-minded theorists see it, is that we seem to have forgotten ‘that there is a category of people, most people in fact, who actually quite like sex, and that it is possible to do so without being a sex fiend’ (Levenson 2009, 39). Far from wanting to partake in sexual gymnastics every night of the week, Claire Walsh in Keyes’ Watermelon instead highlights her own choice in sexual preferences by stating that she prefers the missionary position:

> While we’re on the subject of sexual shenanigans I’ve got a confession to make.
> Wait for it.
> Here it comes.
> I enjoy the missionary position.
> There! I’ve said it.
> I’m made to feel so ashamed of myself for feeling that way.
> As if I’m terribly boring and repressed.
> But I’m not. Honestly.
> I’m not saying that it’s the only position that I like.
> But, really, I have no objection to it whatsoever. (Keyes 2003b, 363)

It is interesting that Keyes chose the missionary position for Claire to admit a particular fondness for, as it is the position often associated with women’s passivity in sexual intercourse, the idea often being that the woman has no choice but to "lie back and think of England" (or, in this case, Ireland). However, when Claire reveals that she prefers this position, its cultural signification changes as it is blatantly stated that this is Claire’s choice; by expressing what she chooses, she therefore becomes active in the situation, again helping to equate Irish chick lit with feminism’s assertions for women to achieve progress by taking control of their own lives and voicing their concerns, aspirations, and desires.

Equally “shocking” is that many women, given the option, would probably quite happily cherish an element of innocence in their relationships:

> We sat quietly and still, Chris’s arm tight around me. I closed my eyes and, for a few moments, let myself pretend it was a perfect world and he was my boyfriend.
> It reminded me of an earlier, more innocent age, when the most a boyfriend did was put his arm around you and—if your luck was in—kissed you. The enforced decorum demanded by the Cloisters was sweet and romantic. It touched, rather than frustrated me. (Keyes 1998, 358)

As many women have realised, the problem is no longer about winning the right to sexual freedom. As feminists spent so long fighting for women to have the same sexual rights as men, many women now feel a sense of hypocrisy when they would prefer to choose to say “no” to sexual advances, the freedom to choose being, ironically, what feminism was fighting for all along. The title character of Lucy Sullivan is Getting Married identifies with these feelings:

> In theory, I knew that it was my right not to go to bed with anyone I didn’t want to and to change my mind at any stage in the proceedings, but the reality was that I would be far too embarrassed to say no. (Keyes 2003a, 187)

While the sexual revolution and the separation of intercourse from reproduction brought new freedom to women, it also, as extracts such as this show, ‘brought benefits to men by releasing them from some responsibility for their sexual acts. Women soon realised that it was freedom only to say “yes”, not to say “no”; they were “frigid” if they said no’ (Viney 1989, 61). In The Female Eunuch (1970), Greer reminds us that feminism urged women to embrace the right to express their own sexuality; this, however, is not at all the same thing as the right to capitulate to male advances” (Greer 2006, 10).

It has been said that a ‘chick lit novel without a few satisfying—or, alternatively, ridiculous—sex scenes is hard to find’ (Wells 2006, 50). One thing that chick lit does—and does well—is describe its sex scenes from the woman’s perspective. In Kate Thompson’s Sex, Lies and Fairytales (2005), one of the characters is a chick lit writer who cheekily declares that her “sex scenes should be prescribed reading for men” (Thompson 2006, 402), alluding to the idea that sex has traditionally been on men’s terms and to men’s preferences, and so men now need to be “taught” how to please a woman. Feminists have noted ‘in almost all literature that the sexual protagonist is the male’ (Hayes 1990, 117-118), and that, in romance fiction, the woman is never seen to take the sexual initiative with a man. Chick lit has reversed these claims by depicting the female as the sexual protagonist, and as portraying women who are happy to take the initiative. It is a huge achievement that chick lit has developed as a genre of fiction that shows women as seeking and deserving pleasure as much as men, a perspective that would have been unheard of until very recently.

Sex scenes are not always easy to write, or to read, for that matter. I again turn to Claire Walsh in Watermelon to explain it clearly:

> It’s very difficult to discuss having sex without being so crude that I sound like a pornographic book or without being so discreet that I sound like a repressed, uptight Victorian novelist who suffers regularly from Vaginismus and still calls her husband Mr Clements after twenty-seven years of marriage. (Keyes 2003b, 378)
Charming Man,

sad fact that men's issues have typically been deemed more important specifically related to women. As Grace Gildee, a journalist in and, consequently, have taken precedence over any matter which is women routinely internalised their misery' (Joannou 1998, 284). Critics' disdain combined, they are automatically 'scorned by the male intellectual elite political credibility are conventionally seen as incompatible' (Whelehan 2005, 19). Such laws meant that the 'battered wife and mother could not exclude her violent husband from the home (which was almost invariably his) except by resort to the most cumbersome procedures' (Scannell 1988, 73). While progress has since been made to protect women and children in such situations, theorists have noted that even in the late twentieth century, women in Ireland 'remained vulnerable to violence within the home' (Hill 2003, 191).

Feminist activism attempted to tackle this neglect of women's issues with full force. It encouraged women not to remain silent, as was expected, but to speak out against the sources of their oppression, thus granting 'speech to those who have been denied independent voices' (Hild 1997, 284). As a result, many issues that were previously hidden and stigmatised in Irish society, such as rape and domestic violence, were brought into the open for the first time. Similarly, female 'writers have become very powerful because their work allows women's problems and concerns to be voiced in a way that is difficult to ignore' (Goodrich 2001, par. 1).

If chick lit, and popular fiction in general, was once dismissed as silly and superficial, then Irish chick lit writers are breaking that mould. Irish chick lit writers are by no means afraid to forcefully address issues affecting women. Keyes' This Charming Man (2008) is a frighteningly realistic and no-holds-barred tale of domestic violence. Its account of the cruelty to which many women are subjected in relationships is portrayed in alarming and utterly shocking extracts such as the following:

"You're a stupid, useless bitch and this is your own fucking fault." He was panting from exertion as he stood over her, curled in a ball beneath him. "Say it. You're a stupid, useless bitch and this is your own fucking fault."

He was pulling his leg back for another kick.
No. She didn't think she could take another one and still live. The toe of his boot slammed her stomach against her spine. She retched, retched, retched, retched, nothing but bile left.

"Say it!"
"I'm a stupid, useless bitch," she whispered, tears streaming down her face. 'And this is my own fault.'

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

As well as marriage and lasting relationships, Irish chick lit also portrays relationship breakdowns, in terms of separation and divorce. However, some relationships are even more damaging, both emotionally and physically. In Ireland, it has been recognised that one 'of the most common, yet least discussed, causes of marital unhappiness, and indeed of relationship problems in general, was abuse, mental or physical, usually inflicted by men on their female partners' (Hill 2003, 148). Although it is a topic rarely broached in typical chick lit, Irish chick lit tackles issues such as domestic violence and rape at full force. This is significant, not only in disputing claims that chick lit only deals with superficial and unimportant subjects, but also because it shows how chick lit is a format which can provide a voice for these often silenced subjects.

Traditionally, 'any nod to the popular in [a novel's] style or tone is to sacrifice the author's credibility [...] because marketability and political credibility are conventionally seen as incompatible' (Whelahan 2005, 68-69). When popular fiction and women's fiction, then, are combined, they are automatically scorned by the male intellectual elite because of their "low-brow" appeal' (Rakow 1998, 282). Critics' disdain of women's popular culture has prevented them from seeing how it speaks to the real problems and tensions in women's lives' (Rakow 1998, 284).

This ignorance and silencing of women's concerns was not unusual or extraordinary. Particularly in terms of issues regarding women's health, as well as women's safety and protection, 'quiet dissatisfaction was more common than open dissent [...] intelligent women routinely internalised their misery' (Joannou 2000, 19). It is a sad fact that men's issues have typically been deemed more important and, consequently, have taken precedence over any matter which is specifically related to women. As Grace Gildee, a journalist in This Charming Man, discovered:

I wanted to do this [report on breast cancer] well. I wanted to do all my stories well, but the slapdash, penny-pinching approach to women's health sometimes made me want to cry with frustration. If such a high number of false negatives had happened with testicular cancer—man cancer—there would be pandemonium. (Keyes 2008, 131)
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‘Own f**king fault. Can’t you get anything right?’ (Keyes 2008, 315)

He carried her bag from the car and solicitously helped her inside. ‘What would you like to do now?’

‘I’d just like to go to bed.’

‘Okay.’ He grinned. ‘Mind if I join you?’

‘Um... perhaps she had misunderstood. I’m going to go straight to sleep.’

‘Come on, you can stay awake for twenty minutes.’ He was steering her towards the bedroom. He was opening his jeans, his intention clear. ‘Take your knickers off.

‘But—no! I’ve just had an abortion.’

‘Excuses, excuses.’ He pushed her onto the bed, his knee pinioning her in position while he wrenched off her tights and pants.

‘Please stop, please. I could get an infection. I can’t have sex for three weeks.’

‘Shut up.’ He was on top of her, he was shoving up into her, into the blood and loss, rubbing her raw with his frenzy. Then he pushed himself up on his hands, as if he was doing a press-up, and slapped her, hard, across the face. ‘For fuck’s sake, try and look like you’re enjoying yourself.’ (Keyes 2008, 363)

Rather than merely skirt­ ing around topics as serious as this, as chick lit is often accused of doing, Keyes discusses domestic violence as honestly as she can, giving equal attention to the brutality of the perpetrators, the pain of the victim, and the ignorance of the people around her as to what is going on. She shows how women often initially, make excuses for violence, claiming it is a sign of the love and passion in the relationship:

Passionate disagreements were routine, practically mandatory. It was like a game, this ritual of dramatic accusations, followed by tearful reunions; their way of demonstrating how much they loved each other. [...] From time to time the emotional game-playing spilled over into the physical; a shove here, a slap there, on one overwrought night, a punch in her face. (Keyes 2008, 527)

As the violence escalates, Keyes shows how women feel confused that this could be happening in their relationship—surely domestic violence only happens to other people? People often ask how and why a woman stays in a volatile relationship; in The Noughtie Girl’s Guide to Feminism (2009), Ellie Levenson outlines the numerous excuses that women may make for their situation:

What would you do if your partner hit you? It’s easy to say, when not in this situation, that you would leave any such partner immediately. Or to say that once may be because you provoked him, or because he saw red, or because he didn’t know what he was capable of doing and is truly shocked at himself, and that you’ll forgive once but not twice so if it ever happens again then you’ll definitely leave him. (Levenson 2009, 164)

In this extract, Levenson is outlining how easy it is for people to believe that it will never happen to them but, as Keyes points out, ‘when you’re in the middle of it, there’s a world of difference’ (Keyes 2008, 547), until eventually even the once-strong woman has no fight left in her:

My indignation had died and the time when I was strong enough to leave him had passed. (Keyes 2008, 549)

Keyes is cleverly reminding us how abuse and violence can affect the victim over a period of time, until they feel that they can no longer seek help or advice. In doing so, Keyes is helping to show how such feelings can result in many domestic violence victims not seeking help until it may be too late:

It may be easy to say that [a woman should leave a violent relationship], but we know for most women, leaving is not as easy as that. We know that women with abusive partners do not tend to leave them after being hit once or even after being hit twice. No, on average a victim is assaulted thirty-five times before contacting the police, and many more never report is at all—other research (by Victim Support) suggests that as little as two per cent of domestic violence is reported. (Levenson 2009, 164)

Writers such as Marisa Mackle and Kate Thompson also address similar issues in their novels, and show how women in these situations are often shamed in silence, feeling somehow at fault for the violence to which they are subjected. This may be largely related to the knowledge that it is often impossible to account for all cases of domestic violence as so many of these cases go unreported:

A range of factors may prevent women from taking action—concern for the welfare and safety of their children, embarrassment, fear of reprisals,
formal complaint: feel that the rape was her own fault, and is dissuaded from making a

In Thompson's Sex, Lies and Fairytales, Hazel is almost raped by her lover's brother. When she is advised to press charges against her attacker, Hazel is quick to refuse, thereby demonstrating the fears often felt by many women in real-life:

'Hugh. I know this is cowardly of me, but I couldn't hack it. I couldn't hack the humiliation. I feel so dirty. I feel so—I feel that I was partly to blame..." [...] The prospect of having to stand in a dock and testify against the stranger who'd tried to rape her filled her with horror. And oh, God—it filled her with shame, too. (Thompson 2006, 489-491)

On the other hand, what if Hazel, or any woman in her situation, had testified? Unfortunately, in many cases, outsiders are slow to intervene, dismissing such instances initially as "only" a domestic' (Keyes 2008, 591). From a specifically feminist point of view, this portrayal of 'male violence, rape, sexual harassment, child sexual abuse, marital violence or pornography as "not that serious" erodes women's sense of their own bodily integrity and ultimately their sense of their own value' (O'Connor 1998, 14). However, it has been suggested that, even when women 'are willing to take action against their partners, abused women often find it difficult to be taken seriously and have little confidence in the police' (Hill 2003, 192). Such circumstances are portrayed in Keyes' The Brightest Star in the Sky (2009) as newly-married Maeve is brutally raped by her ex-boyfriend. Like This Charming Man, this novel also contains shocking descriptions of the act itself; however, it also focuses largely on the concern that such rape and domestic violence tends not to be taken seriously. When Maeve finds the courage to report the crime, she is devastated to realise that no one believes her. She is questioned about the clothes she was wearing at the time of the attack, to which her husband retorts

'But how can it be proved if it doesn't go to court? Maeve and I, we work in the same place as him. You're saying he'll just carry on with his job and everything like nothing happened?'

In the eyes of the law he's done nothing wrong.' The guard heaved himself up to leave. 'Why should the man lose his job?' (Keyes 2009, 537)

Maeve even finds that her own friends do not believe her:

She confided in Yvonne, her best friend from school. 'David raped me.'

'How could he rape you? He used to be your boyfriend. You already had sex with him.'

She confided in Natalie. 'David raped me.'

'David doesn't need to rape anyone. He's a nice guy.'

She confided in Jasmine, her ex-flatmate. 'David raped me.'

'But that's a terrible thing to say. He could sue you for that.'

She stopped confiding in people. (Keyes 2009, 538)

Such were the choices many women had: suffer in silence, or speak up and risk being ignored. In Maeve's case, her feelings of isolation and helplessness resulted in both her and her husband becoming severely depressed and suicidal. Maeve's husband, Matt, reflected on the injustice that arises out of many rape allegations, including the shockingly low conviction rates, which many feminist theorists have also discussed:

Matt had discovered things he'd never before thought about: that only one in ten reported rapes make it to court; that out of them, only six in a

'times' sake, then got afraid that hubby there might get wind.'

'I'm sure.'

'Are you sure you want to go ahead with this? Taking it further?'

'I'm sure.'

'Because it'll ruin his life, you know. Just so as you know.' (Keyes 2009, 336)

Maeve is later informed that it has been decided that there is not enough evidence to result in a conviction, and so the police are not proceeding with the prosecution:

'I'm sure.'

'Innocent until proven, and all that.'

'But how can it be proved if it doesn't go to court? Maeve and I, we work in the same place as him. You're saying he'll just carry on with his job and everything like nothing happened?'

'In the eyes of the law he's done nothing wrong.' The guard heaved himself up to leave. 'Why should the man lose his job?' (Keyes 2009, 537)
hundred result in a conviction. And what about all the rapes that are never reported, because the girl is too scared. Of her rapist? Of the police? All those rapes unacknowledged, unavenged. It was enough to drive him mad. How was the world as normal as it was? How was all that rage and injustice and grief and fear contained? (Keyes 2009, 541-542)

If more writers continue to address such serious issues, they will be helping to 'highlight the serious nature and widespread prevalence of violence experienced by women' (Hill 2003, 148), hopefully resulting in it becoming an issue which is increasingly difficult to ignore. The Brightest Star in the Sky also has further feminist undertones: Maeve’s elderly neighbour, Jemima, on realising that Maeve has been raped, stresses that: ‘Your body belongs to you. Not to that man, whoever he was. Take it back from him’ (Keyes 2006, 523). Jemima’s words echo the assertions of feminists, such as Cixous and de Beauvoir, who have urged women to re-claim control of their bodies, as their bodies belong to no one but them. Levenson explains that ‘rape is usually about power, and when a woman is raped her power to say no is taken away from her’ (Levenson 2009, 63-64). Levenson asserts, much like Jemima, that the women need to take back that power (Levenson 2009, 64). Clodagh Corcoran stresses that if society is to combat issues such as rape and domestic violence, along with other forms of oppression, ‘we must treat it as a civil rights issue for women, demanding appropriate legislation’ (Corcoran 1989, 20). Following this hope, the novel ends on an optimistic note: one of the final chapters is a flash-forward to the future in which most of the main characters are attending a public rally on the streets of Dublin to ‘protest against the low conviction rate for Irish rapists’ (Keyes 2009, 594), depicting a utopian vision for the future in which rape and domestic violence are no longer hidden in Irish society, and where demands for change are voiced publicly.

The novels discussed in this paper are, of course, fictional stories about fictional heroines in fictional scenarios. However, at the same time, the novels are creating characters and situations to which readers can relate, meaning the messages such novels convey can have a positive effect. This examination of how Irish chick lit discusses issues of marriage, motherhood, sex, and domestic violence demonstrates how chick lit’s focus on relationships may not be as trivial, meaningless, and even anti-feminist, as critics have suggested. Moreover, it is important to again consider how Irish women were once silenced; how they were prevented from speaking up about the situations in which they were forced to live. In terms of the family, this paper reminds us how Ireland once censored female sexuality, to the extent that books about women’s sexual pleasure were banned, and single mothers, seen as immoral, were ostracised in society. We are also reminded how Irish society and Irish law worked together to keep women isolated in the home, as wives and mothers, and to silence women who were suffering domestic violence and rape, rendering them

issues to be dealt with “in private”. Irish chick lit, then, is helping to provide a voice for women, by portraying a variety of characters who all have differing views on marriage and motherhood; by presenting single mothers as independent and valued members of society; by openly addressing female sexuality; and, perhaps most importantly, by breaking the taboo about discussing domestic violence and rape, finally allowing this issue to be brought into the public domain. Although the novels are indeed fictional, the inclusion of such topics suggests that the genre attempts to represent contemporary women’s lives in their entirety. If chick lit encourages women to speak out about issues they read within the pages of these novels, they will achieve a lot, and may help to eliminate the trend of women’s issues being censored. As far as feminism goes, that can only be a positive thing.

Works Cited


What's Love Got To Do With It?


