

What a Way to Make a Living: Irish Chick Lit and the Working World

by Mary Ryan

In tracing the career options and possibilities available to women throughout history, we cannot help but stumble upon 'the timeless and naturalized association of women with the home' (Whelehan *Modern Feminist Thought* 9). Until relatively recently, and perhaps to a point even today, it was the common assumption 'that "home-making" is something to which women naturally aspire' (Whelehan *Modern Feminist Thought* 53). This direct association between women and the home even goes so far as to suggest that, for "normal" women – women who married and had children – maintaining the household was to be their proper destiny; indeed, it became an identity in itself, to the exclusion of all others' (Whelehan *Modern Feminist Thought* 7). This supposed *entrapment* of women in the potentially constraining and debilitating roles of wife, mother, and homemaker, was blamed, by much feminist theory, on 'the often-invisible force of patriarchy [which] dictated that a woman's natural place was in the home raising children and caring for her husband' (Eaton, par. 12). The idea that women's "natural" place was in the home was further reinstated by images portrayed in various forms of media, including television, film, literature, and advertising. Media representations of the "happy housewife" promoted the patriarchy-approved ideal image of femininity (Thornham 213). Hollywood traditionally 'maintained its support of oppressive social roles for women' (Walters 140-141). Along with other media forms, it told women 'to get back in the kitchen and obey her master,' and any 'wayward behaviour' was deemed to be suitable for punishment by society (Walters 140). Media images of happy housewives and domestic bliss became 'increasingly glamorized and correspondingly difficult to live up to. Unless, that is, the role was adopted as a full-time occupation' (Whelehan *Modern Feminist Thought* 7). Far from being the positive images they claimed to be, however, these stereotypical representations of women severely limited the options and possibilities available to them, and instead served only 'to mire women further in that [domestic] realm as the only one available to them' (Walters 85):

[Thus] for all the marketed glamour of the passive, pure and contented homemaker, there was a clear disjunction between this ideal and the material realities of the daily drudgery of most domestic labour, which afforded little glamour and less intellectual and social stimulation. (Whelehan *Modern Feminist Thought* 7-8)

The Women's Movement recognised that many women were feeling dissatisfied and unfulfilled at their near-forced confinement to the home and 'confirmed that housework was drudgery' (Whelehan *Feminist Bestseller* 93). The movement then began its work of encouraging women 'to look critically at their own lives and expectations' (Joannou 7), and to find a life for themselves outside of the home. This resulted in 'the radical rethinking of motherhood as the sole fulfilling role for the adult woman' (Walters 120). Because of this, the vast 'majority of women no longer expected to marry young and to spend the rest of their lives as housewives with no paid employment' (Joannou 7). As a result, many women began to seek and undertake work away from their home and family.

While it is now commonly accepted by both men and women that women, as well as men, have the right to pursue a career or family, or both, it was not initially without its problems. The major postfeminist paradigm has precisely been this work/family duality, which condemns feminism for helping to create the double-day/second-shift

syndrome, yet completely overlooks a more radical critique of either work or family (Walters 122). Thus, for all feminism's good intentions in attempting to open up a world of possibilities for women, it ironically came instead 'to be blamed for the perceived personal and social cost of women "having it all" [...] women can be encouraged to blame feminism for the increased burden of entering careers while maintaining the home' (Whelehan *Modern Feminist Thought* 229). For many people, feminism came to be portrayed as 'a movement both victorious (the myth that we have achieved equality) and failed (look what feminism got you: double duty, burnout, and the explosion of your biological clock)' (Walters 139-140).

Those women who did pursue a career also received criticism. Still largely outnumbered by the women who chose to remain in the home, career women were considered to be selfish, and as damaging as the "natural" way of women staying at home to raise a family while men go out to work. So, while it was perfectly acceptable, and usually expected, for men to go out to work and maintain their role as the family breadwinner, women's priorities had to lie with their home and family, or, 'at the least, be informed by a recognition of their "natural" obligations to their families' (Whelehan *Modern Feminist Thought* 52). Women who consciously viewed their careers as being of equal or more importance than raising a family were seen as a threat to societal norms. As Imelda Whelehan explains:

There would be no straightforward way for women to gain access to the top of their professions without the perception that their success had cost them dear in personal terms. (*Feminist Bestseller* 141)

Yet another problem women encountered was the range of professions deemed *suitable* and *appropriate* for women. Historically, the nursing profession has been regarded as suitable women's work, requiring care and similar domestic skills which were viewed as the desired moral attributes of the "good woman" in the home [...] Similarly, in lower and middle schools where most women teachers are to be found, the caring and socializing aspects of the work take preference over the educational role (Whelehan *Modern Feminist Thought* 50). Placing women in traditionally "domestic" careers allows for society's justification for women typically earning less than men, and reaping less financial benefits. We can once again turn to Whelehan, who explains:

Since domestic labour has no exchange value, women's domestic skills gain low financial rewards when transferred to the labour market. The masculine ideal of a "woman's place" perpetuates and covertly justifies the unequal value ascribed to men's and women's work. (*Modern Feminist Thought* 50)

Thus, until relatively recently, many women who chose to enter and remain in the working world could 'expect no promotion, no significant remuneration and no widening of her horizons, for the demands of the household must still be met' (Greer 253).

Yet a further reason for the dismissal of women's career aspirations may be linked to the common assumption that, while men build a career for life, women only enter the workforce as a way of 'putting in time, as the saying is, until she could get herself married' (Reynolds 53). It has been argued that, for a long time, many women viewed their 'professional life either as a stop-gap or an indirect qualification for

marriage' (Greer 76). By likening women's professional lives to a "qualification" for marriage, it can also be argued that this may have been why so many women were encouraged into typically domestic careers, such as nursing and teaching. That is, the skills they would learn and use during their time in such careers would also, to some extent, be useful in home-making and rearing a family.

Despite all of the problems women encountered in trying to find a place for themselves in the working world, they never stopped their efforts to achieve their rights. Still today, career aspirations and professional success are one of the main priorities for women all over the world. After all, many 'women still need a room of their own and the only way to find it may be outside their own homes' (Greer 361). For this reason, an examination of the working world in today's chick lit genre is crucial in a discussion on how successfully the genre portrays contemporary women's lives.

When chick lit initially burst onto the literary scene, it was marketed as providing a more honest and realistic portrayal of the lives of modern women. Unlike the relationship-and-marriage-centred traditional romance genre, in which the heroine's only real aim seemed to be finding a husband, novels in the chick lit genre 'give contemporary women voice and allow them to express desires that may lie outside of the "happily-ever-after" marriage to Prince Charming' (Mabry 192). Yet despite chick lit's potential for opening up more possibilities for women, the genre, even with its professional career-oriented plot, has received criticism for being ultimately as debilitating and repressive as traditional romances.

One fault that many critics have found with the career plot in typical chick lit is that it does not provide readers with a realistic and well-rounded perspective on the working world. The heroines in most chick lit novels work in supposedly "glamorous" careers, usually the fashion, media, or publishing industries. Such professions are often viewed 'as shorthand for excitement and success' (Whelehan *Feminist Bestseller* 198), and are the cause of envy for readers who, at one time or another, may have longed to work in similar positions. And why not? After all, the heroine in Marian Keyes' *Anybody Out There?*, for example, has 'The Best Job In The World™' (6). The problem is that, even though such careers are greatly glamorized and envied, the readers actually learn very little about the work that is carried out in such professions, often leaving them with a very unclear perception of the realities of these jobs. Similarly, for all the *talk* of jobs and work in chick lit novels, we rarely read of the heroines *doing* any actual work. Instead, it would seem to be that:

[...] the very fact of [the heroines] holding such a job, rather than any detailed description about what they actually do in it, is signposted as shorthand for glamour and achievements so that their disastrous personal lives don't make us write them off as dismally pathetic. (Whelehan *Feminist Bestseller* 210)

For the chick lit heroines who do not begin the novel in the fabulously glamorous career of everyone's dreams, we can rest assured that, by the novel's conclusion, the heroine's professional life will be tidied up to perfection. It is a given that each chick lit 'heroine is ultimately rewarded by removal from the bad workplace and the discovery of a new, far more suitable career [...] where her talents are appreciated'

(Hale 103-104). Additionally, it is important to note that, while much emphasis is placed on the supposedly glamorous professions of chick lit, very little attention is paid to the token few chick lit characters who hold more “normal” jobs – clerical and administration positions, for example – even though such jobs arguably link the chick lit heroine much closer to the average reader of the genre. If chick lit was intended to be a realistic fictional interpretation of contemporary women’s lives, why does it consciously depict a lifestyle that many readers can only dream of? It may be argued that, instead of it expanding to become a positive genre of women’s fiction, traditional chick lit may instead be potentially damaging by explicitly pointing out to women what they do not have.

Another problem commonly associated with chick lit is that it has been greatly criticised for being rife with clichés and overused tropes. This has led to chick lit novels being attacked by critics, who virtually condemn chick lit writers for being unoriginal and unimaginative. The most common career-oriented chick lit cliché is regarding “evil” bosses and bitchy co-workers – it would seem that most traditional chick lit heroines encounter one, or both, at some point of the novel. As one such example in an Irish context, Colette Caddle’s *Forever FM* contains a scene in which one of the heroines, Carrie, is contemplating how best to deal with her co-workers in her new job, as they seem to be making a fool out of her. The dilemma she finds herself in is described as follows:

It was clear that Karen and Jackie had been trying to take advantage of her and while she wanted to put a stop to it she didn’t want to alienate them either. After all, they had to sit together in that poxy little corner. (106-107)

While many women face similar difficulties at some point in their working lives, the way such problems are dealt with in many typical chick lit novels remove any sense of realism. Rather than showing heroines who learn from their difficulties and become stronger in the end as a result, typical chick lit novels offer an all-too-simple solution, usually with the heroines getting their “revenge” on nasty colleagues by conveniently moving to a much better position where everyone lives happily-ever-after. As readers, we ‘can always feel confident that all evil work demons will get their due in the end’ (Freitas 82) and ‘the evil boss always gets his/her comeuppance in the end’ (Yardley 12). While critics do not necessarily object to such happy endings in chick lit, they do protest that they portray a very unrealistic view of the world of work.

One further cause for complaint regarding chick lit’s treatment of modern women’s working lives is regarding the age-old work-versus-relationship dilemma. For many years, feminists encouraged women not to confine themselves to *just* being a wife and mother. They urged women to get out of the home and into the work place, as a means of advancing themselves and becoming more independent. On the surface at least, typical chick lit novels initially seemed to show that women have achieved a sense of independence and no longer feel the need to be validated in some way by being in a relationship. However, on further examination, chick lit critics and reviewers began to notice that, while most chick lit heroines indeed have jobs, their main focus still seems to be on having a relationship rather than any form of a successful career:

Many writers extract substantial amusement value from office scenes and make sure that their heroines end the novel better off professionally than they began, but it is required love, not significant career advancement, that brings about the novels' conclusions [...] The world of work in chick lit is thus essentially window dressing; a backdrop to the real business of finding love. (Wells 54-55)

That is, the working world of the typical chick lit heroine is often a means for adding bulk to the novel and giving the heroine something to do while she is waiting for Mr Right to come along and sweep her off her feet. And the heroine's relationship will undoubtedly take precedence over any job because, as the title character in Keyes' *Rachel's Holiday* puts it: 'It was one thing to lose my job, because I'd always get another one. But to lose a boyfriend... well...' (17). When these "modern heroines" are depicted as craving a happy love life more than any other personal success, there has been reason to question how far feminism has come, and how far it still has to go.

This paper intends to argue that Irish chick lit is more positive in its portrayals of careers and ambitious, successful women. Readers can look to the work of Irish author Edna O'Brien as one of the earliest examples, in an Irish context, of women who crave professional success. In *Time and Tide*, the heroine decides she has been dependent on her husband for too long:

In the past when she had worked and received money, she always gave the money over to him, but this time she decided that it was her own money and she wanted her own account. (34)

Over a decade later, Irish women's novels are continuing to portray women who are financially independent, ambitious, and successful.

In looking at the depictions of careers in Irish chick lit, we find little in the way of clichés in respect of the heroines' jobs. While *some* Irish chick lit heroines work in fashion and the media, the novels also tell of women who work in office/administrative positions, accountancy, computer companies, writers, editors and agents, event organisers, full time motherhood – the possibilities are endless. There are also characters who work in less more unusual jobs. In Kate Thompson's *Striking Poses*, the fabulously-named Aphrodite Delaney works as a theatre costume designer and on-set dresser, and later becomes the muse for a famous, slightly eccentric, fashion designer. Perhaps even more unusually, especially for the chick lit genre, a character in Keyes' *Anybody Out There?*, we are told, has recently began working as a private investigator.

After several career changes, Helen – and I'm not making this up, I wish I was – is a private investigator. Mind you, it sounds far more dangerous and exciting than it is. She mostly does white-collar crime and "domestics" – where she has to get proof of men having affairs. I would find it terribly depressing but she says it doesn't bother her because she's always known that men are total scumbags. (5)

By refusing to limit the heroines of chick lit to the same typical, over-used careers, the professional lives of these contemporary *fictional* women are shown as being as interesting and varied as those of contemporary *real* women.

Some chick lit heroines convey their 'sense of real disappointment in their workplaces and working lives' (Hale 105). They know that they want something *more*, they are just not sure what that *more* is, or how and where to find it. We see this to varying degrees in Irish chick lit novels, from a heroine's boredom with, and embarrassment of, her job, to another's outright hatred of hers. In Marisa Mackle's *Chinese Whispers*, for example, Fiona discusses her dislike of the inevitable "what do you do for a living?" question, as she feels embarrassed that she is not in a supposedly glamorous career:

I mingled with the party set wondering vaguely who they all were, but avoiding anyone who might quiz me about what I did for a living. You see, I never really have a suitable answer to that question. At the moment I'm temping in a really awful stuffy insurance office so I suppose my real title would be "PA" but I don't feel like a PA. No. I'm not sure what I am but deep down I always had this feeling that I really would get somewhere someday. I just didn't think it would take me this long. Anyway, ever the optimist, I still live in hope that God has something more exciting in mind for me than answering phones, placing files in dusty cabinets, and having to answer to a cantankerous fool and his sorry old sidekick, Cynthia. (5)

In comparison to Fiona's disappointment with her current job, and her optimistic hope that a better career is waiting around the corner for her, the title of character of *Rachel's Holiday* is similarly dissatisfied with her career, and, in typically witty chick lit style, she makes no attempts to hide her feelings:

Work in the hotel where I was an assistant manager had become harder and harder to do. There were times when I walked through the revolving doors to start my shift and found myself wanting to scream. Eric, my boss, had been very bad-tempered and difficult. I had been sick a lot and late a lot. Which made Eric even more unpleasant. Which, naturally, made me take more time off sick. (20)

After years of struggling for the right to do so, it was finally commonly accepted that women now have the choice of leaving the home and entering the workplace. So why are so many women still left feeling dissatisfied? One probable explanation is that many women may have been under certain illusions of what to expect in the working world. When the reality of the situation does not match the fantasy, it inevitably leads to disappointment. As Elizabeth Hale explains:

[...] it is worth analyzing what exactly it is about their employers that makes them so angry. It cannot only be that their employers are callous and morally defective. Rather, the cause of much of the pain in these narratives may be the gap between the heroine's expectations (and fantasies) about her working life and the reality of work (105)

It is precisely this divide between illusion and reality, and how the issue is dealt with in particular novels, that makes Irish chick lit novels stand out as a positive force within the chick lit genre in general. In chick lit, and forms of contemporary media in general, many heroines are depicted in seemingly glamorous careers that readers and viewers will inevitably aspire for their own lives. These characters' careers are normally only shown in a positive light, where everything is exciting, glamorous, and

ridiculously perfect. *Too* perfect, in fact. The stress, pressure, and hard work, the virtual, and at times literal, sweat and tears, are never, or rarely, depicted. Because readers and viewers are not getting the honest, realistic picture of these careers, they place them on a proverbial pedestal, and undoubtedly begin to focus on the supposed mundane and dull aspects of their own jobs, leading to dissatisfaction, frustration, and disappointment.

To its credit, Irish chick lit is helping to alleviate this disillusionment with the working world by depicting the reality of these “dream jobs”. That is, while Irish chick lit adheres to chick lit’s tradition of placing heroines in supposedly glamorous industries, it also presents a much more realistic insight into such professions. *Chinese Whispers*, for instance, portrays the reality of the much-desired magazine industry. Fiona is delighted when she is offered a job at a popular women’s magazine; after her boredom with her previous PA job, she imagines luxury and excitement as standard to the magazine industry. It is the opportunity she has been waiting for. Unfortunately for Fiona, her illusions regarding the job are short-lived, as her excitement and enthusiasm are brought crashing back down to earth:

Half an hour later we pull up outside a dreary grey prefab building in Templeogue. I wonder why A-J has stopped her car here. I mean I can’t see a shop about or anything.

‘Welcome to Irish Femme,’ Angela-Jean laughs.

I stare ahead in disbelief. This is it? It *can’t* be! I mean where is the classy lobby with a uniformed porter and all the glitz and glamour I’ve been expecting? For God’s sake even the *Gloss* offices, although slightly run down, were at least in town so you could spend lunchtime browsing around the shops.

‘Are you shocked?’ A-J enquires getting out of the car. ‘Welcome to the glamorous world of fashion. Here we are!’ (188)

In *Striking Poses*, similar illusions are dashed, this time regarding ‘one of the most manipulative businesses of all, the business they called fashion’ (Thompson 394). In this novel, renowned fashion designer Troy MacNally expresses how he has come to despise the fashion world, despite it being the industry that has brought him his fame and fortune:

But he wasn’t listening to her. ‘And when someone asks me what I do for a living,’ he continued, ‘I tell them I’m in the fashion industry. The fucking *fashion* industry!’ His voice didn’t just drip disdain now, it was pouring scorn. (371)

Portraying these dream careers from both positive *and* negative angles, Irish chick lit writers are ensuring that readers are under less of a false illusion regarding these careers. While they may, at first glance, be accused of shattering women’s dreams that the “perfect career” really exists, it is arguably much more positive to present a realistic account of careers, and life in general. This also has the effect of making women feel better about their own careers. While they may be unhappy with the perceived banality of their supposedly *ordinary* jobs, a refreshingly honest, warts-and-all look at other careers proves that no job is as perfect as it may seem.

Irish chick lit also tackles the problems that many women still deal with regarding their working lives, where they are often still expected to 'conform to workplaces designed for, by, and to accommodate men' (Freitas 83). One major problem for women, then, is how to be successful in a male-dominated world. Some women 'who have arrived at positions of power in a man's world have done so by adopting masculine methods' (Greer 130). That is, women decided that the best way to get along with men was to act like men. This often resulted in 'a "loophole woman," an exception in a male-dominated field whose presence supposedly proves its penetrability' (Levy 94). Unfortunately, while it may seem beneficial to act like a man in order to achieve professional success on the same terms as men, it means that women are still not able to use their feminine qualities to achieve equality:

It can be fun to feel exceptional – to be the loophole woman, to have a whole power thing, to be an honorary man. But if you are the exception that proves the rule, and the rule is that women are inferior, you haven't made any progress. (Levy 117)

This also results in double-standards in the workplace – men are allowed, or even expected, to act a certain way, while a woman who acts the same way is criticised. In Keyes' *The Other Side of the Story*, we see a "loophole woman" facing this same problem:

Olga Fisher was one of Lipman Haigh's seven partners – the only woman [...]

Olga was in her late forties, single, wore pearls and elegantly draped scarves and because she negotiated good terms for her authors she was known as a ballbreaker. If she were a man, Jojo thought scornfully, they'd simply call her 'a great agent.' (143)

Irish chick lit also pays attention to the battle women have regarding which should take precedence – work or family. Unusually, many Irish chick lit heroines choose to pursue their careers over anything else, regardless of what else they have to sacrifice in the process because they believe the 'rewards had always seemed worth it' (Keyes *Sushi For Beginners* 359). The novels question whether women can, by nature, be "too ambitious", and once again starkly present how women's opportunities may never be equal to men's:

She left, sunk deep in a crisis of the soul. Was Mark right? Was she too ambitious? But that description was never applied to men – in the same way it was impossible for a woman to be too thin; it was impossible for a man to be too ambitious. A man would never have to choose between his ambition and his emotional life. (Keyes *The Other Side of the Story* 559)

Further to these concerns of inequality in the working world are issues of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination, both of which are addressed in Irish chick lit novels. Sexual harassment is one issue that has been targeted in feminist theory. It has been noted that many women feel they have no choice but to 'endure sexual harassment to keep their jobs and learn to behave in a complaisantly and ingratiatingly heterosexual manner' (Rich 1769). That is, wrong as it may be, it has been recognised that the workplace is a social institution in which 'women have

learned to accept male violation of their psychic and physical boundaries as the price of survival; where women have been educated – no less than by romantic literature or by pornography – to perceive themselves as sexual prey' (Rich 1769).

Irish chick lit presents the topic of sexual harassment in an original way. While it portrays the inevitable lecherous bosses and slimy male colleagues, Irish chick lit goes a step further by showing just how much the problem of sexual harassment, and the battle against it, has changed and affected the working world. In *Last Chance Saloon*, we are shown men who fear sexual harassment claims so much that they worry that even light-hearted flirting may be interpreted the wrong way:

He'd always thought that sexual harassment was done by older men, who held a position of power and abused it for sexual favours [...] It had never occurred to Joe that his enthusiastic wooing of Katherine might be viewed in such a light. He'd just thought he'd been *flirting* with her. He felt dirty and disgusting – and rejected. (185)

We are also shown women who abuse the power of such claims, who wrongly and unfairly cry "sexual harassment" just as a way of getting rid of unwanted, but nonetheless harmless, attention:

Savouring her sour triumph, Katherine turned her attention to the figures on her desk. To be fair, she thought, it wasn't exactly *harassment*, as such [...] She stuffed down the unpleasant feeling that true victims of sexual harassment wouldn't have been one bit impressed with her accusations. But at least she'd managed to get rid of him. (Keyes *Last Chance Saloon* 185)

In passages such as the one above, Irish chick lit is highlighting the potential damage that can arise from misused power. Ironically, the Women's Movement was fighting against men abusing their supposed power in society; in passages such as this, we see women abusing the power they have earned.

As well as sexual harassment, Irish chick lit also addresses sexual discrimination in the workplace. In *The Other Side of the Story*, literary agent Jojo, after missing out on a huge promotion, faces the harsh realization that complete equality between the sexes may not yet be achieved in the workplace:

Then Jojo got it and surprise, more than anything, made her blurt, 'It's because I'm a woman!' She'd heard about this but never thought it would happen to her. 'It's the glass ceiling!'

Right up to this minute, she wasn't even sure she'd believed in the existence of glass ceiling. If she'd thought about it at all she'd suspected it was something lame-duck female employees used to salve their pride when their more deserving male colleagues got promoted over them. She'd never felt part of a sisterhood: it was up to each woman to do it for herself. She'd always thought she was as good as men and that she'd be treated on her own merits. But guess what? She was wrong. (548)

When Jojo decides to sue her employers on the grounds of sexual discrimination, she is advised not to as not only is it considered very difficult to prove, and thus win, a sexual discrimination case, it would also make a female employee's working life

extremely difficult, perhaps even impossible (551-554). When we consider that women in real-life find themselves in similar situations on a regular basis, we are disheartened to realise that the workplace may be an area in which, even today, women continue to find themselves being silenced.

Irish chick lit also highlights the confusion regarding feminist teachings. Just because feminism told women that they *could* go to work and be ambitious and successful, many people understood this as meaning that women *must* be ambitious and successful, which is ironically forgetting the element of choice altogether. Irish chick lit novels present this issue in a variety of ways. In *Forever FM*, we see how success means different things to different people:

But the thing was Carrie didn't really want to be successful. No, she corrected herself as she rummaged through her wardrobe; she had a different view of success. Someone to love, a nice home and cash in her pocket – that was enough for her. But her family had always been baffled by her attitude. (19)

We are also presented with women who feel that feminism has misled them, in terms of having careers. They heard feminism urging women to get out of the home and into the workplace, and were excited and enthusiastic at the prospect. But when they arrived in the working world, some women found it wasn't so great after all:

As soon as Clodagh knew she might have a job, she didn't want it. Making tea and answering the phone, where was the fun in that? She did it at home all the time. And a radiator-supply firm? It sounded so dreary. In a strange way, getting a job and then finding she didn't want it was almost worse than being told she was unemployable. Though not much given to introspection, she vaguely realized that she wasn't actually looking for a job – she certainly didn't need the money – she was looking for glamour and excitement. And the reality was she wasn't going to find them at a radiator-supply firm. (*Keyes Sushi for Beginners* 239-240)

In its honest, realistic, and well-rounded depictions and discussions, Irish chick lit novels are providing positive and important visions of women's experiences in the professional world. We are provided with an account of women's desires and their problems; of what they have already overcome and what they have still to achieve. In the search for contemporary feminist texts, what more could we ask for?

One further area which arguably adds to Irish chick lit's potential of becoming important feminist texts of the future is regarding the authors' solidarity and recognition of other writers of the same genre – a trend most unusual regarding women's popular fiction. The vast majority of chick lit writers 'frequently invite us to view their works as descendants of women's literary classics' (Wells 48), particularly Jane Austen. Unlike Austen, however, who worked to promote fellow female writers, many chick lit writers typically do not give any credit or recognition to other chick lit writers. One possible reason for this could be that each chick lit author views another as *competition* – why promote the work of a similar author and risk them achieving more sales and popularity? Unfortunately, this element of competitiveness has resulted in no show of solidarity among the writers. Now, not only are chick lit writers having to defend themselves and their work against male writers and critics, but also against each other:

[...] every writer of chick lit vies with every other, and none can spare a sisterly defense of a fellow author or of the genre as a whole.

This competitiveness stands in marked contrast to Austen's effort to promote women's contributions to fiction (Wells 57)

Apart from this competitiveness, another cause for this lack of support among women writers could well be a reaction to the harsh criticism that women's popular fiction has traditionally received. Horrified at the prospect of receiving similar scorn from critics and reviewers, women writers aim to distance themselves as much as possible from their contemporaries, in an effort to avoid being criticised as a group. Thus, we have a variety of obviously chick lit-style writers who enjoy the fame, popularity, and sales that their work achieves, but who still insist that their work is 'different.'

Irish chick lit, in a sense, mocks these writers who turn their backs on the genre that has launched their careers by portraying egotistical and pretentious "writers" who believe their work is *too superior* to be a success:

'[...] She's even had a novel published.'

By a vanity press, thought Aphrodite bitterly. 'Oh? What's it called?'

'*Fandango in Tunis.*'

Aphrodite was surprised that it wasn't 'My Brilliant Career.' 'Did it sell well?'

Hugo laughed. 'Of course not. Only to a couple of hundred discriminating individuals. It was far too esoteric to do well. Anyway, it would horrify Jolie to see her book on a bestseller list alongside a load of commercial fiction.' He invested the word 'commercial' with a great deal of scorn. (Thompson *Striking Poses* 152-153)

Irish chick lit also light-heartedly mocks readers who are too embarrassed to admit they love the chick lit genre, perhaps for fear of being ridiculed for their reading preferences. This ranges from characters who insist on carrying around supposedly "literary" titles, in the hope of achieving 'more artistic credibility' (Thompson *Sex, Lies and Fairytales* 34-35) to women who feel the need 'to hide the cover of the trashy novel' (Keyes *Watermelon* 347) rather than risk being "caught" reading one, as if it is something to be ashamed of. This is not to say, however, that Irish chick lit writers are oblivious to, or ignorant of, the criticism their genre is often subjected to. In *The Other Side of the Story*, literary agent Jojo considers the reception a new chick lit-style novel may receive:

Despite its flaws the book was fun and would probably sell. Sure, the critics wouldn't even acknowledge it; books like this – 'women's fluff' – flew beneath the radar. Occasionally, to make an example to the others, they wheeled one out and 'reviewed' it – although the review had been written before they'd actually read the

book – and they poured scorn with the ugly superiority of Ku Klux Klan laughing at bound black boys.

Different, of course, if it had been written by a man... Suddenly there would be talk of ‘courageous tenderness’ and ‘fearless exploration and exposition of emotion.’ And women who normally made fun of ‘women’s fiction’ would read it with pride in public places. (404-405)

The comparison of chick lit reviewers and critics to members of the Ku Klux Klan is particularly striking. It effectively, and shockingly, portrays the savagery and cruelty that chick lit reviews are often written with, resulting in the writers themselves in terror of what may be written about them for the world to read. Keyes’ recognition of this shows the beginnings of the understanding and support that Irish chick lit writers feel and show for each other.

With its myriad representations of women who have made, or are in the process of making, their careers as writers, often of popular women’s fiction, Irish chick lit is unique in steering itself away from ‘the genre’s convention of remaining silent on the subject of women’s literary talents and aspirations’ (Wells 58). Unsurprisingly, Edna O’Brien is an early example of Irish women writers’ recognition of other women in the same career, and perhaps *Time and Tide* first recognised the beginnings of the chick lit phenomenon. The heroine, Nell, acquired a part-time job reading manuscripts. Nell began to notice a trend forming in the content of the manuscripts – there were ‘many stories not too different from own, except the women in them had a little more pluck’ (47). Is this not the quintessential chick lit definition? What are chick lit novels but stories about women who are very much like us but just a little feistier? Since then, Irish chick lit writers frequently make direct and complimentary references to chick lit.

While Irish chick lit authors feature fictional writers in their work, it is also important to note that they also discreetly publicise other real-life writers. As one example, Marian Keyes’ *The Other Side of the Story* features a heroine called Lily, who writes an instantly successful chick lit novel called *Mimi’s Remedies*. Kate Thompson’s *Living the Dream* makes direct, and positive, reference to *Mimi’s Remedies*, and, thus, to Marian Keyes’ work:

‘*Mimi’s Remedies!*’ said Dannie. ‘Oh – I love that. What did you think of it? I know it wasn’t high art or anything, but it made me weep buckets.’

‘Me too!’ Cleo was delighted to have found someone that she didn’t have to *pretend* with. She’d never have been able to confess to Margot that she’d enjoyed something as commercial as *Mimi’s Remedies*. (133)

By showing support and recognition of fellow writers in this way, Irish chick lit writers are dismissing notions of rivalry and competitiveness, and are forming a type of sisterly solidarity with each other, which is what feminism encouraged all along. The above extract is also beneficial in showing how chick lit discussions help to form a sense of community among its readers.

Finally, the presence of chick lit writers as characters in Irish chick lit novels has provided a very effective means of demonstrating how innovative, creative, and original our chick lit writers truly are. A number of novels by Kate Thompson feature a character called Pixie Pirelli, who is a successful chick lit author. To bring Pixie to life for her readers, Thompson wrote a novel called *Hard to Choos* and published it under the pseudonym "Pixie Pirelli". Readers could not only read *about* Pixie and her novels, but could now also read the novel "by" Pixie herself! In coming up with such an innovative and original idea, two traits not usually credited to chick lit, Thompson, and other Irish writers, have taken the genre to new strengths by refusing to adhere to the clichéd storylines so often linked to chick lit.

This paper has provided an examination of the ways in which Irish chick lit writers tackle the subject of women's careers. Through honest and varied portrayals of goals, ambitions, and problems, through support and recognition of other writers, and through truly creative concepts, Irish chick lit is quickly becoming a positive source of information and aspirations for women's working lives. The differences in the goals of the various heroines show that not every woman has to want the same thing. After all, feminism told women to fight for the right to *choose*. Through Irish chick lit, this notion of *choice* is finally coming to life.

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